

The Novels of Aldous Huxley – Part 2

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Eyeless in Gaza

First published by Chatto & Windus in 1936, *Eyeless in Gaza* is one of Huxley's longest and most complex novels, which attempts to address fundamental questions about politics, sexuality and religion. The events in the novel are told episodically, not chronologically and the author frequently switches between one time period and another, forcing the reader to mentally re-arrange the timeline. Huxley employs this unconventional narrative method and structure in order to highlight and emphasise his innovative ideas.

The title of the novel was inspired by a phrase in the John Milton closet drama, *Samson Agonistes*. The drama was released in 1671, alongside Milton's poem, *Paradise Regain'd*; it relates the story of Samson after he has been captured by the Philistines, having had his hair cut off and his eyes gouged out. Huxley also reportedly drew upon the life of his biographer and neighbour, Sybille Bedford, who claimed that the character of Mary Amberley was in part based on her morphine-addicted mother. The novel centres on an upper-class sociologist, Anthony Beavis, as he desperately searches for meaning and a path to follow in life.

The first edition

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The famous 17th century poet, John Milton

Chapter One. August 30th 1933

THE SNAPSHOTS HAD become almost as dim as memories. This young woman who had stood in a garden at the turn of the century was like a ghost at cockcrow. His mother, Anthony Beavis recognized. A year or two, perhaps only a month or two, before she died. But fashion, as he peered at the brown phantom, fashion is a topiary art. Those swan-like loins! That long slanting cascade of bosom — without any apparent relation to the naked body beneath! And all that hair, like an ornamental deformity on the skull! Oddly hideous and repellent it seemed in 1933. And yet, if he shut his eyes (as he could not resist doing), he could see his mother languidly beautiful on her chaise-longue; or, agile, playing tennis; or swooping like a bird across the ice of a far-off winter.

It was the same with these snapshots of Mary Amberley, taken ten years later. The skirt was as long as ever, and within her narrower bell of drapery woman still glided footless, as though on castors. The breasts, it was true, had been pushed up a bit, the redundant posterior pulled in. But the general shape of the clothed body was still strangely improbable. A crab shelled in whalebone. And this huge plumed hat of 1911 was simply a French funeral of the first class. How could any man in his senses have been attracted by so profoundly anti-aphrodisiac an appearance? And yet, in spite of the snapshots, he could remember her as the very embodiment of desirability. At the sight of that feathered crab on wheels his heart had beaten faster, his breathing had become oppressed.

Twenty years, thirty years after the event, the snapshots revealed only things remote and unfamiliar. But the unfamiliar (dismal automatism!) is always the absurd. What he remembered, on the contrary, was the emotion felt when the unfamiliar was still the familiar, when the absurd, being taken for granted, had nothing absurd about it. The dramas of memory are always Hamlet in modern dress.

How beautiful his mother had been — beautiful under the convoluted wens of hair and in spite of the jutting posterior, the long slant of bosom. And Mary, how maddeningly desirable even in a carapace, even beneath funereal plumes! And in his little fawn-coloured covert coat and scarlet tam-o'-shanter; as Bubbles, in grass-green velveteen and ruffles; at school in his Norfolk suit with the knickerbockers that ended below the knees in two tight tubes of box-cloth; in his starched collar and his bowler, if it were Sunday, his red-and-black school-cap on other days — he too, in his own memory, was always in modern dress, never the absurd little figure of fun these snapshots revealed. No worse off, so far as inner feeling was concerned, than the little boys of thirty years later in their jerseys and shorts. A proof, Anthony found himself reflecting impersonally, as he examined the top-hatted and tail-coated image of himself at Eton, a proof that progress can only be recorded, never experienced. He reached out for his note-book, opened it and wrote: 'Progress may, perhaps, be perceived by historians; it can never be felt by those actually involved in the supposed advance. The young are born into the advancing circumstances, the old take them for granted within a few months or years. Advances aren't felt as advances. There is no gratitude — only irritation if, for any reason, the newly invented conveniences break down. Men don't spend their time thanking God for cars; they only curse when the carburettor is choked.'

He closed the book and returned to the top-hat of 1907.

* * *

There was a sound of footsteps and, looking up, he saw Helen Ledwidge approaching with those long springing strides of hers across the terrace. Under the wide hat her face was bright with the reflection from her flame-coloured beach pyjamas. As though she were in hell. And in fact, he went on to think, she was there. The mind is its own place; she carried her hell about with her. The hell of her grotesque marriage; other hells too, perhaps. But he had always refrained from inquiring too closely into their nature, had always pretended not to notice when she herself offered to be his guide through their intricacies. Inquiry and exploration would land him in heaven knew what quagmire of emotion, what sense of responsibility. And he had no time, no energy for emotions and responsibilities. His work came first. Suppressing his curiosity, he went on stubbornly playing the part he had long since assigned himself — the part of the detached philosopher, of the preoccupied man of science who doesn't see

the things that to everyone else are obvious. He acted as if he could detect in her face nothing but its external beauties of form and texture. Whereas, of course, flesh is never wholly opaque; the soul shows through the walls of its receptacle. Those clear grey eyes of hers, that mouth with its delicately lifted upper lip, were hard and almost ugly with a resentful sadness.

The hell-flush was quenched as she stepped out of the sunlight into the shadow of the house; but the sudden pallor of her face served only to intensify the embittered melancholy of its expression. Anthony looked at her, but did not rise, did not call a greeting. There was a convention between them that there should never be any fuss; not even the fuss of saying good morning. No fuss at all. As Helen stepped through the open glass doors into the room, he turned back to the study of his photographs.

‘Well, here I am,’ she said without smiling. She pulled off her hat and with a beautiful impatient movement of her head shook back the ruddy-brown curls of her hair. ‘Hideously hot!’ She threw the hat on to the sofa and crossed the room to where Anthony was sitting at his writing-table. ‘Not working?’ she asked in surprise. It was so rare to find him otherwise than immersed in books and papers.

He shook his head. ‘No sociology today.’

‘What are you looking at?’ Standing by his chair, she bent over the scattered snapshots.

‘At my old corpses.’ He handed her the ghost of the dead Etonian.

After studying it for a moment in silence, ‘You looked nice then,’ she commented.

‘Merci, mon vieux!’ He gave her an ironically affectionate pat on the back of the thigh. ‘At my private school they used to call me Benger.’ Between his finger-tips and the rounded resilience of her flesh the silk interposed a dry sliding smoothness, strangely disagreeable to the touch. ‘Short for Benger’s Food. Because I looked so babyish.’

‘Sweet,’ she went on, ignoring his interruption, ‘you looked really sweet then. Touching.’

‘But I still am,’ Anthony protested, smiling up at her.

She looked at him for a moment in silence. Under the thick dark hair the forehead was beautifully smooth and serene, like the forehead of a meditative child. Childish too, in a more comical way, was the short, slightly tilted nose. Between their narrowed lids the eyes were alive with inner laughter, and there was a smile also about the corners of the lips — a faint ironic smile that in some sort contradicted what the lips seemed in their form to express. They were full lips, finely cut; voluptuous and at the same time grave, sad, almost tremulously sensitive. Lips as though naked in their brooding sensuality; without defence of their own and abandoned to their helplessness by the small, unaggressive chin beneath.

‘The worst of it is,’ Helen said at last, ‘that you’re right. You are sweet, you are touching. God knows why. Because you oughtn’t to be. It’s all a swindle really, a trick for getting people to like you on false pretences.’

‘Come!’ he protested.

‘You make them give you something for nothing.’

‘But at least I’m always perfectly frank about its being nothing. I never pretend it’s a Grand Passion.’ He rolled the r and opened the a’s grotesquely. ‘Not even a Wahlverwandschaft,’ he added, dropping into German, so as to make all this romantic business of affinities and violent emotions sound particularly ridiculous. ‘Just a bit of fun.’

‘Just a bit of fun,’ Helen echoed ironically, thinking, as she spoke, of that period at the beginning of the affair, when she had stood, so to speak, on the threshold of being in love with him — on the threshold, waiting to be called in. But how firmly (for all his silence and studied gentleness), how definitely and decidedly he had shut the door against her! He didn’t want to be loved. For a moment she had been on the verge of rebellion; then, in that spirit of embittered and sarcastic resignation with which she had learned to face the world, she accepted his conditions. They were the more acceptable since there was no better alternative in sight; since, after all, he was a remarkable man and, after all, she was very fond of him; since, also, he knew how to give her at least a physical satisfaction. ‘Just a bit of fun,’ she repeated, and gave a little snort of laughter.

Anthony shot a glance at her, wondering uncomfortably whether she meant to break the tacitly accepted agreement between them and refer to some forbidden topic. But his fears were unjustified.

‘Yes, I admit it,’ she went on after a little silence, ‘You’re honest all right. But that doesn’t alter the fact that you’re always getting something for nothing. Call it an unintentional swindle. Your face is your fortune, I suppose. Handsome is as handsome doesn’t in your case.’ She bent down once more over the photographs. ‘Who’s that?’

He hesitated a moment before replying; then, with a smile, but feeling at the same time rather uncomfortable, ‘One of the not-grand passions,’ he answered. ‘Her name was Gladys.’

‘It would have been!’ Helen wrinkled up her nose contemptuously. ‘Why did you throw her over?’

‘I didn’t. She preferred someone else. Not that I very much minded,’ he was adding, when she interrupted him.

‘Perhaps the other man sometimes talked to her when they were in bed.’

Anthony flushed. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Some women, oddly enough, like being talked to in bed. And seeing that you didn’t . . . You never do, after all.’ She threw Gladys aside and picked up the woman in the clothes of 1900. ‘Is that your mother?’

Anthony nodded. ‘And that’s yours,’ he said, pushing across the picture of Mary Amberley in her funereal plumes. Then, in a tone of disgust, ‘All this burden of past experience one trails about with one!’ he added. ‘There ought to be some way of getting rid of one’s superfluous memories. How I hate old Proust! Really detest him.’ And with a richly comic eloquence he proceeded to evoke the vision of that asthmatic seeker of lost time squatting, horribly white and flabby, with breasts almost female but fledged with long black hairs, for ever squatting in the tepid bath of his remembered past. And all the stale soap-suds of countless previous washings floated around him, all the accumulated dirt of years lay crusty on the sides of the tub or hung in dark suspension in the water. And there he sat, a pale repellent invalid, taking up spongefuls of his own thick soup and squeezing it over his face, scooping up cupfuls of it and appreciatively rolling the grey and gritty liquor round his mouth, gargling, rinsing his nostrils with it, like a pious Hindu in the Ganges. . . .

‘You talk about him,’ said Helen, ‘as if he were a personal enemy.’

Anthony only laughed.

In the silence that followed, Helen picked up the faded snapshot of her mother and began to pore over it intently, as though it were some mysterious hieroglyph which, if interpreted, might provide a clue, unriddle an enigma.

Anthony watched her for a little; then, rousing himself to activity, dipped into the heap of photographs and brought out his Uncle James in the tennis clothes of 1906. Dead now — of cancer, poor old wretch, and with all the consolations of the Catholic religion. He dropped that snapshot and picked up another. It showed a group in front of dim Swiss mountains — his father, his step-mother, his two half-sisters. ‘Grindelwald, 1912’ was written on the back in Mr Beavis’s neat hand. All four of them, he noticed, were carrying alpenstocks.

‘And I would wish,’ he said aloud, as he put the picture down, ‘I would wish my days to be separated each from each by unnatural impiety.’

Helen looked up from her undecipherable hieroglyph. ‘Then why do you spend your time looking at old photographs?’

‘I was tidying my cupboard,’ he exclaimed. ‘They came to light. Like Tutankhamen. I couldn’t resist the temptation to look at them. Besides, it’s my birthday,’ he added.

‘Your birthday?’

‘Forty-two today.’ Anthony shook his head. ‘Too depressing! And since one always likes to deepen the gloom. . . .’ He picked up a handful of the snapshots and let them fall again. ‘The corpses turned up very opportunely. One detects the finger of Providence. The hoof of chance, if you prefer it.’

‘You liked her a lot, didn’t you?’ Helen asked after another silence, holding out the ghostly image of her mother for him to see.

He nodded and, to divert the conversation, ‘She civilized me,’ he explained. ‘I was half a savage when she took me in hand.’ He didn’t want to discuss his feelings for Mary Amberley — particularly

(though this, no doubt, was a stupid relic of barbarism) with Helen. ‘The white woman’s burden,’ he added with a laugh. Then, picking up the alpenstock group once again, ‘And this is one of the things she delivered me from,’ he said. ‘Darkest Switzerland. I can never be sufficiently grateful.’

‘It’s a pity she couldn’t deliver herself,’ said Helen, when she had looked at the alpenstocks.

‘How is she, by the way?’

Helen shrugged her shoulders. ‘She was better when she came out of the nursing home this spring. But she’s begun again, of course. The same old business. Morphia; and drink in the intervals. I saw her in Paris on the way here. It was awful!’ She shuddered.

Ironically affectionate, the hand that still pressed her thigh seemed all of a sudden extremely out of place. He let it fall.

‘I don’t know which is worse,’ Helen went on after a pause. ‘The dirt — you’ve no idea of the state she lives in! — or that malice, that awful lying.’ She sighed profoundly.

With a gesture that had nothing ironical about it, Anthony took her hand and pressed it. ‘Poor Helen!’

She stood for a few seconds, motionless and without speech, averted; then suddenly shook herself as though out of sleep. He felt her limp hand tighten on his; and when she turned round on him, her face was alive with a reckless and deliberate gaiety. ‘Poor Anthony, on the contrary!’ she said, and from deep in her throat produced a queer unexpected little sound of swallowed laughter. ‘Talk of false pretences!’

He was protesting that, in her case, they were true, when she bent down and, with a kind of angry violence, set her mouth against his.

Chapter Two. April 4th 1934

FROM A.B.’S DIARY

Five words sum up every biography. Video meliora proboque; deteriora sequor. Like all other human beings, I know what I ought to do, but continue to do what I know I oughtn’t to do. This afternoon, for example, I went to see poor Beppo, miserably convalescent from ‘flu. I knew I ought to have sat with him and let him pour out his complaints about youth’s ingratitude and cruelty, his terror of advancing old age and loneliness, his awful suspicions that people are beginning to find him a bore, no longer à la page. The Bolinskys had given a party without inviting him, Hagworm hadn’t asked him to a week-end since November. . . . I knew I ought to have listened sympathetically, and proffered good advice, implored him not to make himself miserable over inevitabilities and trifles. The advice, no doubt, wouldn’t have been accepted — as usual; but still, one never knows, therefore ought never to fail to give it. Instead of which I squared conscience in advance by buying him a pound of expensive grapes and told a lie about some committee I had to run off to, almost immediately. The truth being that I simply couldn’t face a repetition of poor B’s self-commiserations. I justified my behaviour, as well as by five bob’s worth of fruit, by righteous thoughts: at fifty, the man ought to know better than continue to attach importance to love-affairs and invitations to dinner and meeting the right people. He oughtn’t to be such an ass; therefore (impeccable logic) it wasn’t incumbent upon me to do what I knew I should do. And so I hurried off after only a quarter of an hour with him — leaving the poor wretch to solitude and his festering self-pity. Shall go to him tomorrow for at least two hours.

‘Besetting sin’ — can one still use the term? No. It has too many unsatisfactory overtones and implications — blood of lamb, terrible thing to fall into hands of living God, hell fire, obsession with sex, offences, chastity instead of charity. (Note that poor old Beppo, turned inside out = Comstock or St Paul.) Also ‘besetting sin’ has generally implied that incessant, egotistic brooding on self which mars so much piety. See in this context the diary of Prince, that zealous evangelical who subsequently founded the Abode of Love — under Guidance, as the Buchmanites would say; for his long-repressed wish for promiscuous copulation at last emerged into consciousness as a command from the Holy Ghost

(with whom in the end he came to identify himself) to ‘reconcile flesh with God’. And he proceeded to reconcile it — in public, apparently, and on the drawing-room sofa.

No, one can’t use the phrase, nor think in the terms it implies. But that doesn’t mean, of course, that persistent tendencies to behave badly don’t exist, or that it isn’t one’s business to examine them, objectively, and try to do something about them. That remark of old Miller’s, as we were riding to see one of his Indian patients in the mountains: ‘Really and by nature every man’s a unity; but you’ve artificially transformed the unity into a trinity. One clever man and two idiots — that’s what you’ve made yourself. An admirable manipulator of ideas, linked with a person who, so far as self-knowledge and feeling are concerned, is just a moron; and the pair of you associated with a half-witted body. A body that’s hopelessly unaware of all it does and feels, that has no accomplishments, that doesn’t know how to use itself or anything else.’ Two imbeciles and one intellectual. But man is a democracy, where the majority rules. You’ve got to do something about that majority. This journal is a first step. Self-knowledge an essential preliminary to self-change. (Pure science and then applied.) That which besets me is indifference. I can’t be bothered about people. Or rather, won’t. For I avoid, carefully, all occasions for being bothered. A necessary part of the treatment is to embrace all the bothersome occasions one can, to go out of one’s way to create them. Indifference is a form of sloth. For one can work hard, as I’ve always done, and yet wallow in sloth; be industrious about one’s job, but scandalously lazy about all that isn’t the job. Because, of course, the job is fun. Whereas the non-job — personal relations, in my case — is disagreeable and laborious. More and more disagreeable as the habit of avoiding personal relations ingrains itself with the passage of time. Indifference is a form of sloth, and sloth in its turn is one of the symptoms of lovelessness. One isn’t lazy about what one loves. The problem is: how to love? (Once more the word is suspect — greasy from being fingered by generations of Stigginses.) There ought to be some way of dry-cleaning and disinfecting words. Love, purity, goodness, spirit — a pile of dirty linen waiting for the laundress. How, then, to — not ‘love’, since it’s an unwashed handkerchief — feel, say, persistent affectionate interest in people? How make the anthropological approach to them, as old Miller would say? Not easy to answer.

April 5th

Worked all morning. For it would be silly not to put my materials into shape. Into a new shape, of course. My original conception was of a vast Bouvard et Pécuchet, constructed of historical facts. A picture of futility, apparently objective, scientific, but composed, I realize, in order to justify my own way of life. If men had always behaved either like half-wits or baboons, if they couldn’t behave otherwise, then I was justified in sitting comfortably in the stalls with my opera-glasses. Whereas if there were something to be done, if the behaviour could be modified . . . Meanwhile a description of the behaviour and an account of the ways of modifying it will be valuable. Though not so valuable as to justify complete abstention from all other forms of activity.

In the afternoon to Miller’s, where I found a parson, who takes Christianity seriously and has started an organization of pacifists. Purchas by name. Middle-aged. Slightly the muscular-jocular Christian manner. (How hard to admit that a man can use clichés and yet be intelligent!) But a very decent sort of man. More than decent, indeed. Rather impressive.

The aim is to use and extend Purchas’s organization. The unit a small group, like the Early Christian agape, or the communist cell. (Note that all successful movements have been built up in rowing eights or football elevens.) Purchas’s groups preface meetings with Christian devotions. Empirically, it is found that a devotional atmosphere increases efficiency, intensifies spirit of cooperation and self-sacrifice. But devotion in Christian terms will be largely unacceptable. Miller believes possible a non-theological praxis of meditation. Which he would like, of course, to couple with training, along F. M. Alexander’s lines, in use of the self, beginning with physical control and achieving through it (since mind and body are one) control of impulses and feelings. But this is impracticable. The necessary teachers don’t exist. ‘We must be content to do what we can from the mental side. The physical will let us down, of course. The flesh is weak in so many more ways than we suppose.’

I agreed to contribute the money, prepare some literature and go round speaking to groups. The last is most difficult, as I have always refused to utter in public. When Purchas has gone, asked Miller if I should take lessons in speaking.

Answer. 'If you take lessons before you're well and physically coordinated, you'll merely be learning yet another way of using yourself badly. Get well, achieve coordination, use yourself properly; you'll be able to speak in any way you please. The difficulties, from stage fright to voice production, will no longer exist.'

Miller then gave me a lesson in use of the self. Learning to sit in a chair, to get out of it, to lean back and forward. He warned me it might seem a bit pointless at first. But that interest and understanding would grow with achievement. And that I should find it the solution of the video *meliora proboque; deteriora sequor* problem: a technique for translating good intentions into acts, for being sure of doing what one knows one ought to do.

Spent the evening with Beppo. After listening to catalogues of miseries, suggested that there was no cure, only prevention. Avoid the cause. His reaction was passionate anger: I was robbing life of its point, condemning him to suicide. In answer I hinted that there was more than one point. He said he would rather die than give up his point; then changed his mood and wished to God he could give it up. But for what? I suggested pacifism. But he was a pacifist already, always had been. Yes, I knew that; but a passive pacifist, a negative one. There was such a thing as active and positive pacifism. He listened, said he'd think about it, thought perhaps it might be a way out.

Chapter Three. August 30th 1933

FROM THE FLAT roof of the house the eye was drawn first towards the west, where the pines slanted down to the sea — a blue Mediterranean bay fringed with pale bone-like rocks and cupped between high hills, green on their lower slopes with vines, grey with olive trees, then pine-dark, earth-red, rock-white or rosy-brown with parched heath. Through a gap between the nearer hills, the long straight ridge of the Sainte-Baume stood out metallically clear, but blue with distance. To north and south, the garden was hemmed in by pines; but eastwards, the vineyards and the olive orchards mounted in terraces of red earth to a crest; and the last trees stood, sometimes dark and brooding, sometimes alive with tremulous silver, against the sky.

There were mattresses on the roof for sun-bathing; and on one of these they were lying, their heads in the narrow shade of the southern parapet. It was almost noon; the sunlight fell steep out of the flawless sky; but a faint breeze stirred and died and swelled again into motion. Lapped in that fitfully tempered heat, skin seemed to acquire a livelier sensibility, almost an independent consciousness. As though it were drinking a new life from the sun. And that strange, violent, flamy life from outer space seemed to strike through the skin, to permeate and transmute the flesh beneath, till the whole body was a thing of alien sun-stuff and the very soul felt itself melting out of its proper identity and becoming something else, something of a different, an other-than-human kind.

There are so few possible grimaces, such a paucity, in comparison with all the thoughts and feelings and sensations, such a humiliating poverty of reflexes, even of consciously expressive gestures! Still lucid in his self-estrangement, Anthony observed the symptoms of that death-bed in which he also had his part as assassin and fellow-victim. Restlessly she turned her head on the cushions, this way, that way, as though seeking, but always vainly, some relief, however slight, some respite, if only for a moment, from her intolerable suffering. Sometimes, with the gesture of one who prays despairingly that a cup may be removed, she clasped her hands, and raising them to her mouth gnawed at the clenched knuckles or pressed a wrist between her parted teeth as if to stifle her own crying. Distorted, the face was a mask of extremest grief. It was the face, he suddenly perceived, as he bent down towards those tormented lips, of one of Van der Weyden's holy women at the foot of the Cross.

And then, from one moment to the next, there was a stillness. The victim no longer rolled her tortured head on the pillow. The imploring hands fell limp. The agonized expression of pain gave place to a superhuman and rapturous serenity. The mouth became grave like that of a saint. Behind the closed eyelids what beatific vision had presented itself?

They lay for a long time in a golden stupor of sunlight and fulfilled desire. It was Anthony who first stirred. Moved by the dumb unthinking gratitude and tenderness of his satisfied body he reached out a caressing hand. Her skin was hot to the touch like fruit in the sun. He propped himself up on his elbow and opened his eyes.

‘You look like a Gauguin,’ he said after a moment. Brown like a Gauguin and, curiously, it struck him, flat like a Gauguin too; for the sunburn suppressed those nacreous gleams of carmine and blue and green that give the untanned white body its peculiar sumptuousness of relief.

The sound of his voice broke startlingly into Helen’s warm delicious trance of unconsciousness. She winced almost with pain. Why couldn’t he leave her in peace? She had been so happy in that other world of her transfigured body; and now he was calling her back — back to this world, back to her ordinary hell of emptiness and drought and discontent. She left his words unanswered and, shutting her eyes yet tighter against the menace of reality, tried to force her way back to the paradise from which she had been dragged.

Brown like a Gauguin, and flat. . . . But the first Gauguin he ever saw (and had pretended, he remembered, to like a great deal more than he actually did) had been with Mary Amberley that time in Paris — that exciting and, for the boy of twenty that he then was, extraordinary and apocalyptic time.

He frowned to himself; this past of his was becoming importunate! But when, in order to escape from it, he bent down to kiss Helen’s shoulder, he found the sun-warmed skin impregnated with a faint yet penetrating smell, at once salty and smoky, a smell that transported him instantaneously to a great chalk pit in the flank of the Chilterns, where, in Brian Foxe’s company, he had spent an inexplicably pleasurable hour striking two flints together and sniffing, voluptuously, at the place where the spark had left its characteristic tang of marine combustion.

‘L-like sm-moke under the s-sea,’ had been Brian’s stammered comment when he was given the flints to smell.

Even the seemingly most solid fragments of present reality are riddled with pitfalls. What could be more uncompromisingly there, in the present, than a woman’s body in the sunshine? And yet it had betrayed him. The firm ground of its sensual immediacy and of his own physical tenderness had opened beneath his feet and precipitated him into another time and place. Nothing was safe. Even this skin had the scent of smoke under the sea. This living skin, this present skin; but it was nearly twenty years since Brian’s death.

A chalk pit, a picture gallery, a brown figure in the sun, a skin, here, redolent of salt and smoke, and here (like Mary’s, he remembered) savagely musky. Somewhere in the mind a lunatic shuffled a pack of snapshots and dealt them out at random, shuffled once more and dealt them out in a different order, again and again, indefinitely. There was no chronology. The idiot remembered no distinction between before and after. The pit was as real and vivid as the gallery. That ten years separated flints from Gauguins was a fact, not given, but discoverable only on second thoughts by the calculating intellect. The thirty-five years of his conscious life made themselves immediately known to him as a chaos — a pack of snapshots in the hands of a lunatic. And who decided which snapshots were to be kept, which thrown away? A frightened or libidinous animal, according to the Freudians. But the Freudians were victims of the pathetic fallacy, incorrigible rationalizers always in search of sufficient reasons, of comprehensible motives. Fear and lust are the most easily comprehensible motives of all. Therefore But psychology had no more right to be anthropomorphic, or even exclusively zoomorphic, than any other science. Besides a reason and an animal, man was also a collection of particles subject to the laws of chance. Some things were remembered for their utility or their appeal to the higher faculties of the mind; some, by the presiding animal, remembered (or else deliberately forgotten) for their emotional

content. But what of the innumerable remembered things without any particular emotional content, without utility, or beauty, or rational significance? Memory in these cases seemed to be merely a matter of luck. At the time of the event certain particles happened to be in a favourable position. Click! the event found itself caught, indelibly recorded. For no reason whatever. Unless, it now rather disquietingly occurred to him, unless of course the reason were not before the event, but after it, in what had been the future. What if that picture gallery had been recorded and stored away in the cellars of his mind for the sole and express purpose of being brought up into consciousness at this present moment? Brought up, today, when he was forty-two and secure, forty-two and fixed, unchangeably himself, brought up along with those critical years of his adolescence, along with the woman who had been his teacher, his first mistress, and was now a hardly human creature festering to death, alone, in a dirty burrow? And what if that absurd childish game with the flints had had a point, a profound purpose, which was simply to be recollected here on this blazing roof, now as his lips made contact with Helen's sun-warmed flesh? In order that he might be forced, in the midst of this act of detached and irresponsible sensuality, to think of Brian and of the things that Brian had lived for; yes, and had died for — died for, another image suddenly reminded him, at the foot of just such a cliff as that beneath which they had played as children in the chalk pit. Yes, even Brian's suicide, he now realized with horror, even the poor huddled body on the rocks, was mysteriously implicit in this hot skin.

One, two, three, four — counting each movement of his hand, he began to caress her. The gesture was magical, would transport him, if repeated sufficiently often, beyond the past and the future, beyond right and wrong, into the discrete, the self-sufficient, the atomic present. Particles of thought, desire, and feeling moving at random among particles of time, coming into casual contact and as casually parting. A casino, an asylum, a zoo; but also, in a corner, a library and someone thinking. Someone largely at the mercy of the croupiers, at the mercy of the idiots and the animals; but still irrepressible and indefatigable. Another two or three years and the Elements of Sociology would be finished. In spite of everything; yes, in spite of everything, he thought with a kind of defiant elation, and counted thirty-two, thirty-three, thirty-four, thirty-five . . .

Chapter Four. November 6th 1902

HORNS WITH A frizzle of orange hair between; the pink muzzle lowered inquiringly towards a tiny cup and saucer; eyes expressive of a more than human astonishment. 'THE OX', it was proclaimed in six-inch lettering, 'THE OX IN THE TEA-CUP'. The thing was supposed to be a reason for buying beef extract — was a reason.

Ox in Cup. The words, the basely comic image, spotted the Home Counties that summer and autumn like a skin disease. One of a score of nasty and discreditable infections. The train which carried Anthony Beavis into Surrey rolled through mile-long eczemas of vulgarity. Pills, soaps, cough drops and — more glaringly inflamed and scabby than all the rest — beef essence, the cupped ox.

'Thirty-one . . . thirty-two,' the boy said to himself, and wished he had begun his counting when the train started. Between Waterloo and Clapham Junction there must have been hundreds of oxen. Millions.

Opposite, leaning back in his corner, sat Anthony's father. With his left hand he shaded his eyes. Under the drooping brown moustache his lips moved.

'Stay for me there,' John Beavis was saying to the person who, behind his closed lids, was sometimes still alive, sometimes the cold, immobile thing of his most recent memories:

Stay for me there; I shall not fail

To meet thee in that hollow vale.

There was no immortality, of course. After Darwin, after the Fox Sisters, after John Beavis's own father, the surgeon, how could there be? Beyond that hollow vale there was nothing. But all the same, oh, all the same, stay for me, stay for me, stay, stay!

'Thirty-three.'

Anthony turned away from the hurrying landscape and was confronted by the spectacle of that hand across the eyes, those moving lips. That he had ever thought of counting the oxen seemed all at once shameful, a betrayal. And Uncle James, at the other end of the seat, with his Times — and his face, as he read, twitching every few seconds in sudden spasms of nervousness. He might at least have had the decency not to read it now — now, while they were on their way to . . . Anthony refused to say the words; words would make it all so clear, and he didn't want to know too clearly. Reading The Times might be shameful; but the other thing was terrible, too terrible to bear thinking about, and yet so terrible that you couldn't help thinking about it.

Anthony looked out of the window again, through tears. The green and golden brightness of St Martin's summer swam in an obscuring iridescence. And suddenly the wheels of the train began to chant articulately. 'Dead-a-dead-a-dead,' they shouted, 'dead-a-dead-a-dead . . .' For ever. The tears overflowed, were warm for an instant on his cheeks, then icy cold. He pulled out his handkerchief and wiped them away, wiped the fog out of his eyes. Luminous under the sun, the world before him was like one vast and intricate jewel. The elms had withered to a pale gold. Huge above the fields, and motionless, they seemed to be meditating in the crystal light of the morning, seemed to be remembering, seemed, from the very brink of dissolution, to be looking back and in a last ecstasy of recollection living over again, concentrated in this shining moment of autumnal time, all the long-drawn triumph of spring and summer.

'DEAD-A-DEAD', in a sudden frenzy yelled the wheels, as the train crossed a bridge, 'A-DEAD-A-DEAD!'

Anthony tried not to listen — vainly; then tried to make the wheels say something else. Why shouldn't they say, To stop the train pull down the chain? That was what they usually said. With a great effort of concentration he forced them to change their refrain.

'To stop the train pull down the chain, to stop the train pull down a-dead-a-dead-a-dead . . .' It was no good.

Mr Beavis uncovered his eyes for a moment and looked out of the window. How bright the autumnal trees! Cruelly bright they would have seemed, insultingly, except for something desperate in their stillness, a certain glassy fragility that, oh! invited disaster, that prophetically announced the coming darkness and the black branches moving in torture among stars, the sleet like arrows along the screaming wind.

Uncle James turned the page of his Times. The Ritualists and the Kensitites were at it again, he saw; and was delighted. Let dog eat dog. 'MR CHAMBERLAIN AT UNIVERSITY COLLEGE SCHOOL.' What was the old devil up to now? Unveiling a tablet to the Old Boys who had been killed in the war. 'Over one hundred young men went to the front, and twelve of them laid down their lives for the country in South Africa (cheers).' Deluded idiots, thought Uncle James, who had always been passionately a pro-Boer.

Painted, among the real cows in their pasture, the enormous horns, the triangular auburn frizz, the inquiring nostrils, the tea-cup. Anthony shut his eyes against the vision.

'No, I won't,' he said with all the determination he had previously used against the wheels. He refused to know the horror; he refused to know the ox. But what was the good of refusing? The wheels were still shouting away. And how could he suppress the fact that this ox was the thirty-fourth, on the right, from Clapham Junction? A number is always a number, even on the way to . . . But counting was shameful, counting was like Uncle James's Times. Counting was shirking, was betraying. And yet the other thing, the thing they ought to be thinking about, was really too terrible. Too unnatural, somehow.

'Whatever we may have thought, or still think, as to the causes, the necessity, the justice of the war which is now happily at an end, I think that we must all have a feeling of profound satisfaction that

when the country called its children to arms, the manhood of the nation leaped to it in response. . . .’ His face twitching with exasperation, Uncle James put down *The Times* and looked at his watch.

‘Two and a half minutes late,’ he said angrily.

‘If only it were a hundred years late,’ thought his brother. ‘Or ten years early — no, twelve, thirteen. The first year of our marriage.’

James Beavis looked out of the window. ‘And we’re still at least a mile from Lollington,’ he went on.

As though to a sore, to an aching tooth, his fingers travelled again to the chronometer in his waistcoat pocket. Time for its own sake. Always imperiously time, categorically time — time to look at one’s watch and see the time. . . .

The wheels spoke more and more slowly, became at last inarticulate. The brakes screamed.

‘Lollington, Lollington,’ the porter called.

But Uncle James was already on the platform. ‘Quick!’ he shouted, striding, long-legged, beside the still moving train. His hand went once more to that mystical ulcer for ever gnawing at his consciousness. ‘Quick!’

A sudden resentment stirred in his brother’s mind. ‘What does he want me to be quick for?’ As if they were in danger of missing something — some pleasure, some precariously brief entertainment.

Anthony climbed down after his father. They walked towards the gate, along a wall of words and pictures. A GUINEA A BOX AND A BLESSING TO MEN THE PICKWICK THE OWL AND KILLS MOTHS BUGS BEETLES A SPADE A SPADE AND BRANSON’S CAMP COFFEE THE OX IN And suddenly here were the horns, the expressive eyes, the cup — the thirty-fifth cup — ‘No, I won’t, I won’t’ — but all the same, the thirty-fifth, the thirty-fifth from Clapham Junction on the right-hand side.

The cab smelt of straw and leather. Of straw and leather and of the year eighty-eight, was it? yes, eighty-eight; that Christmas when they had driven to the Champernownes’ dance — he and she and her mother — in that cold, with the sheepskin rug across their knees. And as though by accident (for he had not yet dared to make the gesture deliberately) the back of his hand had brushed against hers; had brushed, as though by accident, had casually rested. Her mother was talking about the difficulty of getting servants — and when you did get them, they didn’t know anything, they were lazy. She hadn’t moved her hand! Did that mean she didn’t mind? He took the risk; his fingers closed over hers. They were disrespectful, her mother went on, they were . . . He felt an answering pressure and, looking up, divined in the darkness that she was smiling at him.

‘Really,’ her mother was saying, ‘I don’t know what things are coming to nowadays.’ And he had seen, by way of silent comment, the mischievous flash of Maisie’s teeth; and that little squeeze of the hand had been deliciously conspiratorial, secret, and illicit.

Slowly, hoof after hoof, the old horse drew them; slowly along lanes, into the heart of the great autumnal jewel of gold and crystal; and stopped at last at the very core of it. In the sunshine, the church tower was like grey amber. The clock, James Beavis noticed with annoyance, was slow. They passed under the lych-gate. Startlingly and hideously black, four people were walking up the path in front of them. Two huge women (to Anthony they all seemed giantesses) rose in great inky cones of drapery from the flagstones. With them, still further magnified by their top-hats, went a pair of enormous men.

‘The Champernownes,’ said James Beavis; and the syllables of the familiar name were like a sword, yet another sword, in the very quick of his brother’s being. ‘The Champernownes and — let’s see — what’s the name of that young fellow their daughter married? Anstey? Annerley?’ He glanced inquiringly at John; but John was staring fixedly in front of him and did not answer.

‘Amersham? Atherton?’ James Beavis frowned with irritation. Meticulous, he attached an enormous importance to names and dates and figures; he prided himself on his power to reproduce them correctly. A lapse of memory drove him to fury. ‘Atherton? Anderson?’ And what made it more maddening was the fact that the young man was so good-looking, carried himself so well — not in that stupid, stiff,

military way, like his father-in-law, the General, but gracefully, easily . . . ‘I shan’t know what to call him,’ he said to himself; and his right cheek began to twitch, as though some living creature had been confined beneath the skin and were violently struggling to escape.

They walked on. It seemed to Anthony that he had swallowed his heart — swallowed it whole, without chewing. He felt rather sick, as though he were expecting to be caned.

The black giants halted, turned, and came back to meet them. Hats were raised, hands shaken.

‘And dear little Anthony!’ said Lady Champernowne, when at last it was his turn. Impulsively, she bent down and kissed him.

She was fat. Her lips left a disgusting wet place on his cheek. Anthony hated her.

‘Perhaps I ought to kiss him too,’ thought Mary Amberley, as she watched her mother. One was expected to do such odd things when one was married. Six months ago, when she was still Mary Champernowne and fresh from school, it would have been unthinkable. But now . . . one never knew. In the end, however, she decided that she wouldn’t kiss the boy, it would really be too ridiculous. She pressed his hand without speaking, smiling only from the remote security of her secret happiness. She was nearly five months gone with child, and had lived for these last two or three weeks in a kind of trance of drowsy bliss, inexpressibly delicious. Bliss in a world that had become beautiful and rich and benevolent out of all recognition. The country, as they drove that morning in the gently swaying landau, had been like paradise; and this little plot of green between the golden trees and the tower was Eden itself. Poor Mrs Beavis had died, it was true; so pretty still, so young. How sad that was! But sadness, somehow, did not touch this secret bliss of hers, remained profoundly irrelevant to it, as though it were the sadness of somebody in another planet.

Anthony looked up for a moment into the smiling face, so bright in its black setting, so luminous with inner peace and happiness, then was overcome with shyness and dropped his eyes.

Fascinated, meanwhile, Roger Amberley observed his father-in-law and wondered how it was possible for anyone to live so unfailingly in character; how one could contrive to be a real general and at the same time to look and sound so exactly like a general on the musical comedy stage. Even at a funeral, even while he was saying a few well-chosen words to the bereaved husband — pure Grossmith! Under his fine brown moustache his lips twitched irrepressibly.

‘Looks badly cut up,’ the General was thinking, as he talked to John Beavis; and felt sorry for the poor fellow, even while he still disliked him. For of course the man was an affected bore and a prig, too clever, but at the same time a fool. Worst of all, not a man’s man. Always surrounded by petticoats. Mother’s petticoats, aunts’ petticoats, wives’ petticoats. A few years in the army would have done him all the good in the world. Still, he did look most horribly cut up. And Maisie had been a sweet little thing. Too good for him, of course. . . .

They stood for a moment, then all together slowly moved towards the church. Anthony was in the midst of them, a dwarf among the giants. Their blackness hemmed him in, obscured the sky, eclipsed the amber tower and the trees. He walked as though at the bottom of a moving well. Its black walls rustled all around him. He began to cry.

He had not wanted to know — had done his best not to know, except superficially, as one knows, for example, that thirty-five comes after thirty-four. But this black well was dark with the concentrated horror of death. There was no escape. His sobs broke out uncontrollably.

Mary Amberley, who had been lost in the rapturous contemplation of golden leaves patterned against the pale sky, looked down for a moment at this small creature weeping on another planet, then turned away again.

‘Poor child!’ his father said to himself; and then, over-bidding as it were, ‘Poor motherless child!’ he added deliberately, and was glad (for he wanted to suffer) that the words should cost him so much pain to pronounce. He looked down at his son, saw the grief-twisted face, the full and sensitive lips so agonizingly hurt, and above this tear-stained distortion the broad high forehead, seemingly unmoved in its smooth purity; saw, and felt his heart wrung with an additional pain.

‘Dear boy!’ he said aloud, thinking, as he spoke, how this grief would surely bring them nearer together. It was so difficult somehow with a child — so hard to be natural, to establish a contact. But surely, surely this sadness, and their common memories . . . He squeezed the small hand within his own. They were at the church door. The well disintegrated.

‘One might be in Tibet,’ thought Uncle James as he took off his hat. ‘Why not one’s boots as well?’

Inside the church was an ancient darkness, smelly with centuries of rustic piety. Anthony took two breaths of that sweet-stale air, and felt his midriff heave with a qualm of disgust. Fear and misery had already made him swallow his heart; and now this smell, this beastly smell that meant that the place was full of germs. . . . ‘Reeking with germs!’ He heard her voice — her voice that always changed when she talked about germs, became different, as though somebody else was speaking. At ordinary times, when she wasn’t angry, it sounded so soft and somehow lazy — laughingly lazy, or tiredly lazy. Germs made it suddenly almost fierce, and at the same time frightened. ‘Always spit when there’s a bad smell about,’ she had told him. ‘There might be typhoid germs in the air.’ His mouth, as he recalled her words, began to water. But how could he spit here, in church? There was nothing to do but swallow his spittle. He shuddered as he did so, with fear and a sickening disgust. And suppose he really should be sick in this stinking place? The apprehension made him feel still sicker. And what did one have to do during the service? He had never been to a funeral before.

James Beavis looked at his watch. In three minutes the hocus-pocus was timed to begin. Why hadn’t John insisted on a plain-clothes funeral? It wasn’t as if poor Maisie had ever set much store by this kind of thing. A silly little woman; but never religiously silly. Hers had been the plain secular silliness of mere female frivolity. The silliness of reading novels on sofas, alternating with the silliness of tea-parties and picnics and dances. Incredible that John had managed to put up with that kind of foolery — had even seemed to like it! Women cackling like hens round the tea-table. James Beavis frowned with angry contempt. He hated women — was disgusted by them. All those soft bulges of their bodies. Horrible. And the stupidity, the brainlessness. But anyhow, poor Maisie had never been one of the curate-fanciers. It was those awful relations of hers. There were deans in the family — deans and deanesses. John hadn’t wanted to offend them. Weak-minded of him. One ought to be offensive on a matter of principle.

The organ played. A little procession of surplices entered through the open door. Some men carried in what seemed a great pile of flowers. There was singing. Then silence. And then, in an extraordinary voice, ‘Now is Christ risen from the dead,’ began the clergyman; and went on and on, all about God, and death, and beasts at Ephesus, and the natural body. But Anthony hardly heard, because he could think of nothing except those germs that were still there in spite of the smell of the flowers, and of the spittle that kept flowing into his mouth and that he had to swallow in spite of the typhoid and influenza, and of that horrible sick feeling in his stomach. How long would it last?

‘Like a goat,’ James Beavis said to himself as he listened to the intoning from the lectern. He looked again at that son-in-law of the Champernownes. Anderton, Abdy . . . ? What a fine, classical profile!

His brother sat with bent head and a hand across his eyes, thinking of the ashes in the casket there beneath the flowers — the ashes that had been her body.

The service was over at last. ‘Thank goodness!’ thought Anthony, as he spat surreptitiously into his handkerchief and folded away the germs into his pocket, ‘Thank goodness!’ He hadn’t been sick. He followed his father to the door and, rapturously, as he stepped out of the twilight, breathed the pure air. The sun was still shining. He looked around and up into the pale sky. Overhead, in the church tower, a sudden outcry of jackdaws was like the noise of a stone flung glancingly on to a frozen pond and skidding away with a reiteration of glassy chinking across the ice.

‘But, Anthony, you mustn’t throw stones on the ice,’ his mother had called to him. ‘They get frozen in, and then the skaters . . .’

He remembered how she had come swerving round towards him, on one foot — swooping, he had thought, like a sea-gull; all in white: beautiful. And now . . . The tears came into his eyes again. But, oh, why had she insisted on his trying to skate?

'I don't want to,' he had said; and when she asked why, it had been impossible to explain. He was afraid of being laughed at, of course. People made such fools of themselves. But how could he have told her that? In the end he had cried — in front of everyone. It couldn't have been worse. He had almost hated her that morning. And now she was dead, and up there in the tower the jackdaws were throwing stones on last winter's ice.

They were at the grave-side now. Once more Mr Beavis pressed his son's hand. He was trying to forestall the effect upon the child's mind of these last, most painful moments.

'Be brave,' he whispered. The advice was tendered as much to himself as to the boy.

Leaning forward, Anthony looked into the hole. It seemed extraordinarily deep. He shuddered, closed his eyes; and immediately there she was, swooping towards him, white, like a sea-gull, and white again in the satin evening-dress when she came to say good night before she went out to dinner, with that scent on her as she bent over him in bed, and the coolness of her bare arms. 'You're like a cat,' she used to say when he rubbed his cheek against her arms. 'Why don't you purr while you're about it?'

'Anyhow,' thought Uncle James with satisfaction, 'he was firm about the cremation.' The Christians had been scored off there. Resurrection of the body, indeed! In A.D. 1902!

When his time came, John Beavis was thinking, this was where he would be buried. In this very grave. His ashes next to hers.

The clergyman was talking again in that extraordinary voice. 'Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts . . .' Anthony opened his eyes. Two men were lowering into the hole a small terra-cotta box, hardly larger than a biscuit tin. The box touched the bottom; the ropes were hauled up.

'Earth to earth,' bleated the goat-like voice, 'ashes to ashes.'

'My ashes to her ashes,' thought John Beavis. 'Mingled.'

And suddenly he remembered that time in Rome, a year after they were married; those June nights and the fire-flies, under the trees, in the Doria Gardens, like stars gone crazy.

'Who shall change our vile body that it may be like unto his glorious body . . .'

'Vile, vile?' His very soul protested.

Earth fell, one spadeful, then another. The box was almost covered. It was so small, so dreadfully and unexpectedly tiny . . . the image of that enormous ox, that minute tea-cup, rose to Anthony's imagination. Rose up obscenely and would not be exorcized. The jackdaws cried again in the tower. Like a sea-gull she had swooped towards him, beautiful. But the ox was still there, still in its tea-cup, still base and detestable; and he himself yet baser, yet more hateful.

John Beavis released the hand he had been holding and, laying his arm round the boy's shoulders, pressed the thin little body against his own — close, close, till he felt in his own flesh the sobs by which it was shaken.

'Poor child! Poor motherless child!'

Chapter Five. December 8th 1926

'YOU WOULDN'T DARE,' Joyce said.

'I would.'

'No, you wouldn't.'

'I tell you I would,' Helen Amberley insisted more emphatically.

Maddeningly sensible, 'You'd be sent to prison if you were caught,' the elder sister went on. 'No, not to prison,' she corrected herself. 'You're too young. You'd be sent to a reformatory.'

The blood rushed up to Helen's face. 'You and your reformatories!' she said in a tone that was meant to be contemptuous, but that trembled with irrepressible anger. That reformatory was a personal affront. Prison was terrible; so terrible that there was something fine about it. (She had visited Chillon, had crossed the Bridge of Sighs.) But a reformatory — no! that was utterly ignoble. A reformatory was on

the same level as a public lavatory or a station on the District Railway. 'Reformatories!' she repeated. It was typical of Joyce to think of reformatories. She always dragged anything amusing and adventurous down into the mud. And, what made it so much worse, she was generally quite right in doing so: the mud was facts, the mud was common sense. 'You think I wouldn't dare to do it, because you wouldn't dare,' Helen went on. 'Well, I shall do it. Just to show you. I shall steal something from every shop we go to. Every one. So there.'

Joyce began to feel seriously alarmed. She glanced questioningly at her sister. A profile, pale now and rigid, the chin defiantly lifted, was all that Helen would let her see. 'Now, look here,' she began severely.

'I'm not listening,' said Helen, speaking straight ahead into impersonal space.

'Don't be a little fool!'

There was no answer. The profile might have been that of a young queen on a coin. They turned into the Gloucester Road and walked towards the shops.

But suppose the wretched girl really meant what she said? Joyce changed her strategy. 'Of course I know you dare,' she said conciliatorily. There was no answer. 'I'm not doubting it for a moment.' She turned again towards Helen; but the profile continued to stare ahead with eyes unwaveringly averted. The grocer's was at the next corner, not twenty yards away. There was no time to lose. Joyce swallowed what remained of her pride. 'Now, look here, Helen,' she said, and her tone was appealing, she was throwing herself on her sister's generosity. 'I do wish you wouldn't.' In her fancy she saw the whole deplorable scene. Helen caught red-handed; the indignant shopkeeper, talking louder and louder; her own attempts at explanation and excuse made unavailing by the other's intolerable behaviour. For, of course, Helen would just stand there, in silence, not uttering a word of self-justification or regret, calm and contemptuously smiling, as though she were a superior being and everybody else just dirt. Which would enrage the shopkeeper still more. Until at last he'd send for a policeman. And then . . . But what would Colin think when he heard of it? His future sister-in-law arrested for stealing! He might break off the engagement. 'Oh, please, don't do it,' she begged; 'please!' But she might as well have begged the image of King George on a half-crown to turn round, and wink at her. Pale, determined, a young queen minted in silver, Helen kept on. 'Please!' Joyce repeated, almost tearfully. The thought that she might lose Colin was a torture. 'Please!' But the smell of groceries was already in her nostrils; they were on the very threshold. She caught her sister by the sleeve; but Helen shook her off and marched straight in. With a sinking of the heart, Joyce followed as though to her execution. The young man at the cheese and bacon counter smiled welcomingly as they came in. In her effort to avert suspicion, to propitiate in advance his inevitable indignation, Joyce smiled back with an effusive friendliness. No, that was overdoing it. She readjusted her face. Calm; easy; perfectly the lady, but at the same time affable; affable and (what was that word?), oh! yes, gracious — like Queen Alexandra. Graciously she followed Helen across the shop. But why, she was thinking, why had she ever broached the subject of crime? Why, knowing Helen, had she been mad enough to argue that, if one were properly brought up, one simply couldn't be a criminal? It was obvious what Helen's response would be to that. She had simply asked for it.

It was to the younger sister that their mother had given the shopping list. 'Because she's almost as much of a scatter-brain as I am,' Mrs Amberley had explained, with that touch of complacency that always annoyed Joyce so much. People had no right to boast about their faults. 'It'll teach her to be a good housekeeper — God help her!' she added with a little snort of laughter.

Standing at the counter, Helen unfolded the paper, read, and then, very haughtily and without a smile, as though she were giving orders to a slave, 'Coffee first of all,' she said to the assistant. 'Two pounds — the two-and-fourpenny mixture.'

The girl, it was evident, was offended by Helen's tone and feudal manner. Joyce felt it her duty to beam at her with a double, compensatory graciousness.

'Do try to behave a little more civilly,' she whispered when the girl had gone for the coffee.

Helen preserved her silence, but with an effort. Civil, indeed! To this horrible little creature who squinted and didn't wash enough under the arms? Oh, how she loathed all ugliness and deformity and uncleanness! Loathed and detested . . .

'And for heaven's sake,' Joyce went on, 'don't do anything idiotic. I absolutely forbid . . .'

But even as she spoke the words, Helen stretched out a hand and without any attempt at concealment took the topmost of an elaborate structure of chocolate tablets that stood, like the section of a spiral pillar, on the counter — took it and then, with the same slow deliberation of movement, put it carefully away in her basket.

But before the crime was fully accomplished Joyce had turned and walked away.

'I might say I'd never seen her before,' she was thinking. But of course that wouldn't do. Everybody knew they were sisters. 'Oh, Colin,' she cried inwardly, 'Colin!'

A pyramid of tinned lobster loomed up before her. She halted. 'Calm,' she said to herself. 'I must be calm.' Her heart was thumping with terror, and the dark magenta lobsters on the labels of the tins wavered dizzily before her eyes. She was afraid to look round; but through the noise of her heart-beats she listened anxiously for the inevitable outcry.

'I don't know if you're interested in lobster, Miss,' a confidential voice almost whispered into her left ear.

Joyce started violently; then managed, with an effort, to smile and shake her head.

'This is a line we can heartily recommend, Miss. I'm sure if you were to try a tin . . .'

'And now,' Helen was saying, very calmly and in the same maddeningly feudal tone, 'I need ten pounds of sugar. But that you must send.'

They walked out of the shop. The young man at the cheese and bacon counter smiled his farewell; they were nice-looking girls and regular customers. With a great effort, Joyce contrived to be gracious yet once more. But they were hardly through the door when her face disintegrated, as it were, into a chaos of violent emotion.

'Helen!' she said furiously. 'Helen!'

But Helen was still the young queen on her silver florin, a speechless profile.

'Helen!' Between the glove and the sleeve, Joyce found an inch of her sister's bare skin and pinched, hard.

Helen jerked her arm away, and without looking round, a profile still, 'If you bother me any more,' she said in a low voice, 'I shall push you into the gutter.'

Joyce opened her mouth to speak, then changed her mind and, absurdly, shut it again. She knew that if she did say anything more, Helen unquestionably would push her into the gutter. She had to be content with shrugging her shoulders and looking dignified.

The greengrocer's was crowded. Waiting for her turn to be served, Helen had no difficulty in bagging a couple of oranges.

'Have one?' she proposed insultingly to Joyce as they walked out of the shop.

It was Joyce's turn to be a profile on a coin.

At the stationer's there were, unfortunately, no other clients to distract the attention of the people behind the counter. But Helen was equal to the situation. A handful of small change suddenly went rolling across the floor; and while the assistants were hunting for the scattered pennies, she helped herself to a rubber and three very good pencils.

It was at the butcher's that the trouble began. Ordinarily Helen refused to go into the shop at all; the sight, the sickening smell of those pale corpses disgusted her. But this morning she walked straight in. In spite of the disgust. It was a point of honour. She had said every shop, and she wasn't going to give Joyce an excuse for saying she had cheated. For the first half-minute, while her lungs were still full of the untainted air she had inhaled outside in the street it was all right. But, oh God, when at last she had to breathe . . . God! She put her handkerchief to her nose. But the sharp rasping smell of the carcasses leaked through the barrier of perfume, superimposing itself upon the sweetness, so that a

respiration that began with *Quelques Fleurs* would hideously end with dead sheep or, opening in stale blood, modulated insensibly into the key of jasmine and ambergris.

A customer went out; the butcher turned to her. He was an oldish man, very large, with a square massive face that beamed down at her with a paternal benevolence.

'Like Mr Baldwin,' she said to herself, and then, aloud but indistinctly through her handkerchief, 'A pound and a half of rumpsteak, please.'

The butcher returned in a moment with a mass of gory flesh. 'There's a beautiful piece of meat, Miss!' He fingered the dank, red lump with an artist's loving enthusiasm. 'A really beautiful piece.' It was Mr Baldwin fingering his *Virgil*, thumbing his dog's-eared *Webb*.

'I shall never eat meat again,' she said to herself, as Mr Baldwin turned away and began to cut up the meat. 'But what shall I take?' She looked round. 'What on earth . . . ? Ah!' A marble shelf ran, table-high, along one of the walls of the shop. On it, in trays, pink or purple brown, lay a selection of revolting viscera. And among the viscera a hook — a big steel S, still stained, at one of its curving tips, with the blood of whatever drawn and decapitated corpse had hung from it. She glanced round. It seemed a good moment — the butcher was weighing her steak, his assistant was talking to that disgusting old woman like a bull-dog, the girl at the cash desk was deep in her accounts. Aloof and dissociated in the doorway, Joyce was elaborately overacting the part of one who interrogates the sky and wonders if this drizzle is going to turn into something serious. Helen took three quick steps, picked up the hook, and was just lowering it into her basket when, full of solicitude, 'Look out, Miss,' came the butcher's voice, 'you'll get yourself dirty if you touch those hooks.'

That start of surprise was like the steepest descent of the Scenic Railway — sickening! Hot in her cheeks, her eyes, her forehead, came a rush of guilty blood! She tried to laugh.

'I was just looking.' The hook clanked back on to the marble.

'I wouldn't like you to spoil your clothes, Miss.' His smile was fatherly. More than ever like Mr Baldwin.

Nervously, for lack of anything better to do or say, Helen laughed again, and, in the process, drew another deep breath of corpse. Ugh! She fortified her nose once more with *Quelques Fleurs*.

'One pound and eleven ounces, Miss.'

She nodded her assent. But what could she take? And how was she to find the opportunity?

'Anything more this morning?'

Yes, that was the only thing to do — to order something more. That would give her time to think, a chance to act. 'Have you any . . . ' she hesitated ' . . . any sweetbreads?'

Yes, Mr Baldwin did have some sweetbreads, and they were on the shelf with the other viscera. Near the hook. 'Oh, I don't know,' she said, when he asked her how much she needed. 'Just the ordinary amount, you know.'

She looked about her while he was busy with the sweetbreads, despairingly. There was nothing in this beastly shop, nothing except the hook, that she could take. And now that he had seen her with it in her hands, the hook was out of the question. Nothing whatever. Unless . . . That was it! A shudder ran through her. But she frowned, she set her teeth. She was determined to go through with it.

'And now,' when he had packed up the sweetbreads, 'now,' she said, 'I must have some of those!' She indicated the packets of pale sausages piled on a shelf at the other end of the shop.

'I'll do it while his back is turned,' she thought. But the girl at the cash desk had emerged from her accounts and was looking round the shop. 'Oh, damn her, damn her!' Helen fairly screamed in her imagination, and then, 'Thank goodness!' the girl had turned away. A hand shot out; but the averted glance returned, 'Damn her!' The hand dropped back. And now it was too late. Mr Baldwin had got the sausages, had turned, was coming back towards her.

'Will that be all, Miss?'

'Well, I wonder?' Helen frowned uncertainly, playing for time. 'I can't help thinking there was something else . . . something else . . . ' The seconds passed; it was terrible; she was making a fool of herself, an absolute idiot. But she refused to give up. She refused to acknowledge defeat.

‘We’ve some beautiful Welsh mutton in this morning,’ said the butcher in that artist’s voice of his, as though he were talking of the Georgics.

Helen shook her head: she really couldn’t start buying mutton now.

Suddenly the girl at the cash desk began to write again. The moment had come. ‘No,’ she said with decision, ‘I’ll take another pound of sausages.’

‘Another?’ Mr Baldwin looked surprised.

No wonder! she thought. They’d be surprised at home too.

‘Yes, just one more,’ she said, and smiled ingratiatingly, as though she were asking a favour. He walked back towards the shelf. The girl at the cash desk was still writing, the old woman who looked like a bull-dog had never stopped talking to the assistant. Quickly — there was not a second to lose — Helen turned towards the marble shelf beside her. It was for one of those kidneys that she had decided. The thing slithered obscenely between her gloved fingers — a slug, a squid. In the end she had to grab it with her whole hand. Thank heaven, she thought, for gloves! As she dropped it into the basket, the idea came to her that for some reason she might have to take the horrible thing in her mouth, raw as it was and oozy with some unspeakable slime, take it in her mouth, bite, taste, swallow. Another shudder of disgust ran through her, so violent this time that it seemed to tear something at the centre of her body.

Tired of acting the meteorologist, Joyce was standing under her umbrella looking at the chrysanthemums in the florist’s window next door. She had prepared something particularly offensive to say to Helen when she came out. But at the sight of her sister’s white unhappy face she forgot even her legitimate grievances.

‘Why, Helen, what is the matter?’

For all answer Helen suddenly began to cry.

‘What is it?’

She shook her head and, turning away, raised her hand to her face to brush away the tears.

‘Tell me . . .’

‘Oh!’ Helen started and cried out as though she had been stung by a wasp. An expression of agonized repugnance wrinkled up her face. ‘Oh, too filthy, too filthy,’ she repeated, looking at her fingers. And setting her basket down on the pavement, she unbuttoned the glove, stripped it off her hand, and, with a violent gesture, flung it away from her into the gutter.

Chapter Six. November 6th 1902

THE GUARD WHISTLED, and obediently the train began to move — past Keating, at a crawl; past Branson; past Pickwick, Owl and Waverley; past Beecham, Owbridge, Carter, Pears, in accelerated succession; past Humphrey’s Iron Buildings, past Lollingdon for Choate; past Eno’s almost at twenty miles an hour; past Pears, Pears, Pears, Pears, Pears — and suddenly the platform and its palings dipped and were lost, swallowed in the green country. Anthony leaned back in his corner and sighed thankfully. It was escape at last; he had climbed out of that black well into which they had pushed him, and he was free again. The wheels sang cheerfully in his ears. ‘To stop the train pull down the chain penalty for impróper use five póunds five pounds FIVE POUNDS FIVE POUNDS . . .’ But how perfectly awful luncheon at Granny’s had been!

‘Work,’ James Beavis was saying. ‘It’s the only thing at a time like this.’

His brother nodded. ‘The only thing,’ he agreed. Then, after a moment’s hesitation, ‘One’s had a pretty bad knock,’ he added self-consciously, in that queer jargon which he imagined to be colloquial English. John Beavis’s colloquialisms mostly came out of books. That ‘bad knock’ was a metaphor drawn from the boxing contests he had never witnessed. ‘Luckily,’ he went on, ‘one’s got a great deal of work on hand at the moment.’ He thought of his lectures. He thought of his contributions to the Oxford

Dictionary. The mountains of books, the slips, his huge card index, the letters from fellow philologists. And the exhaustive essay on Jacobean slang. 'Not that one wants to "shirk" anything,' he added, putting the colloquial word between the audible equivalents of inverted commas. James mustn't think that he was going to drown his grief in work. He groped for a phrase. 'It's . . . it's a sacred music that one's facing!' he brought out at last.

James kept nodding with quick jerks of the head, as though he knew in advance everything his brother would or possibly could say. His face twitched with sudden involuntary tics. He was wasted by nervous impatience as though by a consumption, eaten away by it to the very bone. 'Quite,' he said, 'quite.' And gave one last nod. There was a long silence.

'Tomorrow,' Anthony was thinking, 'there'll be algebra with old Jimbug.' The prospect was disagreeable; he wasn't good at maths, and, even at the best of times, even when he was only joking, Mr Jameson was a formidable teacher. 'If Jimbug gets baity with me, like that time last week . . .'

Remembering the scene, Anthony frowned; the blood came up into his cheeks. Jimbug made sarcastic remarks at him and pulled his hair. He had begun to blub. (Who wouldn't have blubbed?) A tear had fallen on to the equation he was trying to work out and made a huge round blot. That beast Staithes had ragged him about it afterwards. Luckily Foxe had come to his rescue. One laughed at Foxe because he stammered; but he was really extraordinarily decent.

At Waterloo, Anthony and his father took a hansom. Uncle James preferred to walk. 'I can get to the Club in eleven minutes,' he told them. His hand went to his waistcoat pocket. He looked at his watch; then turned and without saying another word went striding away down the hill.

'Euston!' John Beavis called up to the cabman.

Stepping cautiously on the smooth slope, the horse moved forward; the cab heaved like a ship. Inaudibly, Anthony hummed the 'Washington Post'. Riding in a hansom always made him feel extraordinarily happy. At the bottom of the hill, the cabby whipped his horse into a trot. They passed a smell of beer, a smell of fried fish; drove through 'Good-bye, Dolly Gray' on a cornet and swung into the Waterloo Road. The traffic roared and rattled all about them. If his father had not been there, Anthony would have sung out aloud.

The end of the afternoon was still smokily bright above the house-tops. And, all at once, here was the river, shining, with the black barges, and a tug, and St Paul's like a balloon in the sky, and the mysterious Shot Tower.

On the bridge, a man was throwing bread to the sea-gulls. Dim, almost invisible, they came sliding through the air; turned, with a tilt of grey wings, leaning against their speed, and suddenly flashed into brilliance, like snow against the dark fringes of the sky; then wheeled away again out of the light, towards invisibility. Anthony looked and stopped humming. Swerving towards you on the ice a skater will lean like that.

And suddenly, as though, disquietingly, he too had understood the inner significance of those swooping birds, 'Dear boy,' Mr Beavis began, breaking a long silence. He pressed Anthony's arm. 'Dear boy!' With a sinking of the heart Anthony waited for what he would say next.

'We must stand together now,' said Mr Beavis.

The boy made a vague noise of acquiescence.

'Close together. Because we both . . .' he hesitated, 'we both loved her.'

There was another silence. 'Oh, if only he'd stop!' Anthony prayed. Vainly. His father went on.

'We'll always be true to her,' he said. 'Never . . . never let her down? — will we?'

Anthony nodded.

'Never!' John Beavis repeated emphatically. 'Never!' And to himself he recited yet once more those lines that had haunted him all these days:

Till age, or grief, or sickness must
Marry my body to that dust
It so much loves; and fill the room
My heart keeps empty in thy tomb.

Stay for me there!

Then aloud and in a tone almost of defiance, 'She'll never be dead for us,' he said. 'We'll keep her living in our hearts — won't we?'

'Living for us,' his father continued, 'so that we can live for her — live finely, nobly, as she would want us to live.' He paused on the brink of a colloquialism — the sort of colloquialism, he intended it to be, that a schoolboy would understand and appreciate. 'Live . . . well, like a pair of regular "bricks",' he brought out unnaturally. 'And bricks,' he continued, extemporizing an improvement on the locution, 'bricks that are also "pals". Real "chums". We're going to be "chums" now, Anthony, aren't we?'

Anthony nodded again. He was in an agony of shame and embarrassment. 'Chums.' It was a school-story word. The Fifth Form at St Dominic's. You laughed when you read it, you howled derisively. Chums! And with his father! He felt himself blushing. Looking out of the side window, to hide his discomfort, he saw one of the grey birds come swooping down, out of the sky, towards the bridge; nearer, nearer; then it leaned, it swerved away to the left, gleamed for a moment, transfigured, and was gone.

* * *

At school everyone was frightfully decent. Too decent, indeed. The boys were so tactfully anxious not to intrude on his emotional privacy, not to insult him with the display of their own high spirits, that, after having made a few constrained and unnatural demonstrations of friendliness, they left him alone. It was almost, Anthony found, like being sent to Coventry. They could hardly have made it worse for him if he had been caught stealing or sneaking. Never, since the first days of his first term, had he felt so hopelessly out of it all as he felt that evening.

'Pity you missed the match this afternoon,' said Thompson as they sat down to supper; he spoke in the tone he would have used to a visiting uncle.

'Was it a good game?' Anthony asked with the same unnatural politeness.

'Oh, jolly good. They won, though. Three-two.' The conversation languished. Uncomfortably, Thompson wondered what he should say next. That limerick of Butterworth's, about the young lady of Ealing? No, he couldn't possibly repeat that; not today, when Beavis's mother . . . Then what? A loud diversion at the other end of the table providentially solved his problem. He had an excuse to turn away. 'What's that?' he shouted with unnecessary eagerness. 'What's that?' Soon they were all talking and laughing together. From beyond an invisible gulf Anthony listened and looked on.

'Agnes!' someone called to the maid. 'Agnes!'

'Aganeezer Lemon-squeezer,' said Mark Staithes — but in a low voice, so that she shouldn't hear; rudeness to the servants was a criminal offence at Bulstrode, and for that reason all the more appreciated, even sotto voce. That lemon-squeezer produced an explosion of laughter. Staithes himself, however, preserved his gravity. To sit unsmiling in the midst of the laughter he himself had provoked gave him an extraordinary sense of power and superiority. Besides, it was in the family tradition. No Staithes ever smiled at his own joke or epigram or repartee.

Looking round the table, Mark Staithes saw that that wretched, baby-faced Bengier Beavis wasn't laughing with the rest, and for a second was filled with a passionate resentment against this person who had dared not to be amused by his joke. What made the insult more intolerable was the fact that Bengier was so utterly insignificant. Bad at football, not much use at cricket. The only thing he was good at was work. Work! And did such a creature dare to sit unsmiling when he . . . Then, all of a sudden, he remembered that the poor chap had lost his mother, and, relaxing the hardness of his face, he gave him, across the intervening space, a little smile of recognition and sympathy. Anthony smiled back, then looked away, blushing with an obscure discomfort as though he had been caught doing something wrong. The consciousness of his own magnanimity and the spectacle of Bengier's embarrassment restored Staithes to his good humour.

'Agnes!' he shouted. 'Agnes!'

Large, chronically angry, Agnes came at last.

'More jam, please, Agnes.'

‘Jore mam,’ cried Thompson. Everybody laughed again, not because the joke was anything but putrid, but simply because everybody wanted to laugh.

‘And breadney.’

‘Yes, more breaf.’

‘More breaf, please, Agnes.’

‘Breaf, indeed!’ said Agnes indignantly, as she picked up the empty bread-and-butter plate. ‘Why can’t you say what you mean?’

There was a redoubling of the laughter. They couldn’t say what they meant — absolutely couldn’t, because to say ‘breaf’ or ‘breadney’ instead of bread was a Bulstrodean tradition and the symbol of their togetherness, the seal of their superiority to all the rest of the uninitiated world.

‘More Pepin le Bref!’ shouted Staithes.

‘Pepin le Breadney, le Breadney!’

The laughter became almost hysterical. They all remembered that occasion last term, when they had come to Pepin le Bref in their European History. Pepin le Bref — le Bref! First Butterworth had broken down, then Pembroke-Jones, then Thompson — and finally the whole of Division II, Staithes with the rest of them, uncontrollably. Old Jimbug had got into the most appalling bait. Which made it, now, even funnier.

‘Just a lot of silly babies!’ said Agnes; and, finding them still laughing when, a moment later, she came back with more bread, ‘Just babies!’ she repeated in a determined effort to be insulting. But her stroke did not touch them. They were beyond her, rapt away in the ecstasy of causeless laughter.

Anthony would have liked to have laughed with them, but somehow did not dare to do more than smile, distantly and politely, like someone in a foreign country, who does not understand the joke, but wants to show that he has no objection to other people having a bit of fun. And a moment later, feeling hungry, he found himself unexpectedly struck dumb above his empty plate. For to have asked for more breaf, or another chunk of breadney, would have been, for the sacred pariah he had now become, at once an indecency and an intrusion — an indecency, because a person who has been sanctified by his mother’s death should obviously not talk slang, and an intrusion, because an outsider has no right to use the special language reserved to the elect. Uncertainly, he hesitated. Then at last, ‘Pass me the bread, please,’ he murmured; and blushed (the words sounded so horribly stupid and unnatural) to the roots of his hair.

Leaning towards his neighbour on the other side, Thompson went on with his whispered recitation of the limerick. ‘. . . all over the ceiling,’ he concluded; and they shrieked with laughter.

Thank goodness, Thompson hadn’t heard. Anthony felt profoundly relieved. In spite of his hunger, he did not ask again.

There was a stir at the high table; old Jimbug rose to feet. A hideous noise of chair-legs scraping across boards filled the hall, solidly, it seemed; then evaporated into the emptiness of complete silence. ‘For all that we have received . . .’ The talk broke out again, the boys stamped towards the door.

In the corridor, Anthony felt a hand on his arm. ‘Hullo, B-benger.’

‘Hullo, Foxe.’ He did not say, ‘Hullo, Horse-Face,’ because of what happened this morning. Horse-Face would be as inappropriate to the present circumstances as Breaf.

‘I’ve got s-something to sh-show you,’ said Brian Foxe, and his melancholy, rather ugly face seemed suddenly to shine, as he smiled at Anthony. People laughed at Foxe because he stammered and looked like a horse. But almost everybody liked him. Even though he was a bit of a swot and not much good at games. He was rather pi, too, about smut; and he never seemed to get into trouble with the masters. But in spite of it all, you had to like him, because he was so awfully decent. Too decent, even; for it really wasn’t right to treat New Bugs the way he did — as though they were equals. Beastly little ticks of nine the equals of boys of eleven and twelve; imagine! No, Foxe was wrong about the New Bugs; of that there could be no doubt. All the same, people liked old Horse-Face.

‘What have you got?’ asked Anthony; and he felt so grateful to Horse-Face for behaving towards him in a normal, natural way, that he spoke quite gruffly, for fear the other might notice what he was feeling.

‘Come and see,’ Brian meant to say; but he got no further than ‘C-c-c-c . . .’ The long agony of clicks prolonged itself. At another time, Anthony might have laughed, might have shouted, ‘Listen to old Horse-Face trying to be sea-sick!’ But today he said nothing; only thought what awful bad luck it was on the poor chap. In the end, Brian Foxe gave up the attempt to say, ‘Come and see,’ and, instead, brought out. ‘It’s in my p-play-box.’

They ran down the stairs to the dark lobby where the play-boxes were kept.

‘Th-there!’ said Brian, lifting the lid of his box.

Anthony looked, and at the sight of that elegant little ship, three-masted, square-rigged with paper sails, ‘I say,’ he exclaimed, ‘that’s a beauty! Did you make her yourself?’

Brian nodded. He had had the carpenter’s shop to himself that afternoon — all the tools he needed. That was why she was so professional-looking. He would have liked to explain it all, to share his pleasure in the achievement with Anthony; but he knew his stammer too well. The pleasure would evaporate while he was laboriously trying to express it. Besides, ‘carpenter’ was a terrible word. ‘We’ll t-try her to-n-night,’ he had to be content with saying. But the smile which accompanied the words seemed at once to apologize for their inadequacy and to make up for it. Anthony smiled back. They understood one another.

Carefully, tenderly, Brian unstepped the three matchstick masts and slipped them, sails and all, into the inner pocket of his jacket; the hull went into his breeches. A bell rang. It was bed-time. Obediently, Brian shut his play-box. They started to climb the stairs once more.

‘I w-won f-five more g-games today with my old c-c-c . . . my ch-cheeser,’ he emended, finding ‘conker’ too difficult.

‘Five!’ cried Anthony. ‘Good for the old Horse-Face!’

Forgetting that he was an outcast, a sacred pariah, he laughed aloud. He felt warm and at home. It was only when he was undressing in his cubicle that he remembered — because of the tooth powder.

‘Twice a day,’ he heard her saying, as he dipped his wet brush into the pink carbolic-smelling dust. ‘And if you possibly can, after lunch as well. Because of the germs.’

‘But, Mother, you can’t expect me to go up and clean them after lunch!’

The wound to his vanity (did she think his teeth were so dirty?) had made him rude. He found a retrospective excuse in the reflection that it was against the school rules to go up to the dorms during the day.

On the other side of the wooden partition that separated his cubicle from Anthony’s, Brian Foxe was stepping into his pyjamas. First the left leg, then the right. But just as he was starting to pull them up, there came to him, suddenly, a thought so terrible that he almost cried aloud. ‘Suppose my mother were to die!’ And she might die. If Beavis’s mother had died, of course she might. And at once he saw her, lying in her bed at home. Terribly pale. And the death-rattle, that death-rattle one always read about in books — he heard it plainly; and it was like the noise of one of those big wooden rattles that you scare birds with. Loud and incessant, as though it were made by a machine. A human being couldn’t possibly make such a noise. But all the same, it came out of her mouth. It was the death-rattle. She was dying.

His trousers still only half-way up his thighs, Brian stood there, quite still, staring at the brown varnished partition in front of him with eyes that filled with tears. It was too terrible. The coffin; and then the empty house; and, when he went to bed, nobody to come and say good night.

Suddenly shaking himself out of immobility, he pulled up his trousers and tied the string with a kind of violence.

‘But she isn’t dead!’ he said to himself. ‘She isn’t!’

Two cubicles away, Thompson gave vent to one of those loud and extraordinarily long-drawn farts for which, at Bulstrode, he had such a reputation. There were shouts, a chorus of laughter. Even Brian

laughed — Brian who generally refused to see that there was anything funny about that sort of noise. But he was filled at this moment with such a sense of glad relief, that any excuse for laughter was good enough. She was still alive! And though she wouldn't have liked him to laugh at anything so vulgar, he simply had to allow his thankfulness to explode. Uproariously he guffawed; then, all at once, broke off. He had thought of Beavis. His mother was really dead. What must he be thinking? Brian felt ashamed of having laughed, and for such a reason.

Later, when the lights had been put out, he climbed on to the rail at the head of his bed, and, looking over the partition into Anthony's cubicle, 'I s-say,' he whispered, 'sh-shall we see how the new b-b-b . . . the new sh-ship goes?'

Anthony jumped out of bed and, the night being cold, put on his dressing-gown and slippers; then, noiselessly, stepped on to his chair and from the chair (pushing aside the long baize curtain) to the window-ledge. The curtain swung back behind him, shutting him into the embrasure.

It was a high narrow window, divided by a wooden transom into two parts. The lower and larger part consisted of a pair of sashes; the small upper pane was hinged at the top and opened outwards. When the sashes were closed, the lower of them formed a narrow ledge, half-way up the window. Standing on this ledge, a boy could conveniently get his head and shoulders through the small square opening above. Each window — each pair of windows, rather — was set in a gable, so that when you leaned out, you found the slope of the tiles coming steeply down on either side, and immediately in front of you, on a level with the transom, the long gutter which carried away the water from the roof.

The gutter! It was Brian who had recognized its potentialities. A sod of turf carried surreptitiously up to bed in a bulging pocket, a few stones — and there was your dam. When it was built, you collected all the water-jugs in the dormitory, hoisted them one by one and poured their contents into the gutter. There would be no washing the next morning; but what of that? A long narrow sea stretched away into the night. A whittled ship would float, and those fifty feet of watery boundlessness invited the imagination. The danger was always rain. If it rained hard, somebody had somehow to sneak up, at whatever risk, and break the dam. Otherwise the gutter would overflow, and an overflow meant awkward investigations and unpleasant punishments.

Perched high between the cold glass and the rough hairy baize of the curtains, Brian and Anthony leaned out of their twin windows into the darkness. A brick mullion was all that separated them, they could speak in whispers.

'Now then, Horse-Face,' commanded Anthony. 'Blow!'

And like the allegorical Zephyr in a picture, Horse-Face blew. Under its press of paper sail, the boat went gliding along the narrow water-way.

'Lovely!' said Anthony ecstatically; and bending down till his cheek was almost touching the water, he looked with one half-shut and deliberately unfocused eye until, miraculously, the approaching toy was transformed into a huge three-master, seen phantom-like in the distance and bearing down on him, silently, through the darkness. A great ship — a ship of the line — one hundred and ten guns — under a cloud of canvas — the North-East Trades blowing steadily — bowling along at ten knots — eight bells just sounding from . . . He started violently as the foremast came into contact with his nose. Reality flicked back into place again.

'It looks just like a real ship,' he said to Brian as he turned the little boat round in the gutter. 'Put your head down and have a squint. I'll blow.'

Slowly the majestic three-master travelled back again.

'It's like the Fighting T-t-t . . . You know that p-picture.'

Anthony nodded; he never liked to admit ignorance.

'T-temeraire,' the other brought out at last.

'Yes, yes,' said Anthony, rather impatiently, as though he had known it all the time. Bending down again, he tried to recapture that vision of the huge hundred-and-ten-gunner bowling before the North-East Trades; but without success; the little boat refused to be transfigured. Still, she was a lovely ship. 'A beauty,' he said out loud.

‘Only she’s a b-bit l-lopsided,’ said Brian, in modest depreciation of his handiwork.

‘But I rather like that,’ Anthony assured him. ‘It makes her look as though she were heeling over with the wind.’ Heeling over: — it gave him a peculiar pleasure to pronounce the phrase. He had never uttered it before — only read it in books. Lovely words! And making an excuse to repeat them, ‘Just look!’ he said, ‘how she heels over when it blows really hard.’

He blew, and the little ship almost capsized. The hurricane, he said to himself . . . struck her full on the starboard beam . . . carried away the fore top-gallant sails and the spinnakers . . . stove in our only boat . . . heeled till the gunwale touched the water. . . . But it was tiring to go on blowing as hard as that. He looked up from the gutter; his eyes travelled over the sky; he listened intently to the silence. The air was extraordinarily still; the night, almost cloudless. And what stars! There was Orion, with his feet tangled in the branches of the oak tree. And Sirius. And all the others whose names he didn’t know. Thousands and millions of them.

‘Gosh!’ he whispered at last.

‘W-what on earth do you s-suppose they’re f-for?’ said Brian, after a long silence.

‘What — the stars?’

Brian nodded.

Remembering things his Uncle James had said, ‘They’re not for anything,’ Anthony answered.

‘But they m-must be,’ Brian objected.

‘Why?’

‘Because e-everything is for s-something.’

‘I don’t believe that.’

‘W-well, th-think of b-b-bees,’ said Brian with some difficulty.

Anthony was shaken; they had been having some lessons in botany from old Bumface — making drawings of pistils and things. Bees — yes; they were obviously for something. He wished he could remember exactly what Uncle James had said. The iron somethings of nature. But iron whats?

‘And m-mountains,’ Brian was laboriously continuing. ‘It w-wouldn’t r-rain properly if there w-weren’t any m-mountains.’

‘Well, what do you think they’re for?’ Anthony asked, indicating the stars with an upward movement of the chin.

‘P-perhaps there are p-people.’

‘Only on Mars.’ Anthony’s certainty was dogmatic.

There was a silence. Then, with decision, as though he had at last made up his mind to have it out, at any cost, ‘S-sometimes,’ said Brian, ‘I w-wonder wh-whether they aren’t really al-live.’ He looked anxiously at his companion: was Bengier going to laugh? But Anthony, who was looking up at the stars, made no sound or movement of derision; only nodded gravely. Brian’s shy defenceless little secret was safe, had received no wound. He felt profoundly grateful; and suddenly it was as though a great wave were mounting, mounting through his body. He was almost suffocated by that violent uprush of love and (‘Oh, suppose it had been my mother!’) of excruciating sympathy for poor Bengier. His throat contracted; the tears came into his eyes. He would have liked to reach out and touch Bengier’s hand; only, of course, that sort of thing wasn’t done.

Anthony meanwhile was still looking at Sirius. ‘Alive,’ he repeated to himself. ‘Alive.’ It was like a heart in the sky, pulsing with light. All at once he remembered that young bird he had found last Easter holidays. It was on the ground and couldn’t fly. His mother had made fun of him because he didn’t want to pick it up. Big animals he liked, but for some reason it gave him the horrors to touch anything small and alive. In the end, making an effort with himself, he had caught the bird. And in his hand the little creature had seemed just a feathered heart, pulsing against his palm and fingers, a fistful of hot and palpitating blood. Up there, above the fringes of the trees, Sirius was just such another heart. Alive. But of course Uncle James would just laugh.

Stung by this imaginary mockery and ashamed of having been betrayed into such childishness, ‘But how can they be alive?’ he asked resentfully, turning away from the stars.

Brian winced. 'Why is he angry?' he wondered. Then aloud, 'Well,' he started, 'if G-god's alive . . .'

'But my pater doesn't go to church,' Anthony objected.

'N-no, b-b-but . . .'

How little he wanted to argue, now!

Anthony couldn't wait. 'He doesn't believe in that sort of thing.'

'But it's G-god that c-counts; n-not ch-church.' Oh, if only he hadn't got this horrible stammer! He could explain it all so well; he could say all those things his mother had said. But somehow, at the moment, even the things that she had said were beside the point. The point wasn't saying; the point was caring for people, caring until it hurt.

'My uncle,' said Anthony, 'he doesn't even believe in God. I don't either,' he added provocatively.

But Brian did not take up the challenge. 'I s-say,' he broke out impulsively, 'I s-say, B-b-b- . . .'

The very intensity of his eagerness made him stammer all the worse. 'B-benger,' he brought out at last. It was an agony to feel the current of his love thus checked and diverted. Held up behind the grotesquely irrelevant impediment to its progress, the stream mounted, seemed to gather force and was at last so strong within him that, forgetting altogether that it wasn't done, Brian suddenly laid his hand on Anthony's arm. The fingers travelled down the sleeve, then closed round the bare wrist; and thereafter, every time his stammer interposed itself between his feeling and its object, his grasp tightened in a spasm almost of desperation.

'I'm so t-terribly s-sorry about your m-mother,' he went on. 'I d-didn't w-want to s-say it be-before. N-not in f-front of the o-others. You know, I was th-th-th . . .'

He gripped on Anthony's wrist more tightly; it was as though he were trying to supplement his strangled words by the direct eloquence of touch, were trying to persuade the other of the continued existence of the stream within him, of its force, unabated in spite of the temporary checking of the current. He began the sentence again and acquired sufficient momentum to take him past the barrier. 'I was th-thinking just n-now,' he said, 'it m-might have been my mother. Oh, B-b-beavis, it m-must be too awful!'

Anthony looked at him, in the first moment of surprise, with an expression of suspicion, almost of fear on his face. But as the other stammered on, this first hardening of resistance melted away, and now, without feeling ashamed of what he was doing, he began to cry.

Balanced precariously in the tall embrasure of the windows, the two children stood there for a long time in silence. The cheeks of both of them were cold with tears; but on Anthony's wrist the grip of that consoling hand was obstinately violent, like a drowning man's.

Suddenly, with a thin rattling of withered leaves, a gust of wind came swelling up out of the darkness. The little three-master started, as though it had been woken out of sleep, and noiselessly, with an air of purposeful haste, began to glide, stern-foremost, along the gutter.

* * *

The servants had gone to bed; all the house was still. Slowly, in the dark, John Beavis left his study and climbed past the mezzanine landing, past the drawing-room, stair after stair, towards the second floor. Outside, in the empty street, the sound of hoofs approached and again receded. The silence closed in once more — the silence of his solitude, the silence (he shuddered) of her grave.

He stood still, listening for long seconds to the beating of his heart; then, with decision, mounted the last two stairs, crossed the dark landing and, opening the door, turned on the light. His image confronted him, staring palely from the dressing-table mirror. The silver brushes were in their usual place, the little trays and pin-cushions, the row of cut-glass bottles. He looked away. One corner of the broad pink quilt was turned back; he saw the two pillows lying cheek by cheek, and above them, on the wall, that photogravure of the Sistine Madonna they had bought together, in the shop near the British Museum. Turning, he saw himself again, at full length, funereally black, in the glass of the wardrobe. The wardrobe . . . He stepped across the room and turned the key in the lock. The heavy glass door swung open of its own accord, and suddenly he was breathing the very air of her presence, that faint scent of orris-root, quickened secretly, as it were, by some sharper, warmer perfume. Grey, white, green, shell-pink, black — dress after dress. It was as though she had died ten times and ten times been hung there, limp, gruesomely headless, but haloed still, ironically, with the sweet, breathing symbol of her

life. He stretched out his hand and touched the smooth silk, the cloth, the muslin, the velvet; all those various textures. Stirred, the hanging folds gave out their perfume more strongly; he shut his eyes and inhaled her real presence. But what was left of her had been burnt, and the ashes were at the bottom of that pit in Lollingdon churchyard.

‘Stay for me there,’ John Beavis whispered articulately in the silence.

His throat contracted painfully; the tears welled out between his closed eyelids. Shutting the wardrobe door, he turned away and began to undress.

He was conscious, suddenly, of an overwhelming fatigue. It cost him an immense effort to wash. When he got into bed, he fell asleep almost at once.

Towards the morning, when the light of the new day and the noises from the street had begun to break through the enveloping layers of his inner darkness, John Beavis dreamed that he was walking along the corridor that led to his lecture-room at King’s College. No, not walking: running. For the corridor had become immensely long and there was some terrible urgent reason for getting to the end of it quickly, for being there in time. In time for what? He did not know; but as he ran, he felt a sickening apprehension mounting, as it were, and expanding and growing every moment more intense within him. And when at last he opened the door of the lecture-room, it wasn’t the lecture-room at all, but their bedroom at home, with Maisie lying there, panting for breath, her face flushed with the fever, dark with the horrible approach of asphyxiation, and across it, like two weals, bluish and livid, the parted lips. The sight was so dreadful that he started broad awake. Daylight shone pale between the curtains; the quilt showed pink; there was a gleam in the wardrobe mirror: outside, the milkman was calling, ‘Mu-ilk, Mui-uilk!’ as he went his rounds. Everything was reassuringly familiar, in its right place. It had been no more than a bad dream. Then, turning his head, John Beavis saw that the other half of the broad bed was empty.

* * *

The bell came nearer and nearer, ploughing through the deep warm drifts of sleep, until at last it hammered remorselessly on his naked and quivering consciousness. Anthony opened his eyes. What a filthy row it made! But he needn’t think of getting up for at least another five minutes. The warmth under the sheets was heavenly. Then — and it spoilt everything — he remembered that early school was algebra with Jimbug. His heart came into his throat. Those awful quadratics! Jimbug would start yelling at him again. It wasn’t fair. And he’d blub. But then it occurred to him that Jimbug probably wouldn’t yell at him today — because of what, he suddenly remembered, had happened yesterday. Horse-Face had been most awfully decent last night, he went on to think.

But it was time to get up. One, two, three and, ugh, how filthily cold it was! He was just diving upwards into his shirt when somebody tapped very softly at the door of his cubicle. One last wriggle brought his head through into daylight. He went and opened. Staithes was standing in the passage. Staithes — grinning, it was true, in apparent friendliness; but still . . . Anthony was disturbed. Mistrustfully, but with a hypocritical smile of welcome, ‘What’s up?’ he began; but the other put a finger to his lips.

‘Come and look,’ he whispered. ‘It’s marvellous!’

Anthony was flattered by this invitation from one who, as captain of the football eleven, had a right to be, and generally was, thoroughly offensive to him. He was afraid of Staithes and disliked him — and for that very reason felt particularly pleased that Staithes should have taken the trouble to come to him like this, of his own accord. . . .

Staithes’s cubicle was already crowded. The conspiratorial silence seethed and bubbled with a suppressed excitement. Thompson had had to stuff his handkerchief into his mouth to keep himself from laughing, and Pembroke-Jones was doubling up in paroxysms of noiseless mirth. Wedged in the narrow space between the foot of the bed and the washstand, Partridge was standing with one cheek pressed against the partition. Staithes touched him on the shoulder. Partridge turned round and came out into the centre of the cubicle; his freckled face was distorted with glee and he twitched and fidgeted as though his bladder were bursting. Staithes pointed to the place he had vacated and Anthony squeezed in. A

knot in the wood of the partition had been prized out, and, through the hole you could see all that was going on in the next cubicle. On the bed, wearing only a woollen undervest and his rupture appliance, lay Goggler Ledwidge. His eyes behind the thick glass of his spectacles were shut; his lips were parted. He looked tranquilly happy and serene, as though he were in church.

‘Is he still there?’ whispered Staithes.

Anthony turned a grinning face and nodded; then pressed his eyes more closely to the spy-hole. What made it so specially funny was the fact that it should be Goggler — Goggler, the school buffoon, the general victim, predestined by weakness and timidity to inevitable persecution. This would be something new to bait him with.

‘Let’s give him a fright,’ suggested Staithes, and climbed up on to the rail at the head of the bed.

Partridge, who played centre forward for the first eleven, made a movement to follow him. But it was to Anthony that Staithes unexpectedly turned. ‘Come on, Beavis,’ he whispered. ‘Come up here with me.’ He wanted to be specially decent to the poor chap — because of his mater. Besides, it pleased him to be able to snub that lout, Partridge.

Anthony accepted the flattering invitation with an almost abject alacrity and got up beside him. The others perched unsteadily at the foot of the bed. At a signal from Staithes all straightened themselves up and, showing their heads above the partition, hooted their derision.

Recalled thus brutally from his squalidly tender little Eden of enemas and spankings (it had, as yet, no female inhabitants), Goggler gave vent to a startled cry; his eyes opened, frantic with terror; he went very white for a moment, then blushed. With his two hands he pulled down his vest; but it was too short to cover his nakedness or even his truss. Absurdly short, like a baby’s vest. (‘We’ll try to make them last this one more term,’ his mother had said. ‘These woollen things are so frightfully expensive.’ She had made great sacrifices to send him to Bulstrode.)

‘Pull, pull!’ Staithes shouted in sarcastic encouragement of his efforts.

‘Why wouldn’t Henry VIII allow Anne Boleyn to go into his henhouse?’ said Thompson. Everyone knew the answer, of course. There was a burst of laughter.

Staithes lifted one foot from its perch, pulled off the leather-soled slipper, took aim and threw. It hit Goggler on the side of the face. He gave a cry of pain, jumped out of bed and stood with hunched shoulders and one skinny little arm raised to cover his head, looking up at the jeering faces through eyes that had begun to overflow with tears.

‘Buzz yours too!’ shouted Staithes to the others. Then, seeing the new arrival standing in the open doorway of his cubicle, ‘Hullo, Horse-Face,’ he said, as he took off the other slipper; ‘come and have a shot.’ He raised his arm; but before he could throw, Horse-Face had jumped on to the bed and caught him by the wrist.

‘No, s-stop!’ he said. ‘Stop.’ And he caught also at Thompson’s arm. Leaning over Staithes’s shoulder, Anthony threw — as hard as he could. Goggler ducked. The slipper thumped against the wooden partition behind him.

‘B-beavis!’ cried Horse-Face — so reproachfully, that Anthony felt a sudden twinge of shame.

‘It didn’t hit him,’ he said by way of excuse; and for some queer reason found himself thinking of that horrible deep hole in Lollingdon churchyard.

Staithes had found his tongue again. ‘I don’t know what you think you’re doing, Horse-Face,’ he said angrily, and jerked the slipper out of Brian’s hand. ‘Why can’t you mind your own business?’

‘It isn’t f-fair,’ Brian answered.

‘Yes, it is.’

‘F-five against one.’

‘But you don’t know what he was doing.’

‘I d-don’t c-c-c . . . don’t mind.’

‘You would care, if you knew,’ said Staithes; and proceeded to tell him what Goggler had been doing — as dirtily as he knew how.

Brian dropped his eyes and his cheeks went suddenly very red. To have to listen to smut always made him feel miserable — miserable and at the same time ashamed of himself.

‘Look at old Horse-Face blushing!’ called Partridge; and they all laughed — none more derisively than Anthony. For Anthony had had time to feel ashamed of his shame; time to refuse to think about that hole in Lollingdon churchyard; time, too, to find himself all of a sudden almost hating old Horse-Face. ‘For being so disgustingly pi,’ he would have said, if somebody had asked him to explain his hatred. But the real reason was deeper, obscurer. If he hated Horse-Face, it was because Horse-Face was so extraordinarily decent; because Horse-Face had the courage of convictions which Anthony felt should also be his convictions — which, indeed, would be his convictions if only he could bring himself to have the courage of them. It was just because he liked Horse-Face so much that he now hated him. Or, rather, because there were so many reasons why he should like him — so few reasons, on the contrary, why Horse-Face should return the liking. Horse-Face was rich with all sorts of fine qualities that he himself either lacked completely or else, which was worse, possessed, but somehow was incapable of manifesting. That sudden derisive burst of laughter was the expression of a kind of envious resentment against a superiority which he loved and admired. Indeed, the love and the admiration in some sort produced the resentment and the envy — produced, but ordinarily kept them below the surface in an unconscious abeyance, from which, however, some crisis like the present would suddenly call them.

‘You should have seen him,’ concluded Staithes. Now that he felt in a better humour he laughed — he could afford to laugh.

‘In his truss,’ Anthony added, in a tone of sickened contempt. Goggler’s rapture was an aggravation of the offence.

‘Yes, in his beastly old truss!’ Staithes confirmed approvingly. There was no doubt about it; combined as it was with the spectacles and the timidity, that truss made the throwing of slippers not only inevitable, but right, a moral duty.

‘He’s disgusting,’ Anthony went on, warming pleasantly to his righteous indignation.

For the first time since Staithes had started on his description of Goggler’s activities Brian looked up. ‘B-but w-why is he more disgusting than anyone else?’ he asked in a low voice. ‘A-after all,’ he went on, and the blood came rushing back into his cheeks as he spoke, ‘he i-isn’t the . . . the o-only one.’

There was a moment’s uncomfortable silence. Of course he wasn’t the only one. But he was the only one, they were all thinking, who had a truss, and goggles, and a vest that was too short for him; the only one who did it in broad daylight and let himself be caught at it. There was a difference.

Staithes counter-attacked on another front. ‘Sermon by the Reverend Horse-Face!’ he said jeeringly, and at once recovered the initiative, the position of superiority. ‘Gosh!’ he added in another tone, ‘it’s late. We must buck up.’

Chapter Seven. April 8th 1934

FROM A.B.’S DIARY

Conditioned reflex. What a lot of satisfaction I got out of old Pavlov when first I read him. The ultimate debunking of all human pretensions. We were all dogs and bitches together. Bow-wow, sniff the lamp-post, lift the leg, bury the bone. No nonsense about free will, goodness, truth, and all the rest. Each age has its psychological revolutionaries. La Mettrie, Hume, Condillac, and finally the Marquis de Sade, latest and most sweeping of the eighteenth-century debunkers. Perhaps, indeed, the ultimate and absolute revolutionary. But few have the courage to follow the revolutionary argument to Sade’s conclusions. Meanwhile, science did not stand still. Dix-huitième debunking, apart from Sade, proved inadequate. The nineteenth century had to begin again. Marx and the Darwinians. Who are still with us — Marx obsessively so. Meanwhile the twentieth century has produced yet another lot of debunkers — Freud and, when he began to flag, Pavlov and the Behaviourists. Conditioned reflex: — it seemed,

I remember, to put the lid on everything. Whereas actually, of course, it merely restated the doctrine of free will. For if reflexes can be conditioned, then, obviously, they can be re-conditioned. Learning to use the self properly, when one has been using it badly — what is it but reconditioning one's reflexes?

Lunched with my father. More cheerful than I've seen him recently, but old and, oddly, rather enjoying it. Making much of getting out of his chair with difficulty, of climbing very slowly up the stairs. A way, I suppose, of increasing his sense of importance. Perhaps also a way of commanding sympathy whenever he happens to want it. Baby cries so that mother shall come and make a fuss of him. It goes on from the cradle to the grave. Miller says of old age that it's largely a bad habit. Use conditions function. Walk about as if you were a martyr to rheumatism and you'll impose such violent muscular strains upon yourself that a martyr to rheumatism you'll really be. Behave like an old man and your body will function like an old man's, you'll think and feel as an old man. The lean and slippered pantaloons — literally a part that one plays. If you refuse to play it and learn how to act on your refusal, you won't become a pantaloons. I suspect this is largely true. Anyhow, my father is playing his present part with gusto. One of the great advantages of being old, provided that one's economic position is reasonably secure and one's health not too bad, is that one can afford to be serene. The grave is near, one has made a habit of not feeling anything very strongly; it's easy, therefore, to take the God's-eye view of things. My father took it about peace, for example. Yes, men were mad, he agreed; there would be another war quite soon — about 1940, he thought. (A date, significantly, when he was practically certain to be dead!) Much worse than the last war, yes; and would probably destroy the civilization of Western Europe. But did it really matter so much? Civilization would go on in other continents, would build itself up anew in the devastated areas. Our time scale was all wrong. We should think of ourselves, not as living in the thirties of the twentieth-century, but as at a point between two ice ages. And he ended up by quoting Goethe — alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis. All which is doubtless quite true, but not the whole truth. Query: how to combine belief that the world is to a great extent illusory with belief that it is none the less essential to improve the illusion? How to be simultaneously dispassionate and not indifferent, serene like an old man and active like a young one?

Chapter Eight. August 30th 1933

'THESE VILE HORSE-FLIES!' Helen rubbed the reddening spot on her arm. Anthony made no comment. She looked at him for a little in silence. 'What a lot of ribs you've got!' she said at last.

'Schizothyme physique,' he answered from behind the arm with which he was shielding his face from the light. 'That's why I'm here. Predestined by the angle of my ribs.'

'Predestined to what?'

'To sociology; and in the intervals to this.' He raised his hand, made a little circular gesture and let it fall again on the mattress.

'But what's "this"?' she insisted.

'This?' Anthony repeated. 'Well . . .' He hesitated. But it would take too long to talk about that temperamental divorce between the passions and the intellect, those detached sensualities, those sterilized ideas. 'Well, you,' he brought out at last.

'Me?'

'Oh, I admit it might have been someone else,' he said, and laughed, genuinely amused by his own cynicism.

Helen also laughed, but with a surprising bitterness. 'I am somebody else.'

'Meaning what?' he asked, uncovering his face to look at her.

'Meaning what I say. Do you think I should be here — the real I?'

'Real I!' he mocked. 'You're talking like a theosophist.'

‘And you’re talking like a fool,’ she said. ‘On purpose. Because, of course, you aren’t one.’ There was a long silence. I, real I? But where, but how, but at what price? Yes, above all, at what price? Those Cavells and Florence Nightingales. But it was impossible, that sort of thing; it was, above all, ridiculous. She frowned to herself, she shook her head; then, opening her eyes, which had been shut, looked for something in the external world to distract her from these useless and importunate thoughts within. The foreground was all Anthony. She looked at him for a moment; then, reaching out with a kind of fascinated reluctance, as though towards some irresistibly strange but distasteful animal, she touched the pink crumpled skin of the great scar that ran diagonally across his thigh, an inch or two above the knee. ‘Does it still hurt?’ she asked.

‘When I’m run down. And sometimes in wet weather.’ He raised his head a little from the mattress and, at the same time bending his right knee, examined the scar. ‘A touch of the Renaissance,’ he said reflectively. ‘Slashed trunks.’

Helen shuddered. ‘It must have been awful!’ Then, with a sudden vehemence, ‘How I hate pain!’ she cried, and her tone was one of passionate, deeply personal resentment. ‘Hate it,’ she repeated for all the Cavells and Nightingales to hear.

She had pushed him back into the past again. That autumn day at Tidworth eighteen years before. Bombing instruction. An imbecile recruit had thrown short. The shouts, his panic start, the blow. Oddly remote it all seemed now, and irrelevant, like something seen through the wrong end of a telescope. And even the pain, all the months of pain, had shrunk almost to non-existence. Physically, it was the worst thing that had ever happened to him — and the lunatic in charge of his memory had practically forgotten it.

‘One can’t remember pain,’ he said aloud.

‘I can.’

‘No, you can’t. You can only remember its occasion, its accompaniments.’

Its occasion at the midwife’s in the rue de la Tombe-Issoire, its accompaniments of squalor and humiliation. Her face hardened as she listened to his words.

‘You can never remember its actual quality,’ he went on. ‘No more than you can remember the quality of a physical pleasure. Today, for example, half an hour ago — you can’t remember. There’s nothing like a re-creation of the event. Which is lucky.’ He was smiling now. ‘Think, if one could fully remember perfumes or kisses. How wearisome the reality of them would be! And what woman with a memory would ever have more than one baby?’

Helen stirred uneasily. ‘I can’t imagine how any woman ever does,’ she said in a low voice.

‘As it is,’ he went on, ‘the pains and pleasures are new each time they’re experienced. Brand new. Every gardenia is the first gardenia you ever smelt. And every confinement . . .’

‘You’re talking like a fool again,’ she interrupted angrily. ‘Confusing the issue.’

‘I thought I was clarifying it,’ he protested. ‘And anyhow, what is the issue?’

‘The issue’s me, you, real life, happiness. And you go chattering away about things in the air. Like a fool!’

‘And what about you?’ he asked. ‘Are you such a clever one at real life? Such an expert in happiness?’

In the mind of each of them his words evoked the image of a timorous figure, ambushed behind spectacles.

That marriage! What on earth could have induced her? Old Hugh, of course, had been sentimentally in love. But was that a sufficient reason? And, afterwards, what sort of disillusiones? Physiological, he supposed, for the most part. Comic, when you thought of them in relation to old Hugh. The corners of Anthony’s mouth faintly twitched. But for Helen, of course, the joke could only have been disastrous. He would have liked to know the details — but at second-hand, on condition of not having to ask for or be offered her confidences. Confidences were dangerous, confidences were entangling — like fly-paper; yes, like fly-paper. . . .

Helen sighed; then, squaring her shoulders and in a tone of resolution, ‘Two blacks don’t make a white,’ she said. ‘Besides, I’m my own affair.’

Which was all for the best, he thought. There was a silence.

‘How long were you in hospital with that wound?’ she asked in another tone.

‘Nearly ten months. It was disgustingly infected. They had to operate six times altogether.’

‘How horrible!’

Anthony shrugged his shoulders. At least it had preserved him from those trenches. But for the grace of God . . . ‘Queer,’ he added, ‘what unlikely forms the grace of God assumes sometimes! A half-witted bumpkin with a hand-grenade. But for him I should have been shipped out to France and slaughtered — almost to a certainty. He saved my life.’ Then, after a pause, ‘My freedom too,’ he added. ‘I’d let myself be fuddled by those beginning-of-war intoxications. “Honour has come back, as a king, to earth.” But I suppose you’re too young ever to have heard of poor Rupert. It seemed to make sense then, in 1914. “Honour has come back . . .” But he failed to mention that stupidity had come back too. In hospital, I had all the leisure to think of that other royal progress through the earth. Stupidity has come back, as a king — no; as an emperor, as a divine Führer of all the Aryans. It was a sobering reflection. Sobering and profoundly liberating. And I owed it to the bumpkin. He was one of the great Führer’s most faithful subjects.’ There was a silence. ‘Sometimes I feel a bit nervous — like Polycrates — because I’ve had so much luck in my life. All occasions always seem to have conspired for me. Even this occasion.’ He touched the scar. ‘Perhaps I ought to do something to allay the envy of the Gods — throw a ring into the sea next time I go bathing.’ He uttered a little laugh. ‘The trouble is, I don’t possess a ring.’

Chapter Nine. April 2nd 1903

AT PADDINGTON, MR Beavis and Anthony got into an empty third-class compartment and waited for the train to start. For Anthony a railway journey was still profoundly important, still a kind of sacrament. The male soul, in immaturity, is naturaliter ferrovialis. This huge and god-like green monster, for example, that now came snorting into the station and drew up at Platform 1 — but for Watt and Stephenson it would never have rolled thus majestically into its metropolitan cathedral of sooty glass. But the intensity of delight which Anthony felt as he watched the divine creature approach, as he breathed its stink of coal smoke and hot oil, as he heard and almost unconsciously imitated the ch-ff, ch-ff, ch-ff of its steamy panting, was a sufficient proof that the boyish heart must have been, in some mysterious way, prepared for the advent of Puffing Billy and the Rocket, that the actual locomotive, when it appeared, must have corresponded (how satisfyingly!) with some dim prophetic image of a locomotive, pre-existing in the mind of children from the beginning of palaeolithic time. Ch-ff, ch-ff; then silence; then the terrible, the soul-annihilating roar of escaping steam. Wonderful! Lovely!

Bonneted, in black, like a pair of Queen Victorias, two fat and tiny old ladies passed slowly, looking for a compartment where they would not have their throats cut or be compelled to listen to bad language. Mr Beavis looked very respectable indeed. They paused, held a consultation; but, leaning out of the window, Anthony made such a face at them that they moved away again. He smiled triumphantly. Keeping the compartment to oneself was one of the objects of the sacred game of travelling — was the equivalent, more or less, of a Royal Marriage at bezique; you scored forty, so to speak, each time you left a station without a stranger in your carriage. Having lunch in the dining-car counted as much as a Sequence — two hundred and fifty. And Double Bezique — but this, as yet, Anthony had never scored — was being in a slip carriage.

The guard whistled, the train began to move.

‘Hurrah!’ Anthony shouted.

The game had begun well: a Royal Marriage in the very first round. But a few minutes later he was regretting those two old ladies. For, rousing himself suddenly from his abstracted silence, John Beavis leaned forward and, touching his son’s knee, ‘Do you remember what day of the month it is?’ he asked in a low and, to Anthony, inexplicably significant tone.

Anthony looked at him doubtfully; then started to overact the part of the Calculator, frowning over a difficult problem. There was something about his father that seemed to make such overacting inevitable.

‘Let me see,’ he said unnaturally, ‘we broke up on the thirty-first — or was it the thirtieth? That was Saturday, and today’s Monday . . .’

‘Today’s the second,’ said his father in the same slow voice.

Anthony felt apprehensive. If his father knew the date, why had he asked?

‘It’s exactly five months today,’ Mr Beavis went on.

Five months? And then, with a sudden sickening drop of the heart, Anthony realized what his father was talking about. The Second of November, the Second of April. It was five months since she had died.

‘Each second of the month — one tried to keep the day sacred.’

Anthony nodded and turned his eyes away with a sense of guilty discomfort.

‘Bound each to each by natural piety,’ said Mr Beavis.

What on earth was he talking about now? And, oh, why, why did he have to say these things? So awful; so indecent — yes, indecent; one didn’t know where to look. Like the times when Granny’s stomach made those awful bubbling noises after meals . . .

Looking into his son’s averted face, Mr Beavis perceived signs of resistance and was hurt, was saddened, and felt the sadness turn into an obscure resentment that Anthony should not suffer as acutely as he did. Of course the child was still very young, not yet able to realize the full extent of his loss; but all the same, all the same . . .

To Anthony’s unspeakable relief the train slowed down for its first stop. The suburbs of Slough passed slowly and ever slower before his eyes. Against all the rules of the sacred game, he prayed that somebody might get into their compartment. And, thank heaven, somebody did get in — a gross, purple-faced man whom on any other occasion Anthony would have hated. Today he loved him.

Shielding his eyes with his hand, Mr Beavis retired again into a private world of silence.

In the carriage, on the way from Twyford station, his father added insult to injury.

‘You must always be on your very best behaviour,’ he recommended.

‘Of course,’ said Anthony curtly.

‘And always be punctual,’ Mr Beavis continued. ‘And don’t be greedy at meal-times.’ He hesitated, smiled in anticipation of what he was about to say, then launched his colloquialism: ‘however excellent the “grub” may be.’ There was a little silence. ‘And be polite to the Abigails,’ he added.

They turned off the road into a drive that wound between tall shrubberies of rhododendrons. Then, across an expanse of tree-islanded grass, appeared a façade of Georgian stucco. The house was not large, but solid, comfortable and at the same time elegant. Built, you divined, by someone who could quote Horace, aptly, on every occasion. Rachel Foxe’s father, Mr Beavis reflected, as he looked at it, must have left quite a lot of money. Naval architecture — and didn’t the old boy invent something that the Admiralty took up? Foxe, too, had been well off: something to do with coal. (How charming those daffodils looked in the grass there, under the tree!) But a dour, silent, humourless man who had not, Mr Beavis remembered, understood his little philological joke about the word ‘pencil’. Though if he’d known at the time that the poor fellow had a duodenal ulcer, he certainly wouldn’t have risked it.

Mrs Foxe and Brian came to meet them as the carriage drew up. The boys went off together. Mr Beavis followed his hostess into the drawing-room. She was a tall woman, slender and very upright, with something so majestic in her carriage, so nobly austere in the lines and expression of her face, that Mr Beavis always felt himself slightly intimidated and ill at ease in her presence.

‘It was so very good of you to ask us,’ he said. ‘And I can’t tell you how much it will mean for . . .’ he hesitated for an instant; then (since it was the second of the month), with a little shake of the head and in a lower tone, ‘for this poor motherless little fellow of mine,’ he went on, ‘to spend his holidays here with you.’

Her clear brown eyes had darkened, as he spoke, with a sympathetic distress. Always firm, always serious, the coming together of her full, almost floridly sculptured lips expressed more than ordinary

gravity. 'But I'm so delighted to have him,' she said in a voice that was warm and musically vibrant with feeling. 'Selfishly glad — for Brian's sake.' She smiled, and he noticed that even when she smiled her mouth seemed somehow to preserve, through all its sensibility, its profound capacity for suffering and enjoyment, that seriousness, that determined purity which characterized it in repose. 'Yes, selfishly,' she repeated. 'Because, when he's happy, I am.'

Mr Beavis nodded; then, sighing, 'One's thankful,' he said, 'to have as much left to one as that — the reflection of someone else's happiness.' Magnanimously, he was giving Anthony the right not to suffer — though of course when the boy was a little older, when he could realize more fully . . .

Mrs Foxe did not continue the conversation. There was something rather distasteful to her in his words and manner, something that jarred upon her sensibilities. But she hastened to banish the disagreeable impression from her mind. After all, the important, the essential fact was that the poor man had suffered, was still suffering. The false note, if falsity there were, was after the fact — in the mere expression of the suffering.

She proposed a stroll before tea, and they walked through the garden and out into the domesticated wilderness of grass and trees beyond. In a glade of the little copse that bounded the property to the north, three crippled children were picking primroses. With a gruesome agility they swung themselves on their crutches from clump to clump of the pale golden flowers, yelling as they went in shrill discordant rapture.

They were staying, Mrs Foxe explained, in one of her cottages. 'Three of my cripples,' she called them.

At the sound of her voice the children looked up, and at once came hopping across the open space towards her.

'Look, Miss, look what I found!'

'Look here, Miss!'

'What's this called, Miss?'

She answered their questions, asked others in return, promised to come that evening to see them.

Feeling that he too ought to do something for the cripples, Mr Beavis began to tell them about the etymology of the word 'primrose'. 'Primerole in Middle English,' he explained. 'The "rose" crept in by mistake.' They stared at him uncomprehendingly. 'A mere popular blunder,' he went on; then, twinkling, 'a "howler," ' he added. 'Like our old friend,' he smiled at them knowingly, 'our old friend "causeway".'

There was a silence. Mrs Foxe changed the subject.

'Poor little mites!' she said, when at last they let her go. 'They're so happy, they make one want to cry. And then, after a week, one has to pack them off again. Back to their slum. It seems too cruel. But what can one do? There are so many of them. One can't keep one lot at the expense of the others.'

They walked on for a time in silence, and Mrs Foxe found herself suddenly thinking that there were also cripples of the spirit. People with emotions so lame and rickety that they didn't know how to feel properly; people with some kind of hunch or deformity in their power of expression. John Beavis perhaps was one of them. But how unfair she was being! How presumptuous too! Judge not that ye be not judged. And anyhow, if it were true, that would only be another reason for feeling sorry for him.

'I think it must be tea-time,' she said aloud; and, to prevent herself from passing any more judgments, she started to talk to him about those Cripple Schools she had been helping to organize in Notting Dale and St Pancras. She described the cripple's life at home — the parents out at work; not a glimpse of a human face from morning till night; no proper food; no toys, no books, nothing to do but to lie still and wait — for what? Then she told him about the ambulance that now went round to fetch the children to school, about the special desks, the lessons, the arrangements for supplying a decent dinner.

'And our reward,' she said, as she opened the door into the house, 'is that same heart-breaking happiness I was speaking of just now. I can't help feeling it as a kind of reproach, an accusation. Each time I see that happiness, I ask myself what right I have to be in a position to give it so easily, just by

spending a little money and taking a tiny bit of pleasant trouble. Yes, what right?' Her warm clear voice trembled a little as she uttered the question. She raised her hands in an interrogative gesture, then let them fall again and walked quickly into the drawing-room.

Mr Beavis followed her in silence. A kind of tingling warmth had expanded within him as he listened to her last words. It was like the sensation he had when he read the last scene of *Measure for Measure*, or listened to Joachim in the Beethoven Concerto.

Mr Beavis could only stay two nights. There was an important meeting of the Philological Society. And then, of course, his work on the Dictionary. 'The old familiar grind,' he explained to Mrs Foxe in a tone of affected self-pity and with a sigh that was hardly even meant to carry conviction. The truth was that he enjoyed his work, would have felt lost without it. 'And you're really sure,' he added, 'that Anthony won't be too much of a burden to you?'

'Burden? But look!' And she pointed through the window to where the two boys were playing bicycle polo on the lawn. 'And it's not only that,' she went on. 'I've really come to be very much attached to Anthony in these two days. There's something so deeply touching about him. He seems so vulnerable somehow. In spite of all that cleverness and good sense and determination of his. There's part of him that seems terribly at the mercy of the world.' Yes, at its mercy, she repeated to herself, thinking, as she did so, of that broad and candid forehead, of those almost tremulously sensitive lips, of that slight, unforceful chin. He could be easily hurt, easily led astray. Each time he looked at her, he made her feel almost guiltily responsible for him.

'And yet,' said Mr Beavis, 'there are times when he seems strangely indifferent.' The memory of that episode in the train had not ceased to rankle. For though, of course, he wanted the child to be happy, though he had decided that the only happiness he himself could know henceforward would come from the contemplation of the child's happiness, the old resentment still obscurely persisted: he felt aggrieved because Anthony had not suffered more, because he seemed to resist and reject suffering when it was brought to him. 'Strangely indifferent,' he repeated.

Mrs Foxe nodded. 'Yes,' she said, 'he wears a kind of armour. Covers up his vulnerability in the most exposed place and at the same time uncovers it elsewhere, so that the slighter wounds shall act as a kind of distraction, a kind of counter-irritant. It's self-protection. And yet' (her voice deepened, thrillingly), 'and yet I believe that in the long run he'd be better and spiritually healthier, yes, and happier too, if he could bring himself to do just the opposite — if he'd armour himself against the little distracting wounds, the little wounds of pleasure as well as the little wounds of pain, and expose his vulnerability only to the great and piercing blows.'

'How true that is!' said Mr Beavis, who found that her words applied exactly to himself.

There was a silence. Then, harking back to his original question, 'No, no,' said Mrs Foxe with decision, 'so far from feeling him as a burden, I'm really enchanted to have him here. Not only for what he is in himself, but also for what he is to Brian — and incidentally for what Brian is to him. It's delightful to see them. I should like them to be together every holidays.' Mrs Foxe paused for a moment; then, 'Seriously,' she went on, 'if you've made no plans for the summer, why don't you think of this? We've taken a little house at Tenby for August. Why shouldn't you and Anthony find a place there too?'

Mr Beavis thought the idea an excellent one; and the boys, when it was broached to them, were delighted.

'So it's only good-bye till August,' said Mrs Foxe as she saw him off. 'Though of course,' she added, with a warmth that was all the greater for being the result of a deliberate effort of cordiality, 'of course we shall meet before then.'

The carriage rattled away down the drive; and for a hundred yards or more Anthony ran beside it, shouting 'Good-bye' and waving his handkerchief with a vehemence that Mr Beavis took as the sign of a correspondingly intense regret to see him go. In fact, however, it was just a manifestation of overflowing energy and high spirits. Circumstances had filled him, body and mind, with the deep joy of being happily alive. This joy required physical expression, and his father's departure gave him an excuse for running and waving his arms. Mr Beavis was extremely touched. But if only, he went on

sadly to think, if only there were some way of canalizing this love, and his own for the boy, so that it might irrigate the aridities of their daily intercourse! Women understood these things so much better. It had been touching to see how the poor child had responded to Mrs Foxe's affection. And perhaps, he went on to speculate, perhaps it was just because there had been no woman to direct his feelings that Anthony had seemed to be so uncaring. Perhaps a child could never adequately mourn his mother for the very reason that he was motherless. It was a vicious circle. Mrs Foxe's influence would be good, not only in this matter, but in a thousand other ways as well. Mr Beavis sighed. If only it were possible for a man and a woman to associate; not in marriage, but for a common purpose, for the sake of motherless, of fatherless children! A good woman — admirable, extraordinary even. But in spite of that (almost because of that), it could only be an association for a common purpose. Never a marriage. And anyhow there was Maisie — waiting for him there; he would not fail . . . But an association for the sake of the children — that would be no betrayal.

Anthony walked back to the house whistling 'The Honeysuckle and the Bee'. He was fond of his father — fond, it is true, by force of habit, as one is fond of one's native place, or its traditional cooking — but still, genuinely fond of him. Which did nothing however, to diminish the discomfort he always felt in Mr Beavis's presence.

'Brian!' he shouted, as he approached the house — shouted a bit self-consciously; for it seemed queer to be calling him Brian instead of Foxe or Horse-Face. Rather unmanly, even a shade discreditable.

Brian's answering whistle came from the school-room.

'I vote we take the bikes,' Anthony called.

At school, people used to mock at old Horse-Face for his bird mania. 'I say, you fellows,' Staithes would say, taking Horse-Face by the arm, 'guess what I saw today! Two spew-tits and a piddle-warbler.' And a great howl of laughter would go up — a howl in which Anthony always joined. But here, where there was nobody to shame him out of being interested in spring migrants and nest-boxes and heronries, he took to bird-watching with enthusiasm. Coming in, wet and muddy from the afternoon's walk, 'Do you know what we heard, Mrs Foxe?' he would ask triumphantly, before poor Brian had had time to get out a stammered word. 'The first whitethroat!' or 'The first willow wren!' and Rachel Foxe would say, 'How splendid!' in such a way that he was filled with pride and happiness. It was as though those piddle-warblers had never existed.

After tea, when the curtains had been drawn and the lamps brought in, Mrs Foxe would read to them. Anthony, who had always been bored to death by Scott, found himself following the 'Fortunes of Nigel' with the most passionate attention.

Easter approached, and, for the time being, 'Nigel' was put away. Mrs Foxe gave them readings, instead, from the New Testament. 'And he saith unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful unto death: tarry ye here, and watch. And he went forward a little and fell on the ground, and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt.' The lamplight was a round island in the darkness of the room, and towards it, from the fire, projected a vague promontory of luminous redness. Anthony was lying on the floor, and from the high Italian chair beside the lamp the words came down to him, transfigured, as it were, by that warm, musical voice, charged with significances he had never heard or seen in them before. 'And it was the third hour, and they crucified him.' In the ten heart-beats of silence that followed he seemed to hear the blows of the hammer on the nails. Thud, thud, thud . . . He passed the fingers of one hand across the smooth palm of the other; his body went rigid with horror, and through the stiffened muscles passed a violent spasm of shuddering.

'And when the sixth hour was come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.' Mrs Foxe lowered her book. 'That's one of those additions I was telling you about,' she said, 'one of those embroideries on the story. One must think of the age in which the writers of the gospels lived. They believed these things could happen; and, what's more, they thought they ought to happen on important occasions. They wanted to do honour to Jesus; they wanted to make his story seem more wonderful. But to us nowadays, these things make it seem less wonderful; and we don't feel that they

do him honour. The wonderful thing for us,' she went on, and her voice thrilled with a deep note of fervour, 'is that Jesus was a man, no more able to do miracles and no more likely to have them done for him than the rest of us. Just a man — and yet he could do what he did, he could be what he was. That's the wonder.'

There was a long silence; only the clock ticked and the flame rustled silkily in the grate. Anthony lay on his back and stared at the ceiling. Everything was suddenly clear. Uncle James was right; but the other people were right too. She had shown how it was possible for both of them to be right. Just a man — and yet . . . Oh, he too, he too would do and be!

Mrs Foxe picked up the book once more. The thin pages crackled as she turned them.

'Now upon the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they came upon the sepulchre, bringing the spices which they had prepared, and certain others with them. And they found the stone rolled away from the sepulchre.'

The stone . . . But at Lollingdon there was earth; and only ashes in that little box — that little box no bigger than a biscuit tin. Anthony shut his eyes in the hope of excluding the odious vision; but against the crimson darkness the horns, the triangular frizz of auburn curls stood out with an intenser vividness. He lifted his hand to his mouth, and, to punish himself, began to bite the forefinger, harder, harder, until the pain was almost intolerable.

That evening, when she came to say good night to him, Mrs Foxe sat down on the edge of Anthony's bed and took his hand. 'You know, Anthony,' she said after a moment of silence, 'you mustn't be afraid of thinking about her.'

'Afraid?' he mumbled, as though he hadn't understood. But he had understood — understood, perhaps, more than she had meant. The blood rushed guiltily into his cheeks. He felt frightened, as though somehow she had trapped him, found him out — frightened and therefore resentful.

'You mustn't be afraid of suffering,' she went on. 'Thinking about her will make you sad: that's inevitable. And it's right. Sadness is necessary sometimes — like an operation; you can't be well without it. If you think about her, Anthony, it'll hurt you. But if you don't think about her, you condemn her to a second death. The spirit of the dead lives on in God. But it also lives on in the minds of the living — helping them, making them better and stronger. The dead can only have this kind of immortality if the living are prepared to give it them. Will you give it her, Anthony?'

Mutely, and in tears, he nodded his answer. It was not so much the words that had reassured him as the fact that the words were hers and had been uttered in that compelling voice. His fears were allayed, his suspicious resentment died down. He felt safe with her. Safe to abandon himself to the sobs that now mounted irresistibly in his throat.

'Poor little Anthony!' She stroked his hair. 'Poor little Anthony! There's no help for it; it'll always hurt — always. You'll never be able to think of her without some pain. Even time can't take away all the suffering, Anthony.'

She paused, and for a long minute sat there in silence, thinking of her father, thinking of her husband. The old man, so massive, so majestic, like a prophet — then in his wheeled chair, paralysed and strangely shrunken, his head on one side, dribbling over his white beard, hardly able to speak . . . And the man she had married, out of admiration for his strength, out of respect for his uprightness; had married, and then discovered that she did not, could not love. For the strength, she had found, was cold and without magnanimity; the uprightness, harsh and cruel uprightness. And the pain of the long last illness had hardened and embittered him. He had died implacable, resisting her tenderness to the last.

'Yes, there'll always be pain and sadness,' she went on at last. 'And after all,' a warm note of pride, almost of defiance, came into her voice, 'can one wish that it should be otherwise? You wouldn't want to forget your mother, would you, Anthony? Or not to care any more? Just in order to escape a little suffering. You wouldn't want that?'

Sobbing, he shook his head. And it was quite true. At this moment he didn't want to escape. It was in some obscure way a relief to be suffering this extremity of sorrow. And he loved her because she had known how to make him suffer.

Mrs Foxe bent down and kissed him. 'Poor little Anthony!' she kept repeating. 'Poor little Anthony!'

It rained on Good Friday; but on Saturday the weather changed, and Easter Day was symbolically golden, as though on purpose, as though in a parable. Christ's resurrection and the re-birth of Nature — two aspects of an identical mystery. The sunshine, the clouds, like fragments of marbly sculpture in the pale blue sky, seemed, in some profound and inexpressible way, to corroborate all that Mrs Foxe had said.

They did not go to church; but, sitting on the lawn, she read aloud, first a bit of the service for Easter Day, then some extracts from Renan's Life of Jesus. The tears came into Anthony's eyes as he listened, and he felt an unspeakable longing to be good, to do something fine and noble.

On the Monday, a party of slum children were brought down to spend the day in the garden and the copse. At Bulstrode one would have called them scadgers and offensively ignored their existence. Beastly little scadgers; and when they were older, they would grow into louts and cads. Here, however, it was different. Mrs Foxe transformed the scadgers into unfortunate children who would probably never get a second glimpse of the country in all the year.

'Poor kids!' Anthony said to her when they arrived. But in spite of the compassion he was doing his level best to feel, in spite of his determined goodwill, he was secretly afraid of these stunted yet horribly mature little boys with whom he had offered to play, he feared and therefore disliked them. They seemed immeasurably foreign. Their patched, stained clothes, their shapeless boots, were like a differently coloured skin; their cockney might have been Chinese. The mere appearance of them made him feel guiltily self-conscious. And then there was the way they looked at him, with a derisive hatred of his new suit and his alien manners; there was the way the bolder of them whispered together and laughed. When they laughed at Brian for his stammer, he laughed with them; and in a little while they laughed no more, or laughed only in a friendly and almost sympathetic way. Anthony, on the contrary, pretended not to notice their mockery. A gentleman, he had always been taught explicitly as well as by constant implication and the example of his elders, a gentleman doesn't pay any attention to that kind of thing. It is beneath his dignity. He behaved as though their laughter were non-existent. They went on laughing.

He hated that morning of rounders and hide-and-seek. But worse was to follow at lunch-time. He had offered to help in the serving of the table. The work in itself was unobjectionable enough. But the smell of poverty when the twenty children were assembled in the dining-room was so insidiously disgusting — like Lollingdon church, only much worse — that he had to slip out two or three times in the course of the meal to spit in the lavatory basin. 'Reeking with germs!' he heard his mother's angrily frightened voice repeating. 'Reeking with germs!' And when Mrs Foxe asked him a question, he could only nod and make an inarticulate noise with his mouth shut; if he spoke, he would have to swallow. Swallow what? It was revolting only to think of it.

'Poor kids!' he said once more, as he stood with Mrs Foxe and Brian watching their departure. 'Poor kids!' and felt all the more ashamed of his hypocrisy when Mrs Foxe thanked him for having worked so hard to entertain them.

And when Anthony had gone up to the school-room, 'Thank you too, my darling,' she said, turning to Brian. 'You were really splendid.'

Flushing with pleasure, Brian shook his head. 'It was all y-you,' he said; and suddenly, because he loved her so much because she was so good, so wonderful, he found his eyes full of tears.

Together they walked out into the garden. Her hand was on his shoulder. She smelt faintly of eau-de-Cologne, and all at once (and this also, it seemed, was part of her wonderfulness) the sun came out from behind a cloud.

'Look at those heavenly daffodils!' she cried, in that voice that made everything she said seem, to Brian, truer, in some strange way, than the truth itself. ' "And now my heart with pleasure fills . . ." Do you remember, Brian?'

Flushed and with bright eyes, he nodded. ' "And d-dances . . ." '

‘ ”Dances with the daffodils.” ’ She pressed him closer to her. He was filled with an unspeakable happiness. They walked on in silence. Her skirts rustled at every step — like the sea, Brian thought; the sea at Ventnor, that time last year, when he couldn’t sleep at night because of the waves on the beach. Lying there in the darkness, listening to the distant breathing of the sea, he had felt afraid, and above all sad, terribly sad. But, associated with his mother, the memories of that fear, that profound and causeless sadness, became beautiful; and at the same time, in some obscure way, they seemed to reflect their new beauty back on to her, making her seem yet more wonderful in his eyes. Rustling back and forth across the sunny lawn, she took on some of the mysterious significance of the windy darkness, the tirelessly returning waves.

‘Poor little Anthony!’ said Mrs Foxe, breaking the long silence. ‘It’s hard, it’s terribly hard.’ Hard also for poor Maisie, she was thinking. That graceful creature, with her languors, her silences, her dreamy abstractions, and then her sudden bursts of laughing activity — what had such a one to do with death? Or with birth, for that matter? Maisie with a child to bring up — it hardly made more sense than Maisie dead.

‘It must be t-t-t . . .’ but ‘terrible’ wouldn’t come, ‘it must be d-dreadful,’ said Brian, laboriously circumventing the obstacle, while his emotion ran on ahead in an imaginary outburst of unuttered and unutterable words, ‘n-not to have a m-mother.’

Mrs Foxe smiled tenderly, and, bending down, laid her cheek for a moment against his hair. ‘Dreadful also not to have a son,’ she said, and realized, as she did so, that the words were even truer than she had intended them to be — that they were true on a plane of deeper, more essential existence than that on which she was now moving. She had spoken for the present; but if it would be terrible not to have him now, how incomparably more terrible it would have been then, after her father had had his stroke and during the years of her husband’s illness! In that time of pain and utter spiritual deprivation her love for Brian had been her only remaining possession. Ah, terrible, terrible indeed, then, to have no son!

Chapter Ten. June 16th 1912

BOOKS. THE TABLE in Anthony’s room was covered with them. The five folio volumes of Bayle, in the English edition of 1738. Rickaby’s translation of the Summa contra Gentiles. De Gourmont’s *Problème du Style*. The Way of Perfection. Dostoevsky’s Notes from Underground. Three volumes of Byron’s Letters. The works of St John of the Cross in Spanish. The plays of Wycherley. Lee’s History of Sacerdotal Celibacy.

If only, Anthony thought as he came in from his walk, if only one had two sets of eyes! Janus would be able to read *Candide* and the *Imitation* simultaneously. Life was so short, and books so countless many. He pored voluptuously over the table, opening at random now one volume, now another. ‘He would not lie down,’ he read; ‘then his neck was too large for the aperture, and the priest was obliged to drown his exclamations by still louder exhortations. The head was off before the eye could trace the blow; but from an attempt to draw back the head, notwithstanding it was held forward by the hair, the first head was cut off close to the ears; the other two were taken off more cleanly. The first turned me quite hot and thirsty and made me shake so that I could hardly hold the opera glass. . . .’ ‘Happiness being the peculiar good of an intelligent nature, must attach to the intelligent nature on the side of something that is peculiar to it. But appetite is not peculiar to intelligent nature, but is found in all things, though diversely in diverse beings. The will, as being an appetite, is not a peculiar appurtenance of an intelligent nature, except so far as it is dependent on the intelligence; but intelligence in itself is peculiar to an intelligent nature. Happiness therefore consists in an act of the intellect substantially and principally rather than in an act of the will. . . .’ ‘Even in my most secret soul I have never been able to think of love as anything but a struggle, which begins with hatred and ends with moral subjection. .

. . . ' "I will not be a cuckold, I say; there will be danger in making me a cuckold." "Why, wert thou well cured of thy last clap?" . . . 'La primera noche o purgación es amarga y terrible para el sentido, como ahora diremos. La segunda no tiene comparación, porque es horrenda y espantable para el espíritu. . . . 'I think I have read somewhere that preciseness has been carried so far that ladies would not say, J'ai mangé des confitures, but des fitures. At this rate, above one-half of the words of the Dictionary of the French Academy should be struck out. . . . '

In the end, Anthony settled down to *The Way of Perfection of St Teresa*. When Brian came in, an hour later, he had got as far as the Prayer of Quiet.

'B-busy?' Brian asked.

Anthony shook his head.

The other sat down. 'I c-came to s-see if there was anything more to s-settle about to-m-morrow.' Mrs Foxe and Joan Thursley, Mr and Mrs Beavis were coming down to Oxford for the day. Brian and Anthony had agreed to entertain them together.

Hock or Sauterne cup? Lobster mayonnaise or cold salmon? And if it rained, what would be the best thing to do in the afternoon?

'Are you c-coming to the F-fabians this evening?' Brian asked, when the discussion of the next day's plans was at an end.

'Of course,' said Anthony. There was to be voting, that evening, for next term's president. 'It'll be a close fight between you and Mark Staithes. You'll need all the votes you can . . . '

Interrupting him, 'I've st-stood down,' said Brian.

'Stood down? But why?'

'V-various reasons.'

Anthony looked at him and shook his head. 'Not that I'd have ever dreamt of putting up,' he said. 'Can't imagine anything more boring than to preside over any kind of organization.' Even belonging to an organization was bad enough. Why should one be bullied into making choices when one didn't want to choose; into binding oneself to a set of principles when it was so essential to be free; into committing oneself to associate with other people when as likely as not one would want to be alone; into promising in advance to be at given places at given times? It was with the greatest difficulty that Brian had persuaded him to join the Fabians; for the rest he was unattached. 'Inconceivably boring,' he insisted. 'But still, once in the running, why stand down?'

'Mark'll be a b-better president than I.'

'He'll be ruder, if that's what you mean.'

'B-besides, he was so a-awfully k-keen on g-getting elected,' Brian began; then broke off, suddenly conscience-stricken. Anthony might think he was implying a criticism of Mark Staithes, was assuming the right to patronize him. 'I mean, he kn-knows he'll do the j-job so well,' he went on quickly. 'W-whereas I . . . So I r-really didn't see why . . . '

'In fact you thought you might as well humour him.'

'No, n-no!' cried Brian in a tone of distress. 'Not th-that.'

'Cock of the dunghill,' Anthony continued, ignoring the other's protest. 'He's got to be cock — even if it's only of the tiniest little Fabian dunghill.' He laughed. 'Poor old Mark! What an agony when he can't get to the top of his dunghill! One's lucky to prefer books.' He patted St Teresa affectionately. 'Still, I wish you hadn't stood down. It would have made me laugh to see Mark trying to pretend he didn't mind when you'd beaten him. You're reading a paper, aren't you,' he went on, 'after the voting?'

Relieved by the change of subject, Brian nodded. 'On Syn . . . ' he began.

'On sin?'

'Synd-dicalism.'

They both laughed.

'Odd, when you come to think of it,' said Anthony when their laughter subsided, 'that the mere notion of talking to socialists about sin should seem so . . . well, so outrageous, really. Sin . . . socialism.' He shook his head. 'It's like mating a duck with a zebra.'

‘You could t-talk about sin if you st-started from the other end.’

‘Which end?’

‘The s-social end. O-organizing a s-society so well that the i-individual simply c-couldn’t commit any sins.’

‘But do you honestly think such a society could exist?’

‘P-perhaps,’ said Brian doubtfully, but reflected that social change could hardly abolish those ignoble desires of his, couldn’t even legitimate those desires, except within certain conventional limits. He shook his head. ‘N-no, I don’t kn-know,’ he concluded.

‘I can’t see that you could do more than just transfer people’s sins from one plane to another. But we’ve done that already. Take envy and ambition, for example. They used to express themselves on the plane of physical violence. Now, we’ve reorganized society in such a way that they have to express themselves for the most part in terms of economic competition.’

‘Which we’re g-going to ab-abolish.’

‘And so bring physical violence back into fashion, eh?’

‘Th-that’s what you h-hope, d-don’t you?’ said Brian; and laughing, ‘You’re awful!’ he added.

There was a silence. Absently, Brian picked up *The Way of Perfection*, and, turning over the pages, read a line here, a paragraph there. Then with a sigh he shut the book, put it back in its place and, shaking his head, ‘I c-can’t underst-stand,’ he said, ‘why you read this sort of st-stuff. S-seeing that you d-don’t b-believe in it.’

‘But I do believe,’ Anthony insisted. ‘Not in the orthodox explanations, of course. Those are obviously idiotic. But in the facts. And in the fundamental metaphysical theory of mysticism.’

‘You m-mean that you can g-get at t-truth by some s-sort of d-direct union with it?’

Anthony nodded. ‘And the most valuable and important sort of truth only in that way.’

Brian sat for a time in silence, his elbows on his knees, his long face between his hands, staring at the floor. Then, without looking up, ‘It s-seems to me,’ he said at last, ‘that you’re r-running with the h-hare and h-h-h . . . and h-h . . .’

‘Hunting with the hounds,’ Anthony supplied.

The other nodded. ‘Using sc-cepticism against r-religion — ag-against any s-sort of i-idealism, really,’ he added, thinking of the barbed mockery with which Anthony loved to puncture any enthusiasm that seemed to him excessive. ‘And using th-this st-stuff’ — he pointed to *The Way of Perfection* — ‘a-against s-scientific argument, when it s-suits your b-b-b . . .’ ‘book’ refused to come: ‘when it s-suits your bee-double-o-kay.’

Anthony relit his pipe before answering. ‘Well, why shouldn’t one make the best of both worlds?’ he asked, as he threw the spent match into the grate. ‘Of all the worlds. Why not?’

‘W-well, c-consistency, s-single-mindedness . . .’

‘But I don’t value single-mindedness. I value completeness. I think it’s one’s duty to develop all one’s potentialities — all of them. Not stupidly stick to only one. Single-mindedness!’ he repeated. ‘But oysters are single-minded. Ants are single-minded.’

‘S-so are s-saints.’

‘Well, that only confirms my determination not to be a saint.’

‘B-but h-how can you d-do anything if you’re not s-single-minded? It’s the f-first cond-dition of any ach-achievement.’

‘Who tells you I want to achieve anything?’ asked Anthony. ‘I don’t. I want to be, completely. And I want to know. And so far as getting to know is doing, I accept the conditions of it, single-mindedly.’ With the stem of his pipe he indicated the books on the table.

‘You d-don’t accept the c-conditions of th-that kind of kn-knowing,’ Brian retorted, pointing once more at *The Way of Perfection*. ‘P-praying and f-fasting and all th-that.’

‘Because it isn’t knowing; it’s a special kind of experience. There’s all the difference in the world between knowing and experiencing. Between learning algebra, for example, and going to bed with a woman.’

Brian did not smile. Still staring at the floor, ‘B-but you th-think,’ he said, ‘that m-mystical experiences b-brings one into c-contact with the t-truth?’

‘And so does going to bed.’

‘D-does it?’ Brian forced himself to ask. He disliked this sort of conversation, disliked it more than ever now that he was in love with Joan — in love, and yet (he hated himself for it) desiring her basely, wrongly. . . .

‘If it’s the right woman,’ the other answered with an airy knowingness, as though he had experimented with every kind of female. In fact, though he would have been ashamed to admit it, he was a virgin.

‘S-so you needn’t b-bother about the f-fasting,’ said Brian, suddenly ironical.

Anthony grinned. ‘I’m quite content with only knowing about the way of perfection,’ he said.

‘I think I should w-want to exp-experience it too,’ said Brian, after a pause.

Anthony shook his head. ‘Not worth the price,’ he said. ‘That’s the trouble of all single-minded activity; it costs you your liberty. You find yourself driven into a corner. You’re a prisoner.’

‘But if you w-want to be f-free, you’ve g-got to be a p-prisoner. It’s the c-condition of freedom — t-true freedom.’

‘True freedom!’ Anthony repeated in the parody of a clerical voice. ‘I always love that kind of argument. The contrary of a thing isn’t the contrary; oh, dear me, no! It’s the thing itself, but as it truly is. Ask a diehard what conservatism is; he’ll tell you it’s true socialism. And the brewers’ trade papers; they’re full of articles about the beauty of True Temperance. Ordinary temperance is just a gross refusal to drink; but true temperance, true temperance is something much more refined. True temperance is a bottle of claret with each meal and three double whiskies after dinner. Personally, I’m all for true temperance, because I hate temperance. But I like being free. So I won’t have anything to do with true freedom.’

‘Which doesn’t p-prevent it from being t-true freedom,’ the other obstinately insisted.

‘What’s in a name?’ Anthony went on. ‘The answer is, Practically everything, if the name’s a good one. Freedom’s a marvellous name. That’s why you’re so anxious to make use of it. You think that, if you call imprisonment true freedom, people will be attracted to the prison. And the worst of it is you’re quite right. The name counts more with most people than the thing. They’ll follow the man who repeats it most often and in the loudest voice. And of course “True Freedom” is actually a better name than freedom tout court. Truth — it’s one of the magical words. Combine it with the magic of “freedom” and the effect’s terrific.’ After a moment’s silence, ‘Curious,’ he went on, digressively and in another tone, ‘that people don’t talk about true truth. I suppose it sounds too queer. True truth; true truth,’ he repeated experimentally. ‘No, it obviously won’t do. It’s like beri-beri, or Wagga-Wagga. Nigger talk. You couldn’t take it seriously. If you want to make the contrary of truth acceptable, you’ve got to call it spiritual truth, or inner truth, or higher truth, or even . . .’

‘But a m-moment ago you were s-saying that there w-was a k-kind of higher truth. S-something you could only g-get at m-mystically. You’re c-contradicting yourself.’

Anthony laughed. ‘That’s one of the privileges of freedom. Besides,’ he added, more seriously, ‘there’s that distinction between knowing and experiencing. Known truth isn’t the same as experienced truth. There ought to be two distinct words.’

‘You m-manage to wr-wriggle out of e-everything.’

‘Not out of everything,’ Anthony insisted. ‘There’ll always be those.’ He pointed again to the books. ‘Always knowledge. The prison of knowledge — because of course knowledge is also a prison. But I shall always be ready to stay in that prison.’

‘A-always?’ Brian questioned.

‘Why not?’

‘Too m-much of a l-luxury.’

‘On the contrary. It’s a case of scorning delights and living laborious days.’

‘Which are thems-selves del-lightful.’

‘Of course. But mayn’t one take pleasure in one’s work?’

Brian nodded. ‘It’s not exactly th-that,’ he said. ‘One doesn’t w-want to exp-ploit one’s privileges.’

‘Mine’s only a little one,’ said Anthony. ‘About six pounds a week,’ he added, specifying the income that had come to him from his mother.

‘P-plus all the r-rest.’

‘Which rest?’

‘The l-luck that you happen to l-like this sort of thing.’ He reached out and touched the folio Bayle. ‘And all your g-gifts.’

‘But I can’t artificially make myself stupid,’ Anthony objected. ‘Nor can you.’

‘N-no, but we can use what we’ve g-got for s-something else.’

‘Something we’re not suited for,’ the other suggested sarcastically.

Ignoring the mockery, ‘As a k-kind of th-thank-offering,’ Brian went on with a still intenser passion of earnestness.

‘For what?’

‘For all that we’ve been g-given. M-money, to start with. And then kn-knowledge, t-taste, the power to c-c . . .’ He wanted to say ‘create’, but had to be content with ‘to do things’. ‘B-being a scholar or an artist — it’s l-like purs-suing your p-personal salvation. But there’s also the k-kingdom of G-god. W-waiting to be realized.’

‘By the Fabians?’ asked Anthony in a tone of pretended ingenuousness.

‘Am-mong others.’ There was a long half-minute of silence. ‘Shall I say it?’ Brian was wondering. ‘Shall I tell him?’ And suddenly, as though a dam had burst, his irresolution was swept away. ‘I’ve decided,’ he said aloud, and the feeling with which he spoke the words was so strong that it lifted him, almost without his knowledge, to his feet and sent him striding restlessly about the room, ‘I’ve decided that I shall g-go on with ph-philosophy and l-literature and h-history till I’m thirty. Then it’ll be t-time to do something else. S-something more dir-rect.’

‘Direct?’ Anthony repeated. ‘In what way?’

‘In getting at p-people. In r-realizing the k-kingdom of G-god . . .’ The very intensity of his desire to communicate what he was feeling reduced him to dumbness.

Listening to Brian’s words, looking up into the serious and ardent face, Anthony felt himself touched, profoundly, to the quick of his being . . . felt himself touched, and, for that very reason, came at once under a kind of compulsion, as though in self-defence, to react to his own emotion, and his friend’s, with a piece of derision. ‘Washing the feet of the poor, for example,’ he suggested. ‘And drying them on your hair. It’ll be awkward if you go prematurely bald.’

Afterwards, when Brian had gone, he felt ashamed of his ignoble ribaldry — humiliated, at the same time, by the unreflecting automatism with which he had brought it out. Like those pithed frogs that twitch when you apply a drop of acid to their skin. A brainless response.

‘Damn!’ he said aloud, then picked up his book.

He was deep once more in *The Way of Perfection* when there was a thump at the door and a voice, deliberately harshened so as to be like the voice of a drill-sergeant on parade, shouted his name.

‘These bloody stairs of yours!’ said Gerry Watchett as he came in. ‘Why the devil do you live in such a filthy hole?’

Gerry Watchett was fair-skinned, with small, unemphatic features and wavy golden-brown hair. A good-looking young man, but good-looking, in spite of his height and powerful build, almost to girlish prettiness. For the casual observer, there was an air about him of Arcadian freshness and innocence, strangely belied, however, upon a closer examination, by the hard insolence in his blue eyes, by the faint smile of derision and contempt that kept returning to his face, by the startling coarseness of those thick-fingered, short-nailed hands.

Anthony pointed to a chair. But the other shook his head. ‘No, I’m in a hurry. Just rushed in to say you’ve got to come to dinner tonight.’

‘But I can’t.’

Gerry frowned. 'Why not?'

'I've got a meeting of the Fabians.'

'And you call that a reason for not coming to dine with me?'

'Seeing I've promised to . . .'

'Then I can expect you at eight?'

'But really . . .'

'Don't be a fool! What does it matter? A mothers' meeting?'

'But what excuse shall I give?'

'Any bloody thing you like. Tell them you've just had twins.'

'All right, then,' Anthony agreed at last. 'I'll come.'

'Thank you very kindly,' said Gerry, with mock politeness. 'I'd have broken your neck if you hadn't. Well, so long.' At the door he halted. 'I'm having Bimbo Abinger, and Ted, and Willie Monmouth, and Scroope. I wanted to get old Gorchakov too; but the fool's gone and got ill at the last moment. That's why I had to ask you,' he added with a quiet matter-of-factness that was far more offensive than any emphasis could have been; then turned, and was gone.

'Do you l-like him?' Brian had asked one day when Gerry's name came up between them. And because the question evoked an uneasy echo in his own consciousness, Anthony had answered, with a quite unnecessary sharpness, that of course he liked Gerry. 'Why else do you suppose I go about with him?' he had concluded, looking at Brian with irritable suspicion. Brian made no reply; and the question had returned like a boomerang upon the asker. Yes why did he go about with Gerry? For of course he didn't like the man; Gerry had hurt and humiliated him, was ready, he knew, to hurt and humiliate him again on the slightest provocation. Or rather without any provocation at all — just for fun, because it amused him to humiliate people, because he had a natural talent for inflicting pain. So why, why?

Mere snobbery, as Anthony was forced to admit to himself, was part of the discreditable secret. It was absurd and ridiculous; but the fact remained, nevertheless, that it pleased him to associate with Gerry and his friends. To be the intimate of these young aristocrats and plutocrats, and at the same time to know himself their superior in intelligence, taste, judgement, in all the things that really mattered, was satisfying to his vanity.

Admitting his intellectual superiority, the young barbarians expected him to pay for their admiration by amusing them. He was their intimate, yes; but as Voltaire was the intimate of Frederick the Great, as Diderot of the Empress Catherine. The resident philosopher is not easily distinguishable from the court fool.

With genuine appreciation, but at the same time patronizingly, offensively, 'Good for the Professor!' Gerry would say after one of his sallies. Or, 'Another drink for the old Professor' — as though he were an Italian organ-grinder, playing for pennies.

The prick of remembered humiliation was sharp like an insect's sting. With sudden violence Anthony heaved himself out of his chair and began to walk, frowning, up and down the room.

A middle-class snob tolerated because of his capacities as an entertainer. The thought was hateful, wounding. 'Why do I stand it?' he wondered. 'Why am I such a damned fool? I shall write Gerry a note to say I can't come.' But time passed; the note remained unwritten. For, after all, he was thinking, there were also advantages, there were also satisfactions. An evening spent with Gerry and his friends was exhilarating, was educative. Exhilarating and educative, not because of anything they said or thought — for they were all stupid, all bottomlessly ignorant; but because of what they were, of what their circumstances had made them. For, thanks to their money and their position, they were able actually to live in such freedom as Anthony had only imagined or read about. For them, the greater number of the restrictions which had always hedged him in did not even exist. They permitted themselves as a matter of course licences which he took only in theory, and which he felt constrained even then to justify with all the resources of a carefully perverted metaphysic, an ingeniously adulterated mystical theology. By the mere force of social and economic circumstances, these ignorant barbarians found themselves quite naturally behaving as he did not dare to behave even after reading all Nietzsche had

said about the Superman, or Casanova about women. Nor did they have to study Patanjali or Jacob Boehme in order to find excuses for the intoxications of wine and sensuality: they just got drunk and had their girls, like that, as though they were in the Garden of Eden. They faced life, not diffidently and apologetically, as Anthony faced it, not wistfully, from behind invisible bars, but with the serenely insolent assurance of those who know that God intended them to enjoy themselves and had decreed the unfailing acquiescence of their fellows in all their desires.

True, they also had their confining prejudices; they too on occasion were as ready as poor old Brian to lock themselves up in the prison of a code. But code and prejudices were of their own particular caste; therefore, so far as Anthony was concerned, without binding force. Their example delivered him from the chains that his upbringing had fastened upon him, but was powerless to bind him with those other chains in which they themselves walked through life. In their company the compulsions of respectability, the paralysing fear of public opinion, the inhibitory maxims of middle-class prudence fell away from him; but when Bimbo Abinger indignantly refused even to listen to the suggestion that he should sell the monstrous old house that was eating up three-quarters of his income, when Scroope complained that he would have to go into Parliament, because in his family the eldest sons had always sat in the House of Commons before coming into the title, Anthony could only feel the amused astonishment of an explorer watching the religious antics of a tribe of blackamoors. A rational being does not allow himself to be converted to the cult of Mumbo Jumbo; but he will have no objection to occasionally going a bit native. The worship of Mumbo Jumbo means the acceptance of taboos; going native means freedom. 'True freedom!' Anthony grinned to himself; his good humour and equanimity had returned. A snob, a middle-class snob. No doubt. But there was a reason for his snobbery, a justification. And if the lordly young barbarians tended to regard him as a sort of high-class buffoon — well, that was the price he had to pay for their gift of freedom. There was no price to be paid for associating with the Fabians; but then, how little they had to give to him! Socialist doctrines might to some extent theoretically liberate the intellect; but the example of the young barbarians was a liberation in the sphere of practice.

'So frightfully sorry,' he scribbled in his note to Brian. 'Suddenly remembered I'd booked myself for dinner tonight.' ('Booked' was one of his father's words — a word he ordinarily detested for its affectation. Writing a lie, he had found it coming spontaneously to his pen.) 'Alas' (that was also a favourite locution of his father's), 'shan't be able to listen to you on sin! Wish I could get out of this, but don't see how. Yours, A.'

* * *

By the time the fruit was on the table they were all pretty drunk. Gerry Watchett was telling Scroope about that German baroness he had had on the boat, on the way to Egypt. Abinger had no audience, but was reciting limericks: the Young Lady of Wick, the Old Man of Devizes, the Young Man called Maclean — a whole dictionary of national biography. Ted and Willie were having a violent quarrel about the best way of shooting grouse. Alone of the party, Anthony was silent. Speech would have compromised the delicate happiness he was then enjoying. That last glass of champagne had made him the inhabitant of a new world, extraordinarily beautiful and precious and significant. The apples and oranges in the silver bowl were like enormous gems. Each glass, under the candles, contained, not wine, but a great yellow beryl, solid and translucent. The roses had the glossy texture of satin and the shining hardness and distinctness of form belonging to metal or glass. Even sound was frozen and crystalline. The Young Lady of Kew was the equivalent, in his ears, of a piece of sculptured jade, and that violently futile discussion about grouse seemed like a waterfall in winter. *Le transparent glacier des vols qui n'ont pas fui*, he thought with heightened pleasure. Everything was supernaturally brilliant and distinct, but at the same time how remote, how strangely irrelevant! Bright against the outer twilight of the room, the faces grouped about the table might have been things seen on the other side of a sheet of plate-glass, in an illuminated aquarium. And the aquarium was not only without, it was also, mysteriously, within him. Looking through the glass at those sea flowers and submarine gems, he was himself a fish — but a fish of genius, a fish that was also a god. *Ichthus — Iesus Christos theou huios soter*. His divine fish-soul hung there, poised in its alien element, gazing, gazing through huge eyes that

perceived everything, understood everything, but having no part in what it saw. Even his own hands lying there on the table in front of him had ceased, in any real sense, to be his. From his aquarium fastness he viewed them with the same detached and happy admiration as he felt for the fruits and flowers, or those other transfigured bits of still life, the faces of his friends. Beautiful hands! contrived — how marvellously! — to perform their innumerable functions — the pointing of double-barrelled guns at flying birds, the caressing of the thighs of German baronesses in liners, the playing of imaginary scales upon the tablecloth, so. Enchanted, he watched the movements of his fingers, the smooth sliding of the tendons under the skin. Exquisite hands! But no more truly a part of himself, of the essential fish-soul in its timeless aquarium, than the hands of Abinger peeling that banana, the hands of Scroope carrying a match to his cigar. I am not my body, I am not my sensations, I am not even my mind; I am that I am. I om that I om. The sacred word OM represents Him. God is not limited by time. For the One is not absent from anything, and yet is separated from all things. . . .

‘Hi, Professor!’ A piece of orange-peel struck him on the cheek. He started and turned round. ‘What the hell are you thinking about?’ Gerry Watchett was asking in that purposely harsh voice which it amused him to put on like a hideous mask.

The momentarily troubled waters of the aquarium had already returned to rest. A fish once more, a divine and remotely happy Fish, Anthony smiled at him with serene indulgence.

‘I was thinking about Plotinus,’ he said.

‘Why Plotinus?’

‘Why Plotinus? But, my dear sir, isn’t it obvious? Science is reason, and reason is multitudinous.’ The fish had found a tongue; eloquence flowed from the aquarium in an effortless stream. ‘But if one happens to be feeling particularly unmultitudinous — well, what else is there to think about except Plotinus? Unless, of course, you prefer the pseudo-Dionysius, or Eckhart, or St Teresa. The flight of the alone to the Alone. Even St Thomas is forced to admit that no mind can see the divine substance unless it is divorced from bodily senses, either by death or by some rapture. Some rapture, mark you! But a rapture is always a rapture, whatever it’s due to. Whether it’s champagne, or saying OM, or squinting at your nose, or looking at a crucifix, or making love — preferably in a boat, Gerry; I’m the first to admit it; preferably in a boat. What are the wild waves saying? Rapture! Ecstasy! Fairly yelling it. Until, mark you, until, the breath of this corporeal frame and even the motion of our human blood almost suspended, we are laid asleep in body, and become a living soul, while with an eye made quiet . . .’

‘There was a Young Fellow of Burma,’ Abinger suddenly declaimed.

‘Made quiet,’ Anthony repeated more loudly, ‘by the power of harmony . . .’

‘Whose betrothed had good reasons to murmur.’

‘And the deep power of joy,’ shouted Anthony, ‘we see . . .’

‘But now that they’re married he’s

‘Been taking cantharides . . .’

‘We see into the life of things. The life of things, I tell you. The life of things. And damn all Fabians!’ he added.

* * *

Anthony got back to his lodgings at about a quarter to midnight, and was unpleasantly startled, as he entered the sitting-room, to see someone rising with the violent impatience of a jack-in-the-box from an armchair.

‘God, what a fright . . .!’

‘At last!’ said Mark Staithes. His emphatically featured face wore an expression of angry impatience. ‘I’ve been waiting nearly an hour.’ Then, with contempt, ‘You’re drunk,’ he added.

‘As though you’d never been drunk!’ Anthony retorted. ‘I remember . . .’

‘So do I,’ said Mark Staithes, interrupting him. ‘But that was in my first year.’ In his first year, when he had felt it necessary to prove that he was manly — manlier than the toughest of them, noisier, harder drinking. ‘I’ve got something better to do now.’

‘So you imagine,’ said Anthony.

The other looked at his watch. ‘I’ve got about seven minutes,’ he said. ‘Are you sober enough to listen?’

Anthony sat down with dignity and in silence.

Short, but square-shouldered and powerful, Mark stood over him, almost menacingly. ‘It’s about Brian,’ he said.

‘About Brian?’ Then with a knowing smile, ‘That reminds me,’ Anthony added, ‘I ought to have congratulated you on being our future president.’

‘Fool!’ said Mark angrily. ‘Do you think I go about accepting charity? When he withdrew, I withdrew too.’

‘And let that dreary little Mumby walk into the job?’

‘What the devil do I care about Mumby?’

‘What do any of us care about anybody?’ said Anthony sententiously. ‘Nothing, thank God. Absolutely noth . . .’

‘What does he mean by insulting me like that?’

‘Who? Little Mumby?’

‘No; Brian, of course.’

‘He thinks he’s being nice to you.’

‘I don’t want his damned niceness,’ said Mark. ‘Why can’t he behave properly?’

‘Because it amuses him to behave like a Christian.’

‘Well, then, tell him for God’s sake to try it on someone else in future. I don’t like having Christian tricks played on me.’

‘You want a cock to fight, in fact.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Otherwise it’s no fun being on top of the dunghill. Whereas Brian would like us all to be jolly little capons together. Well, so far as dunghills are concerned, I’m all for Brian. It’s when we come to the question of the hens that I begin to hesitate.’

Mark looked at his watch again. ‘I must go.’ At the door he turned back. ‘Don’t forget to tell him what I’ve told you. I like Brian, and I don’t want to quarrel with him. But if he tries being charitable and Christian again . . .’

‘The poor boy will forfeit your esteem for ever,’ concluded Anthony.

‘Buffoon!’ said Staithes, and slamming the door behind him, hurried downstairs.

Left alone, Anthony took the fifth volume of the Historical Dictionary and began to read what Bayle had to say about Spinoza.

Chapter Eleven. December 8th 1926

‘CONDAR INTRA MEUM latus! It is the only place of refuge left to us.’ Anthony rolled the sheet off his typewriter, added it to the other sheets lying before him on the table, clipped them together and started to read through what he had written. Chapter XI of his Elements of Sociology was to deal with the Individual and his conceptions of Personality. He had spent the day jotting down unmethodically a few preliminary reflections.

‘Cogito ergo sum,’ he read. ‘But why not caco ergo sum? Eructo ergo sum? Or, escaping solipsism, why not futuo ergo sumus? Ribald questions. But what is “personality”?’

‘MacTaggart knows his personality by direct acquaintance; others by description. Hume and Bradley don’t know theirs at all, and don’t believe it really exists. Mere splitting, all this, of a bald man’s imaginary hairs. What matters is that “Personality” happens to be a common word with a generally accepted meaning.’

‘People discuss my “personality”. What are they talking about? Not homo cacans, nor homo eructans, not even, except very superficially, homo futuens. No, they are talking about homo sentiens (impossible Latin) and homo cogitans. And when, in public, I talk about “myself”, I talk about the same two homines. My “personality”, in the present conventional sense of the word, is what I think and feel — or, rather, what I confess to thinking and feeling. Caco, eructo, futuo — I never admit that the first person singular of such verbs is really me. Only when, for any reason, they palpably affect my feelings and thinking do the processes they stand for come within the bounds of my “personality”. (This censorship makes ultimate nonsense of all literature. Plays and novels just aren’t true.)

‘Thus, the “personal” is the creditable, or rather the potentially creditable. Not the morally undifferentiated.

‘It is also the enduring. Very short experiences are even less personal than discreditable or merely vegetative experiences. They become personal only when accompanied by feeling and thought, or when reverberated by memory.

‘Matter, analysed, consists of empty space and electric charges. Take a woman and a washstand. Different in kind. But their component electric charges are similar in kind. Odder still, each of these component electric charges is different in kind from the whole woman or washstand. Changes in quantity, when sufficiently great, produces changes in quality. Now, human experience is analogous to matter. Analyse it — and you find yourself in the presence of psychological atoms. A lot of these atoms constitute normal experience, and a selection from normal experience constitutes “personality”. Each individual atom is unlike normal experience and still more unlike personality. Conversely, each atom in one experience resembles the corresponding atom in another. Viewed microscopically, a woman’s body is just like a washstand, and Napoleon’s experience is just like Wellington’s. Why do we imagine that solid matter exists? Because of the grossness of our sense organs. And why do we imagine that we have coherent experiences and personality? Because our minds work slowly and have very feeble powers of analysis. Our world and we who live in it are the creations of stupidity and bad sight.

‘Recently, however, thinking and seeing have been improved. We have instruments that will resolve matter into very small parts and a mathematical technique that allows us to think about still smaller parts.

‘Psychologists have no new instruments, only new techniques of thought. All their inventions are purely mental — techniques of analysis and observation, working hypotheses. Thanks to the novelists and professional psychologists, we can think of our experience in terms of atoms and instants as well as in terms of lumps and hours. To be a tolerably good psychologist was possible, in the past, only for men of genius. Compare Chaucer’s psychology with Gower’s, even Boccaccio’s. Compare Shakespeare’s with Ben Jonson’s. The difference is one not only of quality, but also of quantity. The men of genius knew more than their merely intelligent contemporaries.

‘Today, there is a corpus of knowledge, a technique, a working hypothesis. The amount a merely intelligent man can know is enormous — more than an unlearned man of genius relying solely on intuition.

‘Were the Gowers and Jonsons hampered by their ignorance? Not at all. Their ignorance was the standard knowledge of their times. A few monsters of intuition might know more than they; but the majority knew even less.

‘And here a digression — sociologically speaking, more important than the theme digressed from. There are fashions in personality. Fashions that vary in time — like crinolines and hobble skirts — and fashions that vary in space — like Gold Coast loincloths and Lombard Street tail-coats. In primitive societies everyone wears, and longs to wear, the same personality. But each society has a different psychological costume. Among the Red Indians of the North-West Pacific Coast the ideal personality was that of a mildly crazy egotist competing with his rivals on the plane of wealth and conspicuous consumption. Among the Plains Indians, it was that of an egotist competing with others in the sphere of warlike exploits. Among the Pueblo Indians, the ideal personality was neither that of an egotist, nor of a conspicuous consumer, nor of a fighter, but of the perfectly gregarious man who makes great efforts

never to distinguish himself, who knows the traditional rites and gestures and tries to be exactly like everyone else.

‘European societies are large and racially, economically, professionally heterogeneous; therefore orthodoxy is hard to impose, and there are several contemporaneous ideals of personality. (Note that Fascists and Communists are trying to create one single “right” ideal — in other words, are trying to make industrialized Europeans behave as though they were Dyaks or Eskimos. The attempt, in the long run, is doomed to failure; but in the meantime, what fun they will get from bullying the heretics!)

‘In our world, what are the ruling fashions? There are, of course, the ordinary clerical and commercial modes — turned out by the little dressmakers round the corner. And then *la haute couture*. *Ravissante personnalité d’intérieur de chez Proust, Maison Nietzsche et Kipling; personnalité de sport. Personnalité de nuit, création de Lawrence. Personnalité de bain, par Joyce.* Note the interesting fact that, of these, the *personnalité de sport* is the only one that can really count as a personality in the accepted sense of the word. The others are to a greater or less extent impersonal, because to a greater or less extent atomic. And this brings us back to Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. A pragmatist would have us say that Jonson’s psychology was “truer” than Shakespeare’s. Most of his contemporaries did in fact perceive themselves and were perceived as Humours. It took Shakespeare to see what a lot there was outside the boundaries of the Humour, behind the conventional mask. But Shakespeare was in a minority of one — or, if you set Montaigne beside him, of two. Humours “worked”; the complex, partially atomized personalities of Shakespeare didn’t.

‘In the story of the emperor’s new clothes the child perceives that the man is naked. Shakespeare reversed the process. His contemporaries thought they were just naked Humours; he saw that they were covered with a whole wardrobe of psychological fancy dress.

‘Take Hamlet. Hamlet inhabited a world whose best psychologist was Polonius. If he had known as little as Polonius, he would have been happy. But he knew too much; and in this consists his tragedy. Read his parable of the musical instruments. Polonius and the others assumed as axiomatic that man was a penny whistle with only half a dozen stops. Hamlet knew that, potentially at least, he was a whole symphony orchestra.

‘Mad, Ophelia lets the cat out of the bag. “We know what we are, but know not what we may be.” Polonius knows very clearly what he and other people are, within the ruling conventions. Hamlet knows this, but also what they may be — outside the local system of masks and humours.

‘To be the only man of one’s age to know what people may be as well as what they conventionally are! Shakespeare must have gone through some disquieting quarters of an hour.

‘It was left to Blake to rationalize psychological atomism into a philosophical system. Man, according to Blake (and, after him, according to Proust, according to Lawrence), is simply a succession of states. Good and evil can be predicated only of states, not of individuals, who in fact don’t exist, except as the places where the states occur. It is the end of personality in the old sense of the word. (Parenthetically — for this is quite outside the domain of sociology — is it the beginning of a new kind of personality? That of the total man, unbowlerized, unselected, uncanalized, to change the metaphor, down any one particular drainpipe of *Weltanschauung* — of the man, in a word, who actually is what he may be. Such a man is the antithesis of any of the variants on the fundamental Christian man of our history. And yet in a certain sense he is also the realization of the ideal personality conceived by the Jesus of the Gospel. Like Jesus’s ideal personality, the total, unexpurgated, non-canalized man is (1) not pharisaic, that is to say, not interested in convention and social position, not puffed up with the pride of being better than other men; (2) humble, in his acceptance of himself, in his refusal to exalt himself above his human station; (3) poor in spirit, inasmuch as “he” — his ego — lays no lasting claims on anything, is content with what, for a personality of the old type, would seem psychological and philosophical destitution; (4) like a little child, in his acceptance of the immediate datum of experience for its own sake, in his refusal to take thought for the morrow, in his readiness to let the dead bury their dead; (5) not a hypocrite or a liar, since there is no fixed model which individuals must pretend to be like.)

‘A question: did the old personality ever really exist? In the year m men feel x in context z. In the year n they feel the same x in quite a different context p. But x is a major emotion — vitally significant for personality. And yet x is felt in contexts that change with the changing conventions of fashion. “Rather death than dishonour.” But honour is like women’s skirts. Worn short, worn long, worn full, worn narrow, worn with petticoats, worn minus drawers. Up to 1750 you were expected to feel, you did feel, mortally dishonoured if you saw a man pinching your sister’s bottom. So intense was your indignation, that you had to try to kill him. Today, our honours have migrated from the fleshy parts of our female relations’ anatomy, and have their seats elsewhere. And soon, indefinitely.

‘So what is personality? And what is it not?

‘It is not our total experience. It is not the psychological atom or instant. It is not sense impressions as such, nor vegetative life as such.

‘It is experience in the lump and by the hour. It is feeling and thought.

‘And who makes this selection from total experience, and on what principle? Sometimes we make it — whoever we are. But as often it is made for us — by the collective unwisdom of a class, a whole society. To a great extent, “personality” is not even our personal property.

‘Vaguely, but ever more widely, this fact is now coming to be realized. At the same time, ever-increasing numbers of people are making use of the modern techniques to see themselves and others microscopically and instantaneously, as well as in the lump and by the hour. Moreover, having a working hypothesis of the unconscious, increasing numbers are becoming aware of their secret motives, and so are perceiving the large part played in their lives by the discreditable and vegetative elements of experience. With what results? That the old conception of personality has begun to break down. And not only the conception, also the fact. “Strong personalities”, even “definite personalities”, are becoming less common. Fascists have to go out of their way to manufacture them, deliberately, by a suitable process of education. An education that is simplification, Eskimization; that entails the suppression of psychological knowledge and the inculcation of respect for psychological ignorance. Odious policy — but, I suspect, inevitable and, sociologically speaking, right. For our psychological acumen is probably harmful to society. Society has need of simple Jonsonian Humours, not of formless collections of self-conscious states. Yet another example of the banefulness of too much knowledge and too much scientific technique.

‘Once more, Hamlet casts a light. Polonius is much more obviously and definitely a person than the prince. Indeed, Hamlet’s personality is so indefinite that critics have devoted thousands of pages to the discussion of what it really was. In fact, of course, Hamlet didn’t have a personality — knew altogether too much to have one. He was conscious of his total experience, atom by atom and instant by instant, and accepted no guiding principle which would make him choose one set of patterned atoms to represent his personality rather than another. To himself and to others he was just a succession of more or less incongruous states. Hence that perplexity at Elsinore and among the Shakespearian critics ever since. Honour, Religion, Prejudice, Love — all the conventional props that shore up the ordinary personality have been, in this case, gnawed through. Hamlet is his own termite, and from a tower has eaten himself down to a heap of sawdust. Only one thing prevents Polonius and the rest from immediately perceiving the fact: whatever the state of his mind, Hamlet’s body is still intact, unatomized, macroscopically present to the senses. And perhaps, after all, this is the real reason for our belief in personality: — the existence and persistence of bodies. And perhaps whatever reality there is in the notion of coherent individual continuity is just a function of this physical persistence. “Such hair, such a wonderful figure! I think Mrs Jones has a lovely poyssonality.” When I heard that, in the bus going up Fifth Avenue, it made me laugh. Whereas I probably ought to have listened as though to Spinoza. For what is the most personal thing about a human being? Not his mind — his body. A Hearst, a Rothermere, can mould my feelings, coerce my thinking. But no amount of propaganda can make my digestion or metabolism become identical to theirs. Cogito, ergo Rothermere est. But caco, ergo sum.

‘And here, I suspect, lies the reason for that insistence, during recent years, on the rights of the body. From the Boy Scouts to the fashionable sodomites, and from Elizabeth Arden to D. H. Lawrence (one of the most powerful personality-smashers, incidentally: there are no “characters” in his books). Always

and everywhere the body. Now the body possesses one enormous merit; it is indubitably there. Whereas the personality, as a mental structure, may be all in bits — gnawed down to Hamlet's heap of sawdust. Only the rather stupid and insentient, nowadays, have strong and sharply defined personalities. Only the barbarians among us "know what they are". The civilized are conscious of "what they may be", and so are incapable of knowing what, for practical, social purposes, they actually are — have forgotten how to select a personality out of their total atomic experience. In the swamp and welter of this uncertainty the body stands firm like the Rock of Ages.

Jesu, pro me perforatus,
Condar intra tuum latus.

Even faith hankers for warm caverns of perforated flesh. How much more wildly urgent must be the demands of a scepticism that has ceased to believe even in its own personality! Condar intra MEUM latus! It is the only place of refuge left to us.'

Anthony laid the typescript down, and, tilting backwards, rocked himself precariously on the hind legs of his chair. Not so bad, he was thinking. But there were obviously omissions, there were obviously unjustifiable generalizations. He had written of the world in general as though the world in general were like himself — from the desire, of course, that it should be. For how simple it would be if it were! How agreeable! Each man a succession of states enclosed in the flesh of his own side. And if any other principle of coherence were needed, there was always some absorbing and delightful intellectual interest, like sociology, for example, to supplement the persisting body. Condar intra meum laborem. Instead of which . . . He sighed. In spite of Hamlet, in spite of The Prophetic Books, in spite of Du côté de chez Swann and Women in Love, the world was still full of Jonsonian Humours. Full of the villains of melodrama, the equally deplorable heroes of films, full of Poincarés, of Mussolinis, of Northcliffes, full of ambitious and avaricious mischief-makers of every size and shape.

An idea occurred to him. He let his tilted chair fall forward and picked up his fountain-pen.

'Last infirmity of noble mind, the primary, perhaps only, source of sin,' he scribbled. 'Noble mind = evil mind. Tree known by fruits. What are fruits of fame-seeking, ambition, desire to excel? Among others, war, nationalism, economic competition, snobbery, class hatred, colour prejudice. Comus quite right to preach sensuality; and how foolish of Satan to tempt a, by definition, ahimsa-practising Messiah with fame, dominion, ambition — things whose inevitable fruits are violence and coercion! Compared with fame-seeking, pure sensuality all but harmless. Were Freud right and sex supreme, we should live almost in Eden. Alas, only half-right. Adler also half-right. Hinc illae lac.'

He looked at his watch. Twenty past seven — and he had to be in Kensington by eight! In his bath, he wondered what the evening would be like. It was twelve years now since he had quarrelled with Mary Amberley. Twelve years, during which he had seen her only at a distance — in picture galleries, once or twice; and across the drawing-room of a common friend. 'I don't ever want to speak to you again,' he had written in that last letter to her. And yet, a few days since, when her reconciliatory invitation had unexpectedly appeared with the other letters on his breakfast table, he had accepted immediately; accepted in the same tone as that in which the invitation itself was couched — casually, matter-of-factly, with no more explicit reference to the past than a 'Yes, it's a long time since I last dined at Number 17.' And after all, why not? What was the point of doing things finally and irrevocably? What right had the man of 1914 to commit the man of 1926? The 1914 man had been an embodied state of anger, shame, distress, perplexity. His state today was one of cheerful serenity, mingled, so far as Mary Amberley was concerned, with considerable curiosity. What would she be like now — at forty-three, was it? And was she really as amusing as he remembered her? Or had his admiration been only one of the fruits — the absurd, delicious fruits — of youthful inexperience? Would his swan turn out a goose? Or still a swan — but moulted, but (poor Mary!) middle-aged? Still wondering, he hurried downstairs and into the street.

Chapter Twelve. August 30th 1933

A FAINT RUSTLING caressed the half-conscious fringes of their torpor, swelled gradually, as though a shell were being brought closer and closer to the ear, and became at last a clattering roar that brutally insisted on attention. Anthony opened his eyes for just long enough to see that the aeroplane was almost immediately above them, then shut them again, dazzled by the intense blue of the sky.

'These damned machines!' he said. Then, with a little laugh, 'They'll have a nice God's-eye view of us here,' he added.

Helen did not answer; but behind her closed eyelids she smiled. Pop-eyed and with an obscene and gloating disapproval! The vision of that heavenly visitant was irresistibly comic.

'David and Bathsheba,' he went on. 'Unfortunately at a hundred miles an hour . . .'

A strange yelping sound punctuated the din of the machine. Anthony opened his eyes again, and was in time to see a dark shape rushing down towards him. He uttered a cry, made a quick and automatic movement to shield his face. With a violent but dull and muddy impact the thing struck the flat roof a yard or two from where they were lying. The drops of a sharply spurted liquid were warm for an instant on their skin, and then, as the breeze swelled up out of the west, startlingly cold. There was a long second of silence. 'Christ!' Anthony whispered at last. From head to foot both of them were splashed with blood. In a red pool at their feet lay the almost shapeless carcass of a fox-terrier. The roar of the receding aeroplane had diminished to a raucous hum, and suddenly the ear found itself conscious once again of the shrill rasping of the cicadas.

Anthony drew a deep breath; then, with an effort and still rather unsteadily, contrived to laugh. 'Yet another reason for disliking dogs,' he said, and, scrambling to his feet, looked down, his face puckered with disgust, at his blood-bedabbled body. 'What about a bath?' he asked, turning to Helen.

She was sitting quite still, staring with wide-open eyes at the horribly shattered carcass. Her face was very pale, and a glancing spurt of blood had left a long red streak that ran diagonally from the right side of the chin, across the mouth, to the corner of the left eye.

'You look like Lady Macbeth,' he said, with another effort at jocularly. 'Allons.' He touched her shoulder. 'Out, vile spot. This beastly stuff's drying on me. Like seccotine.'

For all answer, Helen covered her face with her hands and began to sob.

For a moment Anthony stood quite still, looking at her crouched there, in the hopeless abjection of her blood-stained nakedness, listening to the painful sound of her weeping. 'Like seccotine': his own words re-echoed disgracefully in his ears. Pity stirred within him, and then an almost violent movement of love for this hurt and suffering woman, this person, yes, this person whom he had ignored, deliberately, as though she had no existence except in the context of pleasure. Now, as she knelt there sobbing, all the tenderness he had ever felt for her body, all the affection implicit in their sensualities and never expressed, seemed suddenly to discharge themselves, in a kind of lightning flash of accumulated feeling, upon this person, this embodied spirit, weeping in solitude behind concealing hands.

He knelt down beside her on the mattress, and, with a gesture that was meant to express all that he now felt, put an arm round her shoulder.

But at his touch she winced away as if from a defilement. With a violent, shuddering movement she shook her head.

'But, Helen . . .' he protested, in the stupid conviction that there must be some mistake, that it was impossible that she shouldn't be feeling what he was feeling. It was only a question of making her understand what had happened to him. He laid his hand once more on her shoulder. 'But I care, I'm so fond . . .' Even now he refused to commit himself to the word 'love'.

'Don't touch me,' she cried almost inarticulately, leaning away from him.

He withdrew his hand, but remained there, kneeling beside her, in perplexed and miserable silence. He remembered the time when she had wanted to be allowed to love, and how he had evaded her, had refused to take more of the person that she was, or to give more of himself, than the occasional and

discontinuous amorousness of their bodies. She had ended by accepting his terms — accepting them so completely that now . . .

‘Helen,’ he ventured once more. She must be made to understand.

Helen shook her head again. ‘Leave me alone,’ she said; then, as he did not move, she uncovered a face now grotesquely smudged with blood and looked at him. ‘Why can’t you go away?’ she asked, making an effort to express a cold dispassionate resentment of his intrusion upon her. Then, suddenly, her tears began to flow again. ‘Oh, please go away!’ she implored. Her voice broke, and turning aside, she once more buried her face in her hands.

Anthony hesitated for a moment; then, realizing that he would only make things worse if he stayed on, rose to his feet and left her. ‘Give her time,’ he said to himself, ‘give her time.’

He took a bath, dressed and went down to the sitting-room. The snapshots were lying as they had left them, scattered over the table. He sat down and methodically began to sort them out, subject by subject, into little heaps. Mary in plumes; Mary veiled, clambering into a pre-war Renault; Mary bathing at Dieppe in a half-sleeved bodice and bloomers that were covered to the knee by a little skirt. His mother in a garden; feeding the pigeons in the Piazza San Marco; and then her grave at Lollingdon churchyard. His father with an alpenstock; roped to a guide on a snow slope; with Pauline and the two children. Uncle James on his bicycle; Uncle James wearing a speckled straw hat; rowing on the Serpentine; talking, ten years later, with convalescent soldiers in a hospital garden. Then Brian; Brian with Anthony’s own former self at Bulstrode; Brian in a punt with Joan and Mrs Foxe; Brian climbing in the Lakes. That girl he had had an affair with in New York, in 1927, was it? His grandmother. His aunts. Half a dozen snaps of Gladys . . .

Half an hour later he heard Helen’s steps, cautious at first and slow on the precipitous stairs leading down from the roof, then swift along the passage. Water splashed in the bath.

Time, she must have time. He decided to behave towards her as though nothing had happened. It was almost cheerfully, therefore, that he greeted her as she entered the room.

‘Well?’ he questioned brightly, looking up from his photographs. But the sight of that pale and stonily collected face filled him with misgiving.

‘I’m going,’ she said.

‘Now? Before lunch?’

She nodded.

‘But why?’

‘I prefer it,’ was all she answered.

Anthony was silent for a moment, wondering whether he ought to protest, to insist, to tell her the things he had tried to tell her on the roof. But the stoniness of her composure proclaimed in advance that the attempt would be useless. Later, when she had got over the first shock, when she had been given time . . . ‘All right, then,’ he said aloud. ‘I’ll drive you back to the hotel.’

Helen shook her head. ‘No, I shall walk.’

‘Not in this heat!’

‘I shall walk,’ she repeated in a tone of finality.

‘Well, if you also prefer to swelter . . .’ He tried to smile, without much success.

She passed through the glass doors on to the terrace, and suddenly that pale stony face was as though fire-flushed by the reflection from her pyjamas. In hell again, he said to himself, as he followed her.

‘Why do you come out?’ she asked.

‘I’ll take you as far as the gate.’

‘There’s no need.’

‘I prefer it.’

She did not return his smile, but walked on without speaking.

Two small bushy plants of buddleia grew on either side of the steps that led down from the terrace. On the hot air the scent of the flowers (itself, so it seemed, intrinsically hot) was of an intense and violent sweetness.

‘Delicious,’ Anthony said aloud as they stepped into the perfumed aura of the blossoms. ‘Almost too delicious. But look!’ he called in another voice, and caught her sleeve. ‘Do look!’

New from the chrysalis, bright and still untattered, a swallowtail had settled on one of the clusters of mauve flowers. The pale yellow wings, with their black markings, their eyes of blue and crimson, were fully outstretched in the sunlight. Their forward edges had the curve of a sabre, and from the tips the line slanted elegantly backwards towards the two projecting tails of the lower wings. The whole butterfly seemed the symbol, the hieroglyph of gay and airy speed. The spread wings were tremulous as though from an uncontrollable excess of life, of passionate energy. Rapidly, ravenously, but with an extraordinary precision of purposeful movement, the creature plunged its uncoiled proboscis into the tiny trumpet-shaped flowers that composed the cluster. A quick motion of the head and thorax, and the probe had been thrust home, to be withdrawn a moment later and plunged as swiftly and unerringly between the lips of another and yet another flower, until all the blooms within striking distance had been explored and it was necessary to hasten on towards a yet unrifled part of the cluster. Again, again, to the very quick of the expectant flowers, deep to the sheathed and hidden sources of that hot intoxicating sweetness! Again, again, with what a tireless concupiscence, what an intense passion of aimed and accurate greed!

For a long minute they watched in silence. Then, suddenly, Helen stretched out her hand and flicked the cluster on which the butterfly was settled. But before her finger had even touched the flowers, the light, bright creature was gone. A quick flap of the wings, then a long soaring swoop; another spurt of fluttering movement, another long catenary of downward and upward slanting flight, and it was out of sight behind the house.

‘Why did you do that?’ he asked.

Pretending not to have heard his question, Helen ran down the steps and along the gravelled path. At the gate of the garden she halted and turned back.

‘Good-bye, Anthony.’

‘When are you coming again?’ he asked.

Helen looked at him for a few seconds without speaking, then shook her head. ‘I’m not coming,’ she said at last.

‘Not coming again?’ he repeated. ‘What do you mean?’

But she had already slammed the gate behind her and with long springing strides was hurrying along the dusty road under the pine trees.

Anthony watched her go, and knew that, for the moment at least, it was no good even trying to do anything. It would only make things worse if he followed her. Later on, perhaps; this evening, when she had had time . . . But walking back along the garden path, through the now unheeded perfume of the buddleias, he wondered uneasily whether it would be much good, even later on. He knew Helen’s obstinacy. And then what right had he now, after all these months of disclaiming, of actively refusing any rights whatever?

‘But I’m a fool,’ he said aloud as he opened the kitchen door, ‘I’m mad.’ And he made an effort to recover his sanity by disparaging and belittling the whole incident. Unpleasant, admittedly. But not unpleasant enough to justify Helen in behaving as though she were acting Ibsen. Doing a slight Doll’s House, he said to himself — trying to reduce it all to a conveniently ridiculous phrase — when there was no doll and no house; for she really couldn’t complain that old Hugh had ever shut her up, or that he himself had cherished any designs on her liberty. On the contrary, he had insisted on her being free. Her liberty was also his; if she had become his slave, he would necessarily have become hers.

As for his own emotions, up there on the roof — that uprush of tenderness, that longing to know and love the suffering person within that all at once irrelevantly desirable body — these had been genuine, of course; were facts of direct experience. But after all, they could be explained, explained away, as

the mere exaggerations, in a disturbing moment, of his very natural sympathy with her distress. The essential thing was time. Given a little time, she would listen once more to what he wanted to say, and he would no longer want to say any of the things she had just now refused to listen to.

He opened the refrigerator and found that Mme Cayol had prepared some cold veal and a cucumber and tomato salad. Mme Cayol had a vicarious passion for cold veal, was constantly giving it him. Anthony, as it happened, didn't much like it, but he preferred eating it to discussing the bill of fare with Mme Cayol. Whole weeks would sometimes pass without the necessity arising for him to say more than *Bon jour* and *À demain*, Mme Cayol, and *Il fait beau aujourd'hui*, or *Quel vent!*, whichever the case might be. She came for two hours each morning, tidied up, prepared some food, laid the table and went away again. He was served, but almost without being aware of the servant. The arrangement, he considered, was as nearly perfect as any earthly arrangement could be. Cold veal was a small price to pay for such service.

At the table in the shade of the great fig tree on the terrace, Anthony settled down with determination to his food, and as he ate, turned over the pages of his latest note-book. There was nothing, he assured himself, like work — nothing, to make oneself forget a particular and personal feeling, so effective as a good generalization. The word 'freedom' caught his eye, and remembering the satisfaction he had felt, a couple of months before, when he had got those ideas safely on to paper, he began to read.

'Acton wanted to write the History of Man in terms of a History of the Idea of Freedom. But you cannot write a History of the Idea of Freedom without at the same time writing a History of the Fact of Slavery.

'The Fact of Slavery. Or rather of Slaveries. For, in his successive attempts to realize the Idea of Freedom, man is constantly changing one form of slavery for another.

'The primal slavery is the slavery to the empty belly and the unpropitious season. Slavery to nature, in a word. The escape from nature is through social organization and technical invention. In a modern city it is possible to forget that such a thing as nature exists — particularly nature in its more inhuman and hostile aspects. Half the population of Europe lives in a universe that's entirely home-made.

'Abolish slavery to nature. Another form of slavery instantly arises. Slavery to institutions: religious institutions, legal institutions, military institutions, economic institutions, educational, artistic, and scientific institutions.

'All modern history is a History of the Idea of Freedom from Institutions. It is also the History of the Fact of Slavery to Institutions.

'Nature is senseless. Institutions, being the work of men, have meaning and purpose. Circumstances change quicker than institutions. What once was sense is sense no longer. An outworn institution is like a person who applies logical reasoning to the non-existent situation created by an *idée fixe* or hallucination. A similar state of things comes about when institutions apply the letter of the law to individual cases. The institution would be acting rationally if the circumstances envisaged by it really existed. But in fact they don't exist. Slavery to an institution is like slavery to a paranoiac, who suffers from delusions but is still in possession of all his intellectual faculties. Slavery to nature is like slavery to an idiot who hasn't even enough mind to be able to suffer from delusions.

'Revolt against institutions leads temporarily to anarchy. But anarchy is slavery to nature, and to a civilized man slavery to nature is even less tolerable than slavery to institutions. The escape from anarchy is through the creation of new institutions. Sometimes there is no period of anarchy — no temporary enslavement to nature; men pass directly from one set of institutions to another.

'Institutions are changed in an attempt to realize the Idea of Freedom. To appreciate the fact of the new slavery takes a certain time. So it comes about that in all revolts against institutions there is a kind of joyful honeymoon, when people believe that freedom has at last been attained. "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive." And not only in the dawn of the French Revolution. What undiluted happiness, for example, in the dawn of the Franciscan movement, in the dawn of the Reformation, in the dawn of Christianity and Islam! Even in the dawn of the Great War. The honeymoon may last for as much as twenty or thirty years. Then the fact of the new slavery imposes itself on men's consciousness. It is

perceived that the idea of freedom was not realized by the last change, that the new institutions are just as enslaving as the old. What is to be done? Change the new institutions for yet newer ones. And when that honeymoon is over? Change the yet newer for newer still. And so on — indefinitely, no doubt.

‘In any given society the fact of freedom exists only for a very small number of individuals. Propitious economic circumstances are the condition of at least a partial freedom. But if the freedom is to be more nearly complete, there must also be propitious intellectual, psychological, biographical circumstances. Individuals for whom all these circumstances are favourable are not the slaves of institutions. For them, institutions exist as a kind of solid framework on which they can perform whatever gymnastics they please. The rigidity of society as a whole makes it possible for these privileged few to wander out of intellectual and customary moral bounds without risk either for themselves or for the community at large. All particular freedoms — and there is no freedom that is not particular — is enjoyed on the condition of some form of general slavery.’

Anthony shut his book, feeling that he couldn’t read even one line more. Not that his words seemed any less true now than they had done when he wrote them. In their own way and on their particular level they were true. Why then did it all seem utterly false and wrong? Not wishing to discuss this question with himself, he went into the house and sat down to Usher’s History of Mechanical Inventions.

At half past four he suddenly remembered that dead dog. A few hours more, and in this heat . . . He hurried out to the tool-house. The ground in the untended garden was sun-baked almost to the consistency of brick; by the time he had dug the hole he was dripping with sweat. Then, spade in hand, he went up to the roof. There lay the dog. The blood-stains on its fur, on the parapet, on the mattresses had turned the colour of rust. After several ineffectual attempts, he succeeded in scooping up the carcass with his spade and throwing it, flies and all — for the flies refused to be disturbed — over the parapet. He went downstairs and out into the garden; there, as though he were obstinately competing in some hideous egg-and-spoon race, he scooped the thing up once more and carried it, horribly dangling across the iron of his spade, to the grave. When he came back to the house he felt so sick that he had to drink some brandy. After that he went down to the sea and took a long swim.

At six, when he was dressed again, he took his car and drove down to the hotel to have a talk with Helen. By this time, he calculated, she would have got over her first shock, she would be ready to listen to him. Forgetting all about the Doll’s House and the sanity it had been intended to preserve, he was filled, as he drove, with an extraordinary elation. In a few minutes he would be seeing her again. Would be telling her of the discoveries he had suddenly made that morning: the discovery that he cared for her, the discovery that he had been a fool and worse, unspeakably worse than a fool. . . . It would be difficult, it would be all but impossible to say these things about himself; but for that very reason the thought that he was going to say them filled him with profound happiness.

He drew up at the door of the hotel and hurried into the hall.

‘Madame Ledwidge est-elle dans sa chambre, mademoiselle?’

‘Mais non, monsieur, Madame vient de partir.’

‘Elle vient de partir?’

‘Madame est allée prendre le rapide à Toulon.’

Anthony looked at his watch. The train had already started. In a wretched little car like his there was no hope of getting to Marseille before it left again for Paris.

‘Merci, mademoiselle, merci,’ he said, lapsing by force of habit into that excessive politeness by means of which he protected himself from the disquieting world of the lower classes.

‘Mais de rien, monsieur.’

He drove home again, wondering miserably whether he oughtn’t to be thankful for the deliverance. The postman had called in his absence. There was a letter from his broker, advising him to sell at least a part of that block of gold-mining shares he had inherited from Uncle James. There seemed to be no likelihood of their appreciating any further; in view of which, the wisest course would be to take advantage of the present prices and re-invest in sound English industrials such as . . . He threw the letter aside. Occasions, as usual, had been conspiring for him — thrusting good fortune upon him, malignantly.

Now, in the depression, he was better off than ever before. Better off when other people were worse off. Freer while they were hopelessly enslaved. The ring of Polycrates . . . It looked as though the gods had already begun their vengeance.

He went to bed early, and at two was woken by that horribly familiar dream that had haunted his boyhood and plagued him from time to time even as a grown man. In substance it was always the same. Nothing much was ever visible; but there was generally a knowledge that he was in company, surrounded by dim presences. He took a mouthful of some indeterminate food, and instantly it expanded between his teeth, became progressively more rubbery and at the same time stickier, till it was like a gag smeared with a kind of gum that dried in a thick film on the teeth, tongue, palate. Unspeakably disgusting, this process of asphyxiating expansion, of gluey thickening and clogging, went on and on. He tried to swallow, tried, in spite of the obscure but embarrassing presence of strangers, to disgorge. Without effect. In the end, he was reduced to hooking the stuff out with his finger — lump after ropy lump of it. But always in vain. For the gag continued to expand, the film to thicken and harden. Until at last he was delivered by starting out of sleep. This night, the expanding mouthful had some kind of vague but horrible connexion with the dog. He woke up shuddering. Once awake, he was unable to go to sleep again. A huge accumulation of neglected memories broke through, as it were, into his awareness. Those snapshots. His mother and Mary Amberley. Brian in the chalk pit, evoked by that salty smell of sun-warmed flesh, and again dead at the cliff's foot, among the flies — like that dog . . .

Chapter Thirteen. May 20th 1934

MADE MY SECOND yesterday night. Without serious nervousness. It's easy enough, once you've made up your mind that it doesn't matter if you make a fool of yourself. But it's depressing. There's a sense in which five hundred people in a hall aren't concrete. One's talking to a collective noun, an abstraction, not to a set of individuals. Only those already partially or completely convinced of what you're saying even want to understand you. The rest are invincibly ignorant. In private conversation, you could be certain of getting your man to make at least a grudging effort to understand you. The fact that there's an audience confirms the not-understander in his incomprehension. Particularly if he can ask questions after the address. Some of the reasons for this are obvious. Just getting up and being looked at is a pleasure — in many cases, piercing to the point of pain. Excruciating orgasms of self-assertion. Pleasure is heightened if the question is hostile. Hostility is a declaration of personal independence. Makes it clear at the same time that it's only an accident that the questioner isn't on the platform himself — accident or else, of course, deliberate plot on the part of ruffians who want to keep him down. Interruptions and questions are generally of course quite irrelevant. Hecklers (like the rest of us) live in their own private world, make no effort to enter other people's worlds. Most arguments in public are at cross-purposes and in different languages — without interpreters.

Mark was at the meeting, and afterwards, in my rooms, took pleasure in intensifying my depression.

'Might as well go and talk to cows in a field.' The temptation to agree with him was strong. All my old habits of thinking, living, feeling impel me towards agreement. A senseless world, where nothing whatever can be done — how satisfactory! One can go off and (seeing that there's nothing else to do) compile one's treatise on sociology — the science of human senselessness. With Mark last night I caught myself taking intense pleasure in commenting on the imbecility of my audience and human beings at large. Caught and checked myself. Reflecting that seeds had been sown, that if only one were to germinate, it would have been worth while to hold the meeting. Worth while even if none were to germinate — for my own sake, as an exercise, a training for doing better next time.

I didn't say all this. Merely stopped talking and, I suppose, changed my expression. Mark, who notices everything, began to laugh. Foresaw the time when I'd preface every mention of a person or

group with the adjective 'dear'. 'The dear Communists', 'the dear armament makers', 'dear General Goering'.

I laughed — for he was comic in his best savage manner. But, after all, if you had enough love and goodness, you could be sure of evoking some measure of answering love and goodness from almost everyone you came in contact with — whoever he or she might be. And in that case almost everyone would really be 'dear'. At present, most people seem more or less imbecile or odious; the fault is at least as much in oneself as in them.

May 24th 1934

Put in four hours this morning at working up my notes. Extraordinary pleasure! How easily one could slip back into uninterrupted scholarship and idea-mongering! Into that 'Higher Life' which is simply death without tears. Peace, irresponsibility — all the delights of death here and now. In the past, you had to go into a monastery to find them. You paid for the pleasure of death with obedience, poverty, chastity. Now you can have them gratis and in the ordinary world. Death completely without tears. Death with smiles, death with the pleasures of bed and bottle, death in private with nobody to bully you. Scholars, philosophers, men of science — conventionally supposed to be unpractical. But what other class of men has succeeded in getting the world to accept it and (more astonishing) go on accepting it at its own valuation? Kings have lost their divine right, plutocrats look as though they were going to lose theirs. But Higher Lifers continue to be labelled as superior. It's the fruit of persistence. Persistently paying compliments to themselves, persistently disparaging other people. Year in, year out, for the last sixty centuries. We're High, you're Low; we're of the Spirit, you're of the World. Again and again, like Pears Soap. It's been accepted, now, as an axiom. But, in fact, the Higher Life is merely the better death-substitute. A more complete escape from the responsibilities of living than alcohol or morphia or addiction to sex or property. Booze and dope destroy health. Sooner or later sex addicts get involved in responsibilities. Property addicts can never get all the stamps, Chinese vases, houses, varieties of lilies or whatever it may be, that they want. Their escape is a torment of Tantalus. Whereas the Higher Life escapes into a world where there's no risk to health and the minimum of responsibilities and tortures. A world, what's more, that tradition regards as actually superior to the world of responsible living — higher. The Higher Shirker can fairly wallow in his good conscience. For how easy to find in the life of scholarship and research equivalents for all the moral virtues! Some, of course, are not equivalent, but identical: perseverence, patience, self-forgetfulness and the like. Good means to ends that may be bad. You can work hard and whole-heartedly at anything — from atomic physics to forgery and white-slaving. The rest are ethical virtues transposed into the mental key. Chastity of artistic and mathematical form. Purity of scientific research. Courageousness of thought. Bold hypotheses. Logical integrity. Temperance of views. Intellectual humility before the facts. All the cardinal virtues in fancy dress. The Higher Lifers come to think of themselves as saints — saints of art and science and scholarship. A purely figurative and metaphorical sanctity taken *au pied de la lettre*.

'Blessed are the poor in spirit.' The Higher Lifer even has equivalents for spiritual poverty. As a man of science, he tries to keep himself unbiased by his interests and prejudices. But that's not all. Ethical poverty of spirit entails taking no thought for the morrow, letting the dead bury their dead, losing one's life to gain it. The Higher Lifer can make parodies of these renunciations. I know; for I made them and actually took credit to myself for having made them. You live continuously and responsibly only in the other, Higher world. In this, you detach yourself from your past; you refuse to commit yourself in the future; you have no convictions, but live moment by moment; you renounce your own identity, except as a Higher Lifer, and become just the succession of your states. A more than Franciscan destitution. Which can be combined, however, with more than Napoleonic exultations in imperialism. I used to think I had no will to power. Now I perceive that I vented it on thoughts, rather than people. Conquering an unknown province of knowledge. Getting the better of a problem. Forcing ideas to associate or come apart. Bullying recalcitrant words to assume a certain pattern. All the fun of being a dictator without any risks and responsibilities.

Chapter Fourteen. December 8th 1926

BY DINNER-TIME IT was already a Story — the latest addition to Mary Amberley's repertory. The latest, and as good, it seemed to Anthony's critically attentive ear, as the finest classics of the collection. Ever since he received her invitation, he now realized, his curiosity had been tinged with a certain vindictive hope that she would have altered for the worse, either relatively in his own knowledgeable eyes, or else absolutely by reason of the passage of these twelve long years; would have degenerated from what she was, or what he had imagined her to be, at the time when he had loved her. Discreditably enough, as he now admitted to himself, it was with a touch of disappointment that he had found her hardly changed from the Mary Amberley of his memories. She was forty-three. But her body was almost as slim as ever, and she moved with all the old swift agility. With something more than the old agility, indeed; for he had noticed that she was now agile on purpose, that she acted the part of one who is carried away by a youthful impulse to break into quick and violent motion — acted it, moreover, in circumstances where the impulse could not, if natural, possibly have been felt. Before dinner, she took him upstairs to her bedroom to see those nudes by Pascin that she had just bought. The first half of the flight she negotiated at a normal pace, talking as she went; then, as though she had suddenly remembered that slowness on stairs is a sign of middle age, she suddenly started running — no, scampering, Anthony corrected himself as he remembered the incident; scampering was the word. And when they returned to the drawing-room, no tomboy of sixteen could have thrown herself more recklessly into the sofa or tucked up her legs with a more kittenish movement. The Mary of 1914 had never behaved so youthfully as that. Couldn't have even if she had wanted to, he reflected, in all those skirts and petticoats. Whereas now, in kilts . . . It was absurd, of course; but not yet, he judicially decided, painfully absurd. For Mary could still claim to look the youthful part. Only a little worn, her face still seemed to sparkle, through the faint stigmata of fatigue, with the old laughing vitality. And as for her accomplishments — why, this improvisation (and an improvisation it must be, seeing that the event had occurred only that morning), this improvisation on the theme of Helen's stolen kidney was a little masterpiece.

'I shall have the object embalmed,' she was concluding in a mock-serious tone, pregnant with subdued laughter. Embalmed and . . .'

But like a suddenly opened ginger-beer bottle, bubbling, 'I'll give you an address for the embalming,' put in Beppo Bowles. He smiled, he blinked his eyes, he wriggled. His whole plump and florid person seemed to participate in what he said; he talked with every organ of his body. 'From the Mortician's Journal.' He waved a hand and declaimed, 'Embalmers! do your results have that unpleasant putty look? If so . . .'

Mrs Amberley had laughed — a little perfunctorily, perhaps; for she did not like to be interrupted in the middle of a story, Beppo was a darling, of course. So boyish, in spite of his tummy and the bald patch on the top of his head. (So girlish, even, on occasion.) But still . . . She cut him short with a 'Too perfect.' Then, turning back to the rest of the table, 'Well, as I was saying,' she continued, 'I shall have it embalmed and put under one of those glass domes . . .'

'Like life,' Beppo could not refrain from ginger-beerily interjecting. But nobody caught the reference to Adonais, and he giggled alone.

'Those domes,' repeated Mrs Amberley without looking at the interrupter, 'one finds in lodging-houses. With birds under them. Stuffed birds.' She lingered over the monosyllable, as though she were a German prolonging a modified o; and the birds, the Teutonic bö-öds, became, for some obscure reason, extraordinarily funny.

The voice, Anthony decided, was better than ever. There was a faint hoarseness now, like the bloom on a fruit, like the haze through which, on a summer's day, one sees St Paul's from Waterloo Bridge. The interposition of that curtain of husky gauze seemed to deepen, as it were, and enrich the beauties of the vocal landscape lying behind it. Listening more attentively than ever, he tried to fix

the cadences of her speech upon his memory, to analyse them into their component sounds. In his projected *Elements of Sociology* there was to be a chapter on Mass Suggestion and Propaganda. One of the sections would be devoted to the subject of Fascinating Noises. The fascinatingly excitingly exciting noise, for example, of Savonarola, or Lloyd George. The fascinatingly sedative noise of intoning priests; the fascinatingly hilarious noise of Robey and Little Tich; the fascinatingly aphrodisiac noise of certain actors and actresses, certain singers, certain sirens and Don Juans of private life. Mary's gift, he decided, was for making a noise that was simultaneously aphrodisiac and comic. She could emit sounds that touched the springs of laughter and desire, but never those of sorrow, of pity, of indignation. In moments of emotional stress (and he recalled those horrible scenes she used to make) her voice passed out of control into a chaos of raucous shrillness. The sound of her words of complaint, reproach, or grief evoked in the hearer only a certain physical discomfort. Whereas with Mrs Foxe, he now went on to think, the noise alone of what she said had been enough to compel your acquiescence and sympathy. Hers was the mysterious gift that hoisted Robespierre into power, that enabled Whitefield, by the mere repetition, two or three times, of some pious exclamation, to reduce the most hardened sceptic to tears. There are fascinating noises capable of convincing a listener of the existence of God.

Those bö-öds! They all laughed, all simply had to laugh, at them. Even Colin Egerton, even Hugh Ledwidge. And yet ever since that man Beavis had come into the drawing-room, Hugh had been in a prickle of uneasiness. Beavis whom he always did his best to avoid . . . Why hadn't Mary told him? For a moment he imagined it was a plot. Mary had invited Beavis on purpose to put him to shame — because she knew that the man had been a witness of his humiliations at Bulstrode. There were to be two of them: Staithes (for Staithes, he knew, was expected after dinner) and Beavis. Hugh had grown accustomed to meeting Staithes in his house, didn't mind meeting him. Staithes, there could be no doubt, had forgotten. But Beavis — whenever he met Beavis, it always seemed to Hugh that the man looked at him in a queer way. And now Mary had invited him, on purpose, so that he could remind Staithes; and then the two of them would bait him with their reminiscences — their reminiscences of how he had farked at football; of how he had cried when it was his turn at fire-drill to slide down the rope; of how he had sneaked to Jimbug and had then been made to run the gauntlet between two lines of them, armed with wet towels rolled up into truncheons; of how they had looked over the partition . . . He shuddered. But of course, on second, saner thoughts, it couldn't possibly be a plot. Not conceivably. All the same, he was glad when they went down to dinner and he found himself separated from Beavis. Across Helen, conversation would be difficult. And after dinner he would do his best to keep at a distance . . .

As for Colin, he had sat all through the meal in a bewilderment that, as it grew, as he felt himself more and more hopelessly out of it all, was mingled to an ever-increasing extent with exasperation and disapproval, until at last he was saying to himself (what he intended to say aloud to Joyce at the first opportunity), was saying: 'I may be stupid and all that' — and this confession was uttered by his inward voice in a tone of firm contempt, as though it were a confession of strength, not weakness — 'I may be stupid and all that, but at least — well, at least I do know what's within the pale and what's without.' He would say all that to Joyce, and much more; and Joyce (he had glanced at her in the middle of one of Beppo's outrageous stories and caught an eye that was humble, anxious, pleadingly apologetic), Joyce would agree with every word he said. For the poor child was like a kind of changeling — a County changeling left by some inexplicable mistake in the arms of a mad, impossible mother who forced her, against her real nature, to associate with these . . . these . . . (He couldn't find the mentionable word for Beppo.) And he, Colin Egerton, he was the St George who would rescue her. The fact that — like some pure young girl fallen among white slavers — she needed rescuing was one of the reasons why he felt so strongly attracted to her. He loved her, among other reasons, because he so violently loathed that ghastly degenerate (that was the word), Beppo Bowles; and his approval of all that Joyce was and did was proportionate to his disapproval (a disapproval strengthened by a certain terror) of Joyce's mother. And yet, now, in spite of the disapproval, in spite of his fear of that sharp tongue of hers, those

piercingly ironic glances, he could not help laughing with the rest. Those long-drawn bö-öds under their glass domes were irresistible.

For Mrs Amberley the laughter was like champagne — warming, stimulating. ‘And I shall have an inscription carved on the base,’ she went on, raising her voice against the din: ‘ ”This kidney was stolen by Helen Amberley, at the risk of life and . . . ” ’

‘Oh, do shut up, Mummy!’ Helen was blushing with a mixture of pleasure and annoyance. ‘Please!’ It was certainly nice to be the heroine of a story that everybody was listening to — but then the heroine was also a bit of an ass. She felt angry with her mother for exploiting the assishness.

‘. . . and in spite of a lifelong and conscientious objection to butchery,’ Mrs Amberley went on. Then, ‘Poor darling,’ she added in another tone. ‘Smells always were her weak point. Butchers, fishmongers, — and shall I ever forget the one and only time I took her to church!’

(‘One and only time,’ thought Colin. ‘No wonder she goes and does things like this!’)

‘Oh, I do admit,’ cried Mrs Amberley, ‘that a village congregation on a wet Sunday morning — well, frankly, it stinks. Deafeningly! But still . . . ’

‘It’s the odour of sanctity,’ put in Anthony Beavis: and turning to Helen, ‘I’ve suffered from it myself. And did your mother make you spit when there were bad smells about? Mine did. It made things very difficult in church.’

‘She didn’t spit,’ Mrs Amberley answered for her daughter. ‘She was sick. All over old Lady Worplesdon’s astrakhan coat. I was never able to show my face in respectable society again. Thank God!’ she added.

Beppo sizzled a protest against her implied imputations. Switched off kidneys, the conversation rolled away along another line.

Helen sat unnoticed, in silence. Her face had suddenly lost all its light; ‘I’ll never touch meat again,’ she had said. And here she was, with a morsel of that gruesome red lump of cow impaled on her fork. ‘I’m awful,’ she thought. *Pas sérieuse*, old Mme Delécluze had pronounced. And though as a professional girl-finisher the old beast could hardly be expected to say anything else, yet it was true; at bottom it was quite true. ‘I’m not serious. I’m not . . . ’ But suddenly she was aware that the voice which had been sounding, inarticulately and as though from an immense distance, in her right ear was addressing itself to her.

‘. . . Proust,’ she heard it saying, and realized that it had pronounced the same syllable at least twice before. She looked round, guiltily, and saw, red with embarrassment, the face of Hugh Ledwidge turned, waveringly and uncertainly, towards her. He smiled foolishly; his spectacles flashed; he turned away. She felt doubly confused and ashamed.

‘I’m afraid I didn’t quite catch . . . ’ she contrived to mumble.

‘Oh, it doesn’t matter,’ he mumbled back. ‘It’s really of no importance.’ Of no importance; but it had taken him the best part of five minutes to think of that gambit about Proust. I must say something to her, he had decided, when he saw Beavis safely involved in intimate talk with Mary Amberley and Beppo. ‘Must say something.’ But what? What did one say to young girls of eighteen? He would have liked to say something personal, something even a bit gallant. About her frock, for example. ‘How nice!’ No, that was a bit vague and unspecific. ‘How it suits your complexion, your eyes!’ (What colour were they, by the way?) Or he might ask her about parties. Did she go to many? With (very archly) boy friends? But that, he knew, was too difficult for him. Besides, he didn’t much like to think of her with boy friends — preferred her virginal: *du bist wie eine Blume* . . . Or else, seriously but with a smile, ‘Tell me,’ he might say, ‘tell me, Helen, what are young people really like nowadays? What do they think and feel about things?’ And Helen would plant her elbows on the table and turn sideways and tell him exactly all he wanted to know about that mysterious world, the world where people danced and went to parties and were always having personal relations with one another; would tell him everything, everything — or else, more likely, nothing, and he would just be made to feel an impertinent fool. No, no; this wouldn’t do, wouldn’t do at all. This was just fancy, this was just wish-fulfilment. It was then that the question about Proust had occurred to him. What did she think of Proust? It was a

comfortingly impersonal question — one that he could ask without feeling awkward and unnatural. But its impersonality could easily be made to lead to a long discussion — always in the abstract, always, so to speak, in a test-tube — of the most intimately emotional, even (no, no; but still, one never knew; it was revolting; and yet . . .) even physiological matters. Talking of Proust, it would be possible to say everything — everything, but always in terms of a strictly literary criticism. Perfect! He had turned towards Helen.

‘I suppose you’re as keen on Proust as everybody else.’ No answer. From the end of the table came wafts of Mrs Amberley’s conversation with Anthony and Beppo: they were discussing the habits of their friends. Colin Egerton was in the middle of a tiger hunt in the Central Provinces. He coughed, then, ‘You’re a Proustian, I take it? Like the rest of us,’ he repeated. But the lowered and melancholy profile gave no sign of life. Feeling most uncomfortably a fool, Hugh Ledwidge tried once more.

‘I wish you’d tell me,’ he said in a louder voice, that sounded, he thought, peculiarly unnatural, ‘what you think about Proust.’

Helen continued to stare at some invisible object on the table, just in front of her plate. *Pas sérieuse*. She was thinking of all the unserious things she had ever done in her life, all the silly, the mean, the awful things. A kind of panic embarrassment overwhelmed Hugh Ledwidge. He felt as he might feel if his trousers were to start coming down in Piccadilly — lost. Anybody else, of course, would just touch her arm and say, ‘A penny for your thoughts, Helen!’ How simple this would be, how sensible! The whole incident would at once be turned into a joke — a joke, moreover, at her expense. He would establish once and for all a position of teasing superiority. ‘Day-dreaming in the middle of a dinner! About what? About whom?’ Very knowing and arch. And she would blush, would giggle — at his behest, in response to his command. Like a skilled matador, he would wave his little red flag, and she would go plunging here, go charging there, making an absurd and ravishing exhibition of herself, until at last raising his sword . . . But simple and sensible and strategically advantageous as all this would be, Hugh Ledwidge found it quite impossible to make the first move. There was her bare arm, thin like a little girl’s; but somehow he could not bring himself to put out his hand and touch it. And the jocular offer of that penny — it couldn’t be made; his vocal cords would not do it. Thirty seconds passed — seconds of increasing embarrassment and uncertainty. Then suddenly, as though waking from sleep, she had looked round at him. What had he said? But it was impossible to repeat that question again.

‘It’s of no importance. No importance,’ he turned away. But why, oh why was he such a fool, so ridiculously incompetent? At thirty-five. *Nel mezzo del cammin*. Imagine Dante in the circumstances! Dante, with his steel profile, ploughing forward, like a spiritual battleship. And meanwhile, what on earth should he say to her in place of that now impossible remark about Proust? What in the name of heaven . . . ?

It was she finally who touched his arm. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said with a real contrition. She was trying to make up for her awfulness, for having so frivolously eaten Mr Baldwin’s well-thumbed cow. Besides, she liked old Hugh. He was nice. He had taken the trouble to show her the Mexican things at the Museum. ‘I have an appointment with Mr Ledwidge,’ she had said. And the attendants had all been delightfully deferential. She had been led to his private room — the private room of the Assistant Director of the Department — as though she were some distinguished personage. One eminent archaeologist visiting another. It had really been extraordinarily interesting. Only, of course — and this was another symptom of her awful unseriousness — she had forgotten most of the things he had told her. ‘So awfully sorry,’ she repeated; and it was genuinely true. She knew what he must be feeling. ‘You see,’ she explained, ‘Granny’s deaf. I know how awful it is when I have to repeat something. It sounds so idiotic. Like Mr Shandy and the clock, somehow, if you see what I mean. Do forgive me.’ She pressed his arm appealingly, then planting her elbows on the table and turning sideways towards him in just the confidential attitude he had visualized, ‘Listen, Hugh,’ she said, ‘you’re serious, aren’t you? You know, *sérieux*.’

‘Well, I suppose so,’ he stammered. He had just seen, rather belatedly, what she meant by that reference to Mr Shandy, and the realization had come as something of a shock.

‘I mean,’ she went on, ‘you could hardly be at the Museum if you weren’t serious.’

'No,' he admitted, 'I probably couldn't.' But after all, he was thinking, still preoccupied by Mr Shandy, there's such a thing as theoretical knowledge. (And didn't he know it? Only too well.) Theoretical knowledge corresponding to no genuine experience, unrealized, not lived through. 'Oh God!' he inwardly groaned.

'Well, I'm not serious,' Helen was saying. She felt a great need to unburden herself, to ask for help. There were moments — and they recurred whenever, for one reason or another, she felt doubtful of herself — moments when everything round her seemed terribly vague and unreliable. Everything — but in practice, of course, it all boiled down to the unreliability of her mother. Helen was very fond of her mother, but at the same time she had to admit to herself that she was no use. 'Mummy's like a very bad practical joke,' she had once said to Joyce. 'You think you're going to sit on it; but the chair's whisked away and you come down with a horrible bump on your bottom.' But all that Joyce had said was: 'Helen, you simply mustn't use those words.' Ass of a girl! Though, of course, it had to be admitted, Joyce was a chair that could be sat on. But an inadequate chair, a chair only for unimportant occasions — and what was the good of that? Joyce was too young; and even if she'd been much older, she wouldn't really have understood anything properly. And now that she was engaged to Colin, she seemed to understand things less and less. God, what a fool that man was! But all the same, there, if you liked, was a chair. A chair like the rock of ages. But so shaped, unfortunately, that it forced you to sit in the most grotesquely uncomfortable position. However, as Joyce didn't seem to mind the discomfort, that was all right. Chairless in an exhausting world, Helen almost envied her. Meanwhile there was old Hugh. She sat down, heavily.

'What's wrong with me,' she went on, 'is that I'm so hopelessly frivolous.'

'I can't really believe that,' he said; though why he said it he couldn't imagine. For, obviously, he ought to be encouraging her to make confession, not assuring her that she had no sins to confess. It was as though he were secretly afraid of the very thing he had wished for.

'I don't think you're . . .'

But unfortunately nothing he said could put her off. She insisted on using him as a chair.

'No, no, it's quite true,' she said. 'You can't imagine how frivolous I am. I'll tell you . . .'

Half an hour later, in the back drawing-room, he was writing out for her a list of the books she ought to read. Burnet's Early Greek Philosophers; Phaedrus, Timaeus, The Apology, and The Symposium in Jowett's translation; the Nicomachean Ethios; Cornford's little anthology of the Greek moralists; Marcus Aurelius; Lucretius in any good translation; Inge's Plotinus. His manner, as he spoke, was easy, confident, positively masterful. He was like a creature suddenly restored to its proper element.

'Those will give you some idea of the way the ancients thought about things.'

She nodded. Her face as she looked at the pencilled list was grave and determined. She had decided that she would wear spectacles, and have a table brought up to her bedroom, so that she could sit undisturbed, with her books piled up and her writing materials in front of her. Note-books — or, better, a card index. It would be a new life — a life with some meaning in it, some purpose. In the drawing-room somebody started up the gramophone. As though on its own initiative, her foot began to beat out the rhythm. One two three, one two three — it was a waltz. But what was she thinking of? She frowned and held her foot still.

'As for modern thought,' Hugh was saying, 'well, the two indispensable books, from which every modern culture must start, are' — his pencil hurried across the paper — 'Montaigne's Essays and the Pensées of Pascal. Indispensable, these.' He underlined the names. 'Then you'd better glance at the Discourse on Method.'

'Which method?' asked Helen.

But Hugh did not hear her question. 'And take a look at Hobbes, if you have the time,' he went on with ever-increasing power and confidence. 'And then Newton. That's absolutely essential. Because if you don't know the philosophy of Newton, you don't know why science has developed as it has done. You'll find all you need in Burt's Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science.' There was a little silence while he wrote. Tom had arrived, and Eileen and Sybil. Helen could hear them talking in the

other room. But she kept her eyes determinedly fixed on the paper. ‘Then there’s Hume,’ he continued. ‘You’d better begin with the Essays. They’re superb. Such sense, such an immense sagacity!’

‘Sagacity,’ Helen repeated, and smiled to herself with pleasure. Yes, that was exactly the word she’d been looking for — exactly what she herself would like to be: sagacious, like an elephant, like an old sheepdog, like Hume, if you preferred it. But at the same time, of course, herself. Sagacious, but young; sagacious, but lively and attractive; sagacious, but impetuous and . . .

‘I won’t inflict Kant on you,’ said Hugh indulgently. ‘But I think’ (he brought the pencil into play again), ‘I think you’ll have to read one or two of the modern Kantians. Vaihinger’s *Philosophy of As If*, for example, and von Uexküll’s *Theoretical Biology*. You see, Kant’s behind all our twentieth-century science. Just as Newton was behind all the science of the eighteenth and nineteenth . . .’

‘Why, Helen!’

They started and looked up — looked up into the smiling, insolently handsome face of Gerry Watchett. Brilliantly blue against the sunburnt skin, the eyes glanced from one to the other with a kind of mockery. Coming a step nearer, he laid his hand familiarly on Helen’s shoulder. ‘What’s the fun? Cross-word puzzles?’ He gave the shoulder two or three little pats.

‘As though she were his horse,’ Hugh said to himself indignantly. And, in effect, that was what the man looked like — a groom. That crisply waving, golden-brownish hair, that blunt-featured face, at once boyish and tough — they were straight from the stable, straight from Epsom Downs.

Helen smiled a smile that was intended to be contemptuously superior — an intellectual’s smile. ‘You would think it was crosswords!’ she said. Then, ‘By the way,’ she added in another tone, ‘you know each other, don’t you?’ she looked inquiringly from Gerry to Hugh.

‘We do,’ Gerry answered: still keeping his right hand on Helen’s shoulder, he raised his left in the derisive caricature of military salute. ‘Good evening, Colonel.’

Sheepishly, Hugh returned the salute. All his power and confidence had vanished with his forced return from the world of books to that of personal life; he felt like an albatross on dry land — helplessly awkward, futile, ugly. And yet how easy it should have been to put on a knowing smile, and say significantly, ‘Yes, I know Mr Watchett very well’ — know him, the tone would imply, for what he is: the gentleman sharepusher, the professional gambler, and the professional lover. Mary Amberley’s lover at the moment, so it was supposed. ‘Know him very well indeed!’ That was what it would have been so easy to say. But he didn’t say it: he only smiled and rather foolishly raised his hand to his forehead.

Gerry, meanwhile, had sat down on the arm of the sofa, and through the smoke of his cigarette was staring at Helen with a calm and easy insolence, appraising her, so it seemed, point by point — hocks, withers, quarters, barrel. ‘Do you know, Helen,’ he said at last, ‘you’re getting prettier and prettier every day.’

Blushing, Helen threw back her head and laughed; then suddenly stiffened her face into an unnatural rigidity. She was angry — angry with Gerry for his damned impertinence, angry above all with herself for having been pleased by the damned impertinence, for having reacted with such a humiliating automatic punctuality to that offensive flattery. Going red in the face and giggling like a schoolgirl! And that *Philosophy of As If*, those horn-rimmed spectacles, and the new life, and the card index . . . ? A man said, ‘You’re pretty,’ and it was as though they had never been so much as thought of. She turned towards Hugh; turned for protection, for support. But her eyes no sooner met his than he looked away. His face took on an expression of meditative absence; he seemed to be thinking of something else. Was he angry with her, she wondered? Had he been offended because she had been pleased by Gerry’s compliment? But it had been like blinking at the noise of a gun — something you couldn’t help doing. He ought to understand, ought to realize that she wanted to lead that new life, was simply longing to be sagacious. Instead of which, he just faded out and refused to have anything to do with her. Oh, it wasn’t fair!

Behind that cold detached mask of his, Hugh was feeling more than ever like Baudelaire’s albatross.

Ce voyageur ailé, comme il est gauche et veule!

Lui, naguère si beau, qu’il est comique et laid!

Ah, those strong and majestic swoopings in the neo-Kantian azure!

From the next room the gramophone was trumpeting, 'Yes, sir, she's my Baby.' Gerry whistled a couple of bars; then 'What about a spot of fox-trotting, Helen?' he suggested. 'Unless, of course, you haven't finished with the Colonel.' He glanced mockingly at Hugh's averted face. 'I don't want to interrupt . . .'

It was Helen's turn to look at Hugh. 'Well . . .'

she began doubtfully. But without looking up, 'Oh, not at all, not at all,' Hugh made haste to say; and wondered, even as he did so, what on earth had induced him to proclaim his own defeat before there had been a battle. Leaving her to that groom! Fool, coward! Still, he told himself cynically, she probably preferred the groom. He got up, mumbled something about having to talk to someone about some point that had turned up, and moved away towards the door that gave on to the landing and the stairs.

'Well, if he doesn't want me to stay,' Helen thought resentfully, 'if he doesn't think it's worth his while to keep me.' She was hurt.

'Exit the Colonel,' said Gerry. Then, 'What about that spot of dancing?' He rose, came towards her and held out his hand. Helen took it and pulled herself up from the low chair. 'No, sir, don't say maybe,' he sang as he put his arm about her. They stepped out into the undulating stream of the music. Zigzagging between chairs and tables, he steered towards the door that led into the other room.

Chapter Fifteen. June 1903–january 1904

IT HAD BECOME a rite, a sacrament (that was how John Beavis described it to himself): a sacrament of communion. First, the opening of the wardrobe door, the handling of her dresses. Closing his eyes, he breathed the perfume they exhaled, the faint sweet essence of her body from across the widening abyss of time. Then there were the drawers. These three, on the left, contained her linen. The lavender bags were tied with pale blue ribbon. This lace on the night-gown he now unfolded had touched . . . Even in thought, John Beavis avoided the pronunciation of the words 'her breasts', but only imagined the rounded flesh softly swelling and sinking under the intricacies of the patterned thread; then recalled those Roman nights; and finally thought of Lollingdon and the hollow vale, the earth, the terrible dark silence. The night-gown refolded and once more shut away, it was the turn of the two small drawers on the right — of the gloves that had encased her hands, the belts that had girdled her body and that now he wound round his wrist or tightened like a phylactery about his temples. And the rite concluded with the reading of her letters — those touchingly childish letters she had written during their engagement. That consummated the agony for him; the rite was over and he could go to bed with yet another sword in his heart.

But recently, it seemed, the sword had grown blunter. It was as though her death, till now so poignantly alive, had itself begun to die. The rite seemed to be losing its magic: consummation became increasingly difficult of achievement, and, when achieved, was less painful and, for that reason, less satisfying. For the thing which had made life worth living all these months was precisely the pain of his bereavement. Desire and tenderness had suddenly been deprived of their object. It was an amputation — agonizing. And now this pain — and it was all of her that was left him — this precious anguish was slipping away from him, was dying, even as Maisie herself had died.

Tonight it seemed to have vanished altogether. He buried his face in the scented folds of her dresses, he spread out the lace and lawn she had worn next to her skin, he blew into one of her gloves and watched the gradual deflation of this image of her hand — dying, dying, till the skin hung limp again and empty of even the pretence of life. But the rites were without effect; John Beavis remained unmoved. He knew that she was dead and that his bereavement was terrible. But felt nothing of this bereavement — nothing except a kind of dusty emptiness of spirit.

He went to bed unfulfilled, somehow humiliated. Magic rites justify themselves by success; when they fail to produce their proper emotional results, the performer feels that he has been betrayed into making a fool of himself.

Dry, like a mummy, in the dusty emptiness of his own sepulchre, John Beavis lay for a long time, unable to sleep. Twelve; one; two; and then, when he had utterly despaired of it, sleep came, and he was dreaming that she was there beside him; and it was Maisie as she had been the first year of their marriage, the round flesh swelling and subsiding beneath the lace, the lips parted and, oh, innocently consenting. He took her in his arms.

It was the first time since her death that he had dreamed of her except as dying.

John Beavis woke to a sense of shame; and when, later in the day, he saw Miss Gannett evidently waiting for him as usual, in the corridor outside his lecture-room, he pretended not to have noticed her, but hurried past with downcast eyes, frowning, as though preoccupied by some abstruse, insoluble problem in higher philology.

But the next afternoon found him at his Aunt Edith's weekly At Home. And of course — though he expressed a perhaps excessive surprise at seeing her — of course Miss Gannett was there, as he knew she would be; for she never missed one of Aunt Edith's Thursdays.

'You were in a terrible hurry yesterday,' she said, when his surprise had had time to die down.

'Me? When?' He pretended not to know what she meant.

'At the college, after your lecture.'

'But were you there? I didn't see you.'

'Now he thinks I shirked his lecture,' she wailed to some non-existent third party. Ever since, two months before, she had first met him in Aunt Edith's drawing-room, Miss Gannett had faithfully attended every one of his public lectures. 'To improve my mind,' she used to explain. 'Because,' with a jocularity that was at the same time rather wistful, 'it does so need improving!'

Mr Beavis protested. 'But I didn't say anything of the kind.'

'I'll show you the notes I took.'

'No, please don't do that!' It was his turn to be playful. 'If you knew how my own lectures bored me!'

'Well, you nearly ran over me in the corridor, after the lecture.'

'Oh, then!'

'I never saw anyone walk so fast.'

He nodded. 'Yes, I was in a hurry; it's quite true. I had a Committee. Rather a special one,' he added impressively.

She opened her eyes at him very wide, and, from playful, her tone and expression became very serious. 'It must be rather a bore sometimes,' she said, 'to be such a very important person — isn't it?'

Mr Beavis smiled down at the grave and awestruck child before him — at the innocent child who was also a rather plump and snubbily pretty young woman of seven and twenty — smiled with pleasure and stroked his moustache. 'Oh, not quite so important as all that,' he protested. 'Not quite such . . .' he hesitated for a moment; his mouth twitched, his eyes twinkled; then the colloquialism came out: 'not quite such a "howling toff" as you seem to imagine.'

There was only one letter that morning. From Anthony, Mr Beavis saw as he tore open the envelope. Bulstrode, June 26th

Dearest Father, — Thank you for your letter. I thought we were going to Tenby for the holidays. Did you not arrange it with Mrs Foxe? Foxe says she expects us, so perhaps we ought not to go to Switzerland instead as you say we are doing. We had two matches yesterday, first eleven v. Sunny Bank, second v. Mumbridge, we won both which was rather ripping. I was playing in the second eleven and made six not out. We have begun a book called *Lettres de mon Moulin* in French, I think it is rotten. There is no more news, so with much love. — Your loving son,

Anthony.

P.S. — Don't forget to write to Mrs Foxe, because Foxe says he knows she thinks we are going to Tenby.

Mr Beavis frowned as he read the letter, and when breakfast was over, sat down at once to write an answer.

Earl's Court Square
27.vi.03.

Dearest Anthony, — I am disappointed that you should have received what I had hoped was a piece of very exciting news with so little enthusiasm. At your age I should certainly have welcomed the prospect of 'going abroad', especially to Switzerland, with unbounded delight. The arrangements with Mrs Foxe were always of the most indeterminate nature. Needless to say, however, I wrote to her as soon as the golden opportunity for exploring the Bernese Oberland in congenial company turned up, as it did only a few days since, and made me decide to postpone the realization of our vague Tenby plans. If you want to see exactly where we are going, take your map of Switzerland, find Interlaken and the Lake of Brienz, move eastward from the end of the lake to Meiringen and thence in a southerly direction towards Grindelwald. We shall be staying at the foot of the Scheideck Pass, at Rosenloui, almost in the shadow of such giants as the Jungfrau, Weisshorn and Co. I do not know the spot, but gather from all accounts that it is entirely 'spiffing' and paradisal.

I am delighted to hear you did so creditably in your match. You must go on, dear boy, from strength to strength. Next year I shall hope to see you sporting the glories of the First Eleven Colours.

I cannot agree with you in finding Daudet 'rotten'. I suspect that his rottenness mainly consists in the difficulties he presents to a tyro. When you have acquired a complete mastery of the language, you will come to appreciate the tender charm of his style and the sharpness of his wit.

I hope you are working your hardest to make good your sad weakness in 'maths'. I confess that I never shone in the mathematical line myself, so I am able to sympathize with your difficulties. But hard work will do wonders, and I am sure that if you really 'put your back into' algebra and geometry, you can easily get up to scholarship standards by this time next year. — Ever your most affectionate father,
J.B.

'It's too sickening!' said Anthony, when he had finished reading his father's letter. The tears came into his eyes; he was filled with a sense of intolerable grievance.

'W-what does he s-say?' Brian asked.

'It's all settled. He's written to your mater that we're going to some stinking hole in Switzerland instead of Tenby. Oh, I really am too sick about it!' He crumpled up the letter and threw it angrily on the ground, then turned away and tried to relieve his feeling by kicking his play-box. 'Too sick, too sick!' he kept repeating.

Brian was sick too. They were going to have had such a splendid time at Tenby; it had been imaginatively foreseen, preconstructed in the most luxuriant detail; and now, crash! the future good time was in bits.

'S-still,' he said at last, after a long silence, 'I exp-pect you'll enj-joy yourself in S-switzerland.' And, moved by a sudden impulse, for which he would have found it difficult to offer an explanation, he picked up Mr Beavis's letter, smoothed out the crumpled pages and handed it back to Anthony. 'Here's your l-letter,' he said.

Anthony looked at it for a moment, opened his mouth as though to speak, then shut it again, and taking the letter, put it away in his pocket.

The congenial company in which they were to explore the Bernese Oberland turned out, when they reached Rosenloui, to consist of Miss Gannett and her old school-friend Miss Louie Piper. Mr Beavis always spoke of them as 'the girls', or else, with a touch of that mock-heroic philological jocularly to which he was so partial, 'the damsels' — dominicellae, double diminutive of domina. The teeny weeny ladies! He smiled to himself each time he pronounced the word. To Anthony the damsels seemed a pair of tiresome and already elderly females. Piper, the thin one, was like a governess. He preferred fat old Gannett, in spite of that awful moeey, squealing laugh of hers, in spite of the way she puffed and

sweated up the hills. Gannett at least was well-meaning. Luckily, there were two other English boys in the hotel. True, they came from Manchester and spoke rather funnily, but they were decent chaps, and they knew an extraordinary number of dirty stories. Moreover, in the woods behind the hotel they had discovered a cave, where they kept cigarettes. Proudly, when he got back to Bulstrode, Anthony announced that he had smoked almost every day of the hols.

One Saturday in November Mr Beavis came down to Bulstrode for the afternoon. They watched the football for a bit, then, went for a depressing walk that ended, however, at the King's Arms. Mr Beavis ordered crumpets 'and buttered eggs for this young stalwart' (with a conspiratorial twinkle at the waitress, as though she knew that the word meant 'foundation-worthy'), 'and cherry jam to follow — isn't cherry the favourite?'

Anthony nodded. Cherry was the favourite. But so much solicitude made him feel rather suspicious. What could it all be for? Was he going to say something about his work? About going in for the scholarship next summer? About . . . ? He blushed. But after all, his father couldn't possibly know anything about that. Not possibly. In the end he gave it up; he couldn't imagine what it was.

But when, after an unusually long silence, his father leaned forward and said, 'I've got an interesting piece of news for you, dear boy,' Anthony knew, in a sudden flash of illumination, exactly what was coming.

'He's going to marry the Gannett female,' he said to himself.

And so he was. In the middle of December.

'A companion for you,' Mr Beavis was saying. That youthfulness, those fresh and girlish high spirits! 'A companion as well as a second mother.'

Anthony nodded. But 'companion' — what did he mean? He thought of the fat old Gannett, toiling up the slopes behind Rosenlauri, red-faced, smelling of sweat, reeking . . . And suddenly his mother's voice was sounding in his ears.

'Pauline wants you to call her by her Christian name,' Mr Beavis went on. 'It'll be . . . well, jollier, don't you think?'

Anthony said 'Yes,' because there was obviously nothing else for him to say, and helped himself to more cherry jam.

* * *

'Third person singular aorist of τῖθῆμι?' questioned Anthony.

Horse-Face got it wrong. It was Staithes who answered correctly.

'Second plural pluperfect of ἐρχομαι?'

Brian's hesitation was due to something graver than his stammer.

'You're putrid tonight, Horse-Face,' said Anthony, and pointed his finger at Staithes, who gave the right answer again. 'Good for you, Staithes.' And repeating Jimbug's stalest joke, 'The sediment sinks to the bottom, Horse-Face,' he rumbled in a parody of Jimbug's deep voice.

'Poor old Horse-Face!' said Staithes, slapping the other on the back. Now that Horse-Face had given him the pleasure of knowing less Greek grammar than he did, Staithes almost loved him.

It was nearly eleven, long after lights out, and the three of them were crowded into the w.c., Anthony in his capacity of examiner sitting majestically on the seat, and the other two squatting on their heels below him, on the floor. The May night was still and warm; in less than six weeks they would be sitting for their scholarship examinations, Brian and Anthony at Eton, Mark Staithes at Rugby. It was after the previous Christmas holidays that Staithes had come back to Bulstrode with the announcement that he was going in for a scholarship. Astonishing news and, for his courtiers and followers, appalling! That work was idiotic, and that those who worked were contemptible, had been axiomatic among them. And now here was Staithes going in for a schol with the other swots — with Benger Beavis, with old Horse-Face, with that horrible little tick, Goggler Ledwidge. It had seemed a betrayal of all that was most sacred.

By his words first of all, and afterwards, more effectively, by his actions, Staithes had reassured them. The scholarship idea was his Pater's. Not because of the money, he had hastened to add. His

Pater didn't care a damn about money. But for the honour and glory, because it was a tradition in the Family. His Pater himself and his uncles, his Fraters — they had all got schols. It wouldn't do to let the Family down. Which didn't change the fact that swotting was a stinking bore and that all swotters who swotted because they liked it, as Horse-Face and Beavis seemed to do, or for the sake of the money, like that miserable Goggler, were absolutely worms. And to prove it he had ragged old Horse-Face about his stammer and his piddle-warblers, he had organized a campaign against Goggler for funking at football, he had struck nibs into Beavis's bottom during prep; and though working very hard himself, he had made up for it by playing harder than ever and by missing no opportunity of telling everyone how beastly swotting was, how he had absolutely no chance whatever of getting a schol.

When face had been sufficiently saved, he had changed his tactics towards Beavis and Horse-Face, and after showing himself for some time progressively more friendly towards them, had ended by proposing the creation of a society of mutual assistance in schol swotting. It was he who, at the beginning of the summer term, had suggested the nightly sessions in the w.c. Brian had wanted to include Goggler in these reading-parties; but the other two had protested; and anyhow, the w.c. was demonstrably too small to contain a fourth. He had to be content with helping Goggler in occasional half-hours during the day. Night and the lavatory were reserved for the triumvirate.

To explain this evening's failure with Greek verbs, 'I'm rather t-t-t . . .' Brian began; then, forced into apparent affectation, 'rather weary to-n-night,' he concluded.

His pallor and the blue transparency under his eyes testified to the truth of his words; but for Mark Staithes they were obviously an excuse by means of which Horse-Face hoped to diminish a little the sting of his defeat at the hands of one who had been swotting, not for years, as his rivals had, but only a few months. It was an implied confession of inferiority. Triumphant, Staithes felt that he could be magnanimous. 'Hard luck!' he said solicitously. 'Let's have a bit of a rest.'

From the pocket of his dressing-gown Anthony produced three ginger-nuts, rather soft, it was true, with age, but none the less welcome.

For the thousandth time since it had been decided that he should go in for a scholarship, 'I wish I had a ghost of a chance,' said Staithes.

'You've g-got a very g-good one.'

'No, I haven't. It's just a crazy idea of my Pater's. Crazy!' he repeated, shaking his head. But in fact it was with a tingling, warm sensation of pride, of exultation, that he remembered his father's words. 'We Staitheses . . . When one's a Staithes . . . You've got as good brains as the rest of us, and as much determination . . .' He forced a sigh, and, aloud, 'Not a ghost of a chance,' he insisted.

'Yes, you h-have, honestly.'

'Rot!' he refused to admit even the possibility of the thing. Then, if he failed, he could laughingly say, 'I told you so'; and if he succeeded, as he privately believed he would, the glory would be all the greater. Besides, the more persistently he denied his chances, the oftener they would repeat their delicious assurances of his possible, his probable, success. Success, what was more, in their own line; success, in spite of his consistent refusal, till the beginning of last term, ever to take this ridiculous swotting seriously.

It was Bengier who brought the next tribute. 'Jimbug thinks you've got a chance,' he said. 'I heard him talking to old Jacko about it yesterday.'

'What does that old fool Jimbug know about it?' Staithes made a disparaging grimace; but through the mask of contempt his brown eyes shone with pleasure. 'And as for Jacko . . .'

A sudden rattling of the door-handle made them all start. 'I say, you chaps,' came an imploring whisper through the keyhole, 'do buck up! I've got the most frightful belly-ache.'

Brian rose hastily from the floor. 'We must l-let him in,' he began.

But Staithes pulled him down again. 'Don't be a fool!' he said; then, turning towards the door, 'Go to one of the rears downstairs,' he said, 'we're busy.'

'But I'm in a most frightful hurry.'

'Then the quicker you go, the better.'

'You are a swine!' protested the whisper. Then 'Christ!' it added, and they heard the sound of slippers receding in a panic rush down the stairs.

Staithes grinned. 'That'll teach him,' he said. 'What about another go at the Greek grammar?'

* * *

Outraged in advance, James Beavis had felt his indignation growing with every minute he spent under his brother's roof. The house positively reeked of matrimony. It was asphyxiating! And there sat John, fairly basking in those invisible radiations of dark female warmth, inhaling the stuffiness with a quivering nostril, deeply contented, revoltingly happy! Like a marmot, it suddenly occurred to James Beavis, a marmot with its female, crowded fur to fur in their subterranean burrow. Yes, the house was just a burrow — a burrow, with John like a thin marmot at one end of the table and that soft, bulging marmot-woman at the other, and between them, one on either side, himself, outraged and nauseated, and that unhappy little Anthony, like a changeling from the world of fresh air, caught and dragged down and imprisoned in the marmot-warren. Indignation begot equally violent pity and affection for this unhappy child, begot at the same time a retrospective feeling of sympathy for poor Maisie. In her lifetime he had always regarded Maisie as just a fool — hopelessly silly and frivolous. Now, John's marriage and the oppressive connubiality which enveloped the all too happy couple made him forget his judgements on the living Maisie and think of her as a most superior woman (at least, she had had the grace to be slim), posthumously martyred by her husband for the sake of this repulsively fleshy female marmot. Horrible. He did well to be angry.

Pauline meanwhile had refused a second helping of the chocolate soufflé.

'But, my dear, you must,' John Beavis insisted.

Pauline heaved the conscious imitation of a sigh of repletion. 'I couldn't.'

'Not even the favourite chocolatl?' Mr Beavis always spoke of chocolate in the original Aztec.

Playfully, Pauline eyed the dish askance. 'I shouldn't,' she said, implicitly admitting that the repletion was not complete.

'Yes, you should,' he wheedled.

'Now he's trying to make me fat!' she wailed with mock reproach. 'He's leading me into temptation!'

'Well, be led.'

This time, Pauline's sigh was a martyr's. 'All right, then,' she said submissively. The maid, who had been waiting impassively for the outcome of the controversy, presented the dish once again. Pauline helped herself.

'There's a good child,' said Mr Beavis, in a tone and with a twinkle that expressed a sportive mock-fatherliness. 'And now, James, I hope you'll follow the good example.'

James's disgust and anger were so intense that he could not trust himself to speak, for fear of saying something outrageous. He contented himself with curtly shaking his head.

'No chocolatl for you?' Mr Beavis turned to Anthony. 'But I'm sure you'll take pity on the pudding!' And when Anthony did. 'Ah that's good!' he said. 'That's the way . . .' — he hesitated for a fraction of second — '. . . the way to tuck in!'

Chapter Sixteen. June 17th 1912

ANTHONY'S FLUENCY, AS they walked to the station, was a symptom of his inward sense of guilt. By the profusion of his talk, by the brightness of his attention, he was making up to Brian for what he had done the previous evening. It was not as though Brian had uttered any reproaches; he seemed, on the contrary, to be taking special pains not to hint at yesterday's offence. His silence served Anthony as an excuse for postponing all mention of the disagreeable subject of Mark Staithes. Some time, of course, he would have to talk about the whole wretched affair (what a bore people were, with their complicated squabbles!); but, for the moment, he assured himself, it would be best to wait . . .

to wait until Brian himself referred to it. Meanwhile, his uneasy conscience constrained him to display towards Brian a more than ordinary friendliness, to make a special effort to be interesting and to show himself interested. Interested in the poetry of Edward Thomas as they walked down Beaumont Street; in Bergson opposite Worcester; crossing Hythe Bridge, in the nationalization of coal mines; and finally, under the viaduct and up the long approach to the station, in Joan Thursley.

'It's ext-traordinary,' said Brian, breaking, with what was manifestly an effort, a rather long preparatory silence, 'that you sh-shouldn't ever have met her.'

'Dis aliter visum', Anthony answered in his father's best classical style. Though, of course, if he had accepted Mrs Foxe's invitations to stay at Twyford, the gods, he reflected, would have changed their minds.

'I w-want you to l-like one another,' Brian was saying.

'I'm sure we shall.'

'She's not frightfully c-c-c . . .' Patiently he began again: 'frightfully c-clever. N-not on the s-surface. You'd th-think she was o-only interested in c-c-c . . .' But 'country life' wouldn't allow itself to be uttered; Brian was forced into a seemingly affected circumlocution: 'in rural m-matters,' he brought out at last. 'D-dogs and b-birds and all that.'

Anthony nodded and, suddenly remembering those spew-tits and piddle-warblers of the Bulstrode days, imperceptibly smiled.

'But w-when you g-get to kn-know her better,' Brian went on laboriously, 'you f-find there's a lot m-more in her than you th-thought. She's g-got ext-traordinary feeling for p-p-p . . . for v-verse. W-wordsworth and M-meredith, for example. I'm always ast-tonished how g-good her j-judgements are.'

Anthony smiled to himself sarcastically. Yes, it would be Meredith!

The other was silent, wondering how he should explain, whether he should even try to explain. Everything was against him — his own physical disability, the difficulty of putting what he had to say into words, the possibility that Anthony wouldn't even want to understand what he said, that he would produce his alibi of cynicism and just pretended not to be there at all.

Brian thought of their first meeting. The embarrassing discovery of two strangers in the drawing-room when he came in, flushed and his hair still wet with the rain, to tea. His mother pronounced a name: 'Mrs Thursley'. The new vicar's wife, he realized, as he shook hands with the thin dowdy woman. Her manners were so ingratiating that she lisped as she spoke; her smile was deliberately bright.

'And this is Joan.'

The girl held out her hand, and as he took it, her slender body swayed away from his alien presence in a movement of shyness that was yet adorably graceful, like the yielding of a young tree before the wind. That movement was the most beautiful and at the same time the most touching thing he had ever seen.

'We've been hearing you're keen on birds,' said Mrs Thursley, with an oppressive politeness and intensifying that all too bright, professionally Christian smile of hers. 'So's Joan. A regular ornithologist.'

Blushing, the girl muttered a protest.

'She will be pleased to have someone to talk to about her precious birds. Won't you, Joanie?'

Joan's embarrassment was so great that she simply couldn't speak.

Looking at her flushed, averted face, Brian was filled with compassionate tenderness. His heart began to beat very hard. With a mixture of fear and exultation he realized that something extraordinary, something irrevocable had happened.

And then, he went on to think, there was that time, some four or five months later, when they were staying together at her uncle's house in East Sussex. Away from her parents, she was as though transformed — not into another person; into her own fundamental self, into the happy, expansive girl that it was impossible for her to be at home. For at home she lived under constraint. Her father's chronic grumblings and occasional outbursts of bad temper oppressed her with fear. And though she loved her, she felt herself the prisoner of her mother's affection, was dimly conscious of being somehow exploited by means of it. And finally there was the cold numbing atmosphere of the genteel poverty in which they

lived, the unremitting tension of the struggle to keep up appearances, to preserve social superiority. At home, it was impossible for Joan to be fully herself; but there, in that spacious house at Iden, among its quiet, easy-going inhabitants, she was liberated into a transfiguring happiness. Dazzled, Brian fell in love with her all over again.

He thought of the day when they had gone walking in Winchelsea marshes. The hawthorn was in bloom; dotted here and there on the wide, flat expanse of grass, the sheep and their lambs were like white constellations; overhead, the sky was alive with white clouds gliding in the wind. Unspeakably beautiful! And suddenly it seemed to him that they were walking through the image of their love. The world was their love, and their love the world; and the world was significant, charged with depth beyond depth of mysterious meaning. The proof of God's goodness floated in those clouds, crept in those grazing sheep, shone from every burning bush of incandescent blossom — and, in himself and Joan, walked hand in hand across the grass and was manifest in their happiness. His love, it seemed to him, in that apocalyptic moment, was more than merely his; it was in some mysterious way the equivalent of this wind and sunshine, these white gleams against the green and blue of spring. His feeling for Joan was somehow implicit in the world, had a divine and universal significance. He loved her infinitely, and for that reason was able to love everything in the world as much as he loved her.

The memory of that experience was precious to him, all the more so now, since the quality of his feelings had undergone a change. Transparent and seemingly pure as spring water, that infinite love of his had crystallized out, with the passage of time, into specific desires.

Et son bras et sa jambe, et sa cuisse et ses reins,
Polis comme de l'huile, onduleux comme un cygne,
Passaient devant mes yeux clairvoyants et sereins,
Et son ventre et ses seins, ces grappes de ma vigne.

Ever since Anthony had first made him read the poem, those lines had haunted his imagination; impersonally, at first; but later, they had come to associate themselves, definitely, with the image of Joan. Polis comme de l'huile, onduleux comme un cygne. There was no forgetting. The words had remained with him, indelibly, like a remorse, like the memory of a crime.

They entered the station and found that there were nearly five minutes to wait. The two young men walked slowly up and down the platform.

In an effort to lay the shameful phantom of those breasts, that oil-smooth belly, 'My m-mother likes her a l-lot,' Brian went on at last.

'That's very satisfactory,' said Anthony; but felt, even as he uttered the words, that he was rather overdoing the approval. If he fell in love, he most certainly wouldn't take the girl to be inspected by his father and Pauline. On approval! But it wasn't their business to approve — or disapprove, for that matter. Mrs Foxe was different, of course; one could take her more seriously than Pauline or his father. But, all the same, one wouldn't want even Mrs Foxe to interfere — indeed, he went on to reflect, would probably dislike the interference even more intensely than other people's, just because of that superiority. For the superiority constituted a kind of claim on one, gave her certain rights. One wouldn't be able so easily to ignore her opinion as one could ignore Pauline's, for example. He was very fond of Mrs Foxe, he respected and admired her; but for that very reason he felt her as potentially a menace to his freedom. For she might — indeed, if she knew it, she certainly would — object to his way of looking at things. And though her criticisms would be based on the principles of that liberal Christianity of hers, and though, of course, such modernism was just as preposterous and, in spite of its pretensions to being 'scientific', just as hopelessly beyond the pale of rationality as the most extravagant fetishism — nevertheless, her words, being hers, would carry weight, would have to be considered. Which was why he did his best not to place himself in the position of having to listen to them. It was more than a year now since he had accepted one of her invitations to come and stay with them in the country. Dis aliter visum. But he looked forward rather nervously to his impending encounter with her.

The train came roaring in; and there, a minute later, they all were, at the other end of the platform — Mr Beavis in a grey suit, and Pauline beside him, very large in mauve, her face apoplectically flushed

by the shadow of her mauve parasol, and behind them Mrs Foxe, straight and queenly, and a tall girl in a big flopping hat and a flowered dress.

Mr Beavis adopted for his greetings a humorously mock-heroic manner that Anthony found particularly irritating. 'Six precious souls,' he quoted, as he patted his son's shoulder, 'or rather only four precious souls, but all agog to dash through thick and thin. And what a hot dash — what a dashed hot dash!' he emended, twinklingly.

'Well, Anthony.' Mrs Foxe's voice was musically rich with affection. 'It's an age since I saw you.'

'Yes, an age.' He laughed rather uncomfortably, trying, as he did so, to remember those elaborate reasons he had given for not accepting her invitations. At all costs he mustn't contradict himself. Was it at Easter or at Christmas that the necessity of working at the British Museum had kept him in London? He felt a touch on his arm, and thankful for any excuse to break off the embarrassing conversation, turned quickly away.

'J-joan,' Brian was saying to the girl in the flowered dress, 'h-here's A-anthony.'

'Awfully glad,' he mumbled. 'Heard such a lot about you from . . .' Nice hair, he thought; and the hazel eyes were beautifully bright and eager. But the profile was too emphatic; and though the lips were well cut, the mouth was too wide. A bit dairymaidish, was his conclusion; and her clothes were really too home-made. He himself preferred something rather more urban.

'Well, lead on, Macduff,' said Mr Beavis.

They left the station, and slowly, on the shady side of the street, walked towards the centre of the town. Still merrily Gilpinesque, as though (and this particularly irritated Anthony) today's expedition were his first holiday jaunt for twenty years, Mr Beavis expatiated in waggish colloquialisms on the Oxford of his own undergraduate days. Mrs Foxe listened, smiled at the appropriate moments, asked pertinent questions. Pauline complained from time to time of the heat. Her face shone; and, walking in gloomy silence beside her, Anthony remarked with distaste the rather rank intensification of her natural odour. From behind him, he could hear snatches of the conversation between Brian and Joan. '. . . a great big hawk,' she was saying. Her speech was eager and rapid. 'It must have been a harrier.' 'D-did it have b-bars on its t-t-t . . . on its tail?' 'That's it. Dark bars on a light grey ground.' 'Th-then it was a f-female,' said Brian. 'Fe-females have b-bars on their tails.' Anthony smiled to himself sarcastically.

They were passing the Ashmolean, when a woman who was coming very slowly and as though disconsolately out of the museum suddenly waved her hand at them and, calling out first Mr Beavis's name and then, as they all turned round to look at her, Mrs Foxe's, came running down the steps towards them.

'Why, it's Mary Champernowne,' said Mrs Foxe. 'Mary Amberley, I should say.' Or perhaps, she reflected, should not say, now that the Amberleys were divorced.

The name, the familiar face, evoked in Mr Beavis's mind only a pleasant sensation of surprised recognition. Raising his hat with a self-consciously comic parody of an old-world flourish, 'Welcome,' he said to the new arrival. 'Welcome, dear lady.'

Mary Amberley took Mrs Foxe's hand. 'Such luck,' she exclaimed breathlessly. Mrs Foxe was surprised by so much cordiality. Mary's mother was her friend; but Mary had always held aloof. And anyhow, since her marriage she had moved in a world that Mrs Foxe did not know, and of which, on principle, she disapproved. 'Such marvellous luck!' the other repeated as she turned to Mr Beavis.

'The luck is ours,' he said gallantly. 'You know my wife, don't you? And the young stalwart?' His eyes twinkled; the corners of his mouth, under the moustache, humorously twitched. He laid a hand on Anthony's arm. 'The young foundation-worthy?'

She smiled at Anthony. A strange smile, he noticed; a crooked smile of unparted lips that seemed as though secretly significant. 'I haven't seen you for years,' she said. 'Not since . . .' Not since the first Mrs Beavis's funeral, as a matter of fact. But one could hardly say so. 'Not since you were so high!' And lifting a gloved hand to the level of her eye, she measured, between the thumb and forefinger, a space of about an inch.

Anthony laughed nervously, intimidated, even while he admired, by so much prettiness and ease and smartness.

Mrs Amberley shook hands with Joan and Brian; then turning back to Mrs Foxe, 'I was feeling like Robinson Crusoe,' she said, explaining that abnormal cordiality. 'Marooned.' She lingered with a comical insistence over the long syllable. 'Absolutely marooned. Monarch of all I surveyed.' And while they slowly walked on across St Giles's, she launched out into a complicated story about a stay in the Cotswolds; about an appointment to meet some friends on the way home, at Oxford, on the eighteenth; about her journey from Chipping Campden; about her punctual arrival at the meeting-place, her waiting, her growing impatience, her rage, and finally her discovery that she had come a day too early: it was the seventeenth. 'Too typical of me.'

Everybody laughed a great deal. For the story was full of unexpected fantasies and extravagances; and it was told in a voice that modulated itself with an extraordinary subtlety to fit the words — a voice that knew when to hurry breathlessly and when to drawl, when to fade out into an inaudibility rich with unspoken implications.

Even Mrs Foxe, who didn't particularly want to be amused — because of that divorce — found herself unable to resist the story.

For Mary Amberley, their laughter was like champagne; it warmed her, it sent a tingling exhilaration through her body. They were bores, of course; they were philistines. But the applause even of bores and philistines is still applause and intoxicating; Her eyes shone, her cheeks flushed. 'Too hopelessly typical of me!' she wailed, when their laughter had subsided; but the gesture of despairing self-disparagement was a caricature; she was really proud of her incompetence, regarded it as part of her feminine charm. 'Well, anyhow,' she concluded, 'there I was — shipwrecked. All alone on a desert island.'

They walked for a moment in silence. The thought that she would have to be asked to lunch was in all their minds — a thought tinged in Mrs Foxe's case with vexation, in Anthony's with embarrassed desire. The lunch was being given in his rooms; as the host, he ought to ask her. And he wanted to ask her — violently wanted it. But what would the others say? Oughtn't he somehow to consult them first? Mr Beavis solved the problem for him by making the suggestion on his own account.

'I think' — he hesitated; then, twinkling, 'I think our festal "spread",' he went on, 'will run to another guest, won't it, Anthony?'

'But I can't impose myself,' she protested, turning from the father to the son. He seemed a nice boy, she thought, sensitive and intelligent. Pleasant-looking too.

'But I assure you . . .' Anthony was earnestly and incoherently repeating, 'I assure you . . .'

'Well, if it's really all right . . .' She thanked him with a smile of sudden intimacy, almost of complicity — as though there were some bond between them, as though, of all the party, they two were the only ones who understood what was what.

After lunch, Joan had to be shown the sights of Oxford; and Mr Beavis had an appointment with a philological colleague in the Woodstock Road; and Pauline thought she would like to take things quietly till tea-time. Anthony was left to entertain Mary Amberley. The responsibility was deliciously alarming.

In the hansom that was taking them to Magdalen Bridge Mrs Amberley turned to him a face that was bright with sudden mischief.

'Free at last,' she said.

Anthony nodded at her and smiled back, understandingly, conspiratorially. 'They were rather heavy,' he said. 'Perhaps I ought to apologize.'

'I've often thought of founding a league for the abolition of families,' she went on. 'Parents ought never to be allowed to come near their children.'

'Plato thought so too,' he said, rather pedantically.

'Yes, but he wanted children to be bullied by the state instead of by their fathers and mothers. I don't want them to be bullied by anyone.'

He ventured a personal question. 'Were you bullied?' he asked.

Mary Amberley nodded. 'Horribly. Few children have been more loved than I was. They fairly bludgeoned me with affection. Made me a mental cripple. It took me years to get over the deformity.' There was a silence. Then, looking at him with an embarrassingly appraising glance, as though he were for sale, 'Do you know,' she said, 'the last time I saw you was at your mother's funeral.'

The subterranean association between this remark and what had gone before made him blush guiltily, as though at an impropriety in mixed company. 'Yes, I remember,' he mumbled, and was annoyed with himself for feeling so embarrassed, was at the same time rather ashamed that he had allowed even this remotely implied comment upon his mother to pass without some kind of protest, that he had felt so little desire to make a protest.

'You were a horrible, squalid little boy then,' she went on, still looking at him judicially. 'How awful little boys always are! It seems incredible that they should ever turn into presentable human beings. And of course,' she added, 'a great many of them don't. Dismal, don't you find? — the way most people are so hideous and stupid, so utterly and abysmally boring!'

Making a violent effort of will, Anthony emerged from his embarrassment with a creditable dash. 'I hope I'm not one of the majority?' he said, lifting his eyes to hers.

Mrs Amberley shook her head, and with a serious matter-of-factness. 'No,' she answered. 'I was thinking how successfully you'd escaped from the horrors of boyhood.'

He blushed again, this time with pleasure.

'Let's see, how old are you now?' she asked.

'Twenty — nearly twenty-one.'

'And I shall be thirty this winter. Queer,' she added, 'how these things change their significance. When I saw you last, those nine years were a great gulf between us. Uncrossable, it seemed then. We belonged to different species. And yet here we are, sitting on the same side of the gulf as though it were the most natural thing in the world. Which indeed it is, now.' She turned and smiled at him that secret and significant smile of unparted lips. Her dark eyes were full of dancing brightness. 'Ah, there's Magdalen,' she went on, leaving him (to his great relief; for in his excited embarrassment he would not have known what to say) no time to comment on her words. 'How dreary that late Gothic can be! So mean! No wonder Gibbon didn't think much of the Middle Ages!' She was suddenly silent, remembering the occasion when her husband had made that remark about Gibbon. Only a month or two after their marriage. She had been shocked and astonished by his airy criticisms of things she had been brought up to regard as sacredly beyond judgement — shocked, but also thrilled, also delighted. For what fun to see the sacred things knocked about! And in those days Roger was still adorable. She sighed; then, with a touch of irritation, shook off the sentimental mood and went on talking about that odious architecture.

The cab drew up at the bridge; they dismounted and walked down to the boat-house. Lying back on the cushions of the punt, Mary Amberley was silent. Very slowly, Anthony poled his way upstream. The green world slid past her half-shut eyes. Green darkness of trees overarching the olive shadows and tawny-glaucous lights of water; and between the twilight stretches of green vaulting, the wide gold-green meadows, islanded with elms. And always the faint weedy smell of the river; and the air so soft and warm against the face that one was hardly aware any longer of the frontiers between self and not-self, but lay there, separated by no dividing surfaces, melting, drowsily melting into the circumambient summer.

Standing at the stern, Anthony could look down on her, as from a post of vantage. She lay there at his feet, limp and abandoned. Handling his long pole with an easy mastery of which he was proud, he felt, as he watched her, exultantly strong and superior. There was no gulf between them now. She was a woman, he a man. He lifted his trailing punt pole and swung it forward with a movement of easy grace, of unhurried and accomplished power. Thrust it down into the mud, tightened his muscles against its resistance; the punt shot forward, the end of the pole lifted from the river-bed, trailed for a moment, then gracefully, once more, easily, masterfully was swung forward. Suddenly she lifted her eyelids and looked at him, with that detached appraising look that had embarrassed him so much in the cab. His manly confidence evaporated at once.

‘My poor Anthony,’ she said at last, and her face came closer, as it were, in a sudden smile. ‘It makes me hot even to look at you.’

When the punt had been secured, he came forward and sat down in the place she made, drawing her skirts away, on the cushion beside her.

‘I don’t suppose your father bullies you much,’ she said, returning to the theme of their conversation in the cab.

He shook his head.

‘Nor blackmails you with too much affection, I imagine.’

Anthony found himself feeling unexpectedly loyal to his father. ‘I think he was always very fond of me.’

‘Oh, of course,’ said Mrs Amberley, impatiently. ‘I didn’t imagine he knocked you about.’

Anthony could not help laughing. The vision of his father running after him with a club was irresistibly comic. Then, more seriously, ‘He never got near enough to knock me about,’ he said. ‘There was always a great gulf fixed.’

‘Yes, one feels he has a talent for fixing gulfs. And yet your step-mother seems to get on with him all right. So did your mother, I believe.’ She shook her head. ‘But, then, marriage is so odd and unaccountable. The most obviously incompatible couples stick together, and the most obviously compatible fly apart. Boring, tiresome people are adored, and charming ones are hated. Why? God knows. But I suppose it’s generally a matter of what Milton calls the Genial Bed.’ She lingered, ludicrously, over the first syllable of ‘genial’; but Anthony was so anxious not to seem startled by the casual mention of what he had always regarded as, in a lady’s presence, the unmentionable, that he did not laugh — for a laugh might have been interpreted as a schoolboy’s automatic reaction to smut — did not even smile; but gravely, as though he were admitting the truth of a proposition in geometry, nodded his head and in a very serious and judicial tone said, ‘Yes, I suppose it generally is.’

‘Poor Mrs Foxe,’ Mary Amberley went on. ‘I imagine there was a minimum of geniality there.’

‘Did you know her husband?’ he asked.

‘Only as a child. One grown-up seems as boring as another then. But my mother’s often talked to me about him. Thoroughly beastly. And thoroughly virtuous. God preserve me from a virtuous beast! The vicious ones are bad enough; but at least they’re never beastly on principle. They’re inconsistent: so they’re sometimes nice by mistake. Whereas the virtuous ones — they never forget; they’re beastly all the time. Poor woman! She had a dog’s life, I’m afraid. But she seems to be getting it back on her son all right.’

‘But she adores Brian,’ he protested. ‘And Brian adores her.’

‘That’s exactly what I was saying. All the love she never got from her husband, all the love she never gave him — it’s being poured out on that miserable boy.’

‘He isn’t miserable.’

‘He may not know it, perhaps. Not yet. But you wait!’ Then, after a little pause, ‘You’re lucky,’ Mrs Amberley went on. ‘A great deal luckier than you know.’

Chapter Seventeen. May 26th 1934

LITERATURE FOR PEACE — of what kind? One can concentrate on economics: trade barriers, disorganized currency, impediments in the way of migration, private interests bent on making profits at all costs. And so on. One can concentrate on politics: danger of the concept of the sovereign state, as a wholly immoral being having interests irreconcilable with those of other sovereign states. One can propose political and economic remedies — trade agreements, international arbitration, collective security. Sensible prescriptions following sound diagnosis. But has the diagnosis gone far enough, and will the patient follow the treatment prescribed?

This question came up in the course of today's discussion with Miller. Answer in the negative. The patient can't follow the treatment prescribed, for a good reason: there is no patient. States and Nations don't exist as such. There are only people. Sets of people living in certain areas, having certain allegiances. Nations won't change their national policies unless and until people change their private policies. All governments, even Hitler's, even Stalin's, even Mussolini's, are representative. Today's national behaviour — a large-scale projection of today's individual behaviour. Or rather, to be more accurate, a large-scale projection of the individual's secret wishes and intentions. For we should all like to behave a good deal worse than our conscience and respect for public opinion allow. One of the great attractions of patriotism — it fulfils our worst wishes. In the person of our nation we are able, vicariously, to bully and cheat. Bully and cheat, what's more, with a feeling that we're profoundly virtuous. Sweet and decorous to murder, lie, torture for the sake of the fatherland. Good international policies are projections of individual good intentions and benevolent wishes, and must be of the same kind as good inter-personal policies. Pacifist propaganda must be aimed at people as well as their governments; must start simultaneously at the periphery and the centre.

Empirical facts:

One. We are all capable of love for other human beings.

Two. We impose limitations on that love.

Three. We can transcend all these limitations — if we choose to. (It is a matter of observation that anyone who so desires can overcome personal dislike, class feeling, national hatred, colour prejudice. Not easy; but it can be done, if we have the will and know how to carry out our good intentions.)

Four. Love expressing itself in good treatment breeds love. Hate expressing itself in bad treatment breeds hate.

In the light of these facts, it's obvious what inter-personal, interclass and international policies should be. But, again, knowledge cuts little ice. We all know; we almost all fail to do. It is a question, as usual, of the best methods of implementing intentions. Among other things, peace propaganda must be a set of instructions in the art of modifying character.

I see

The lost are like this, and their scourge to be,

As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse.

Hell is the incapacity to be other than the creature one finds oneself ordinarily behaving as.

On the way home from Miller's, dived into the public lavatory at Marble Arch, and there ran into Beppo Bowles deep in conversation with one of those flannel-trousered, hatless young men who look like undergraduates and are, I suppose, very junior clerks or shop assistants. On B.'s face, what a mingling of elation and anxiety. Happy, drunk with thrilling anticipation, and at the same time horribly anxious and afraid. He might be turned down — unspeakable humiliation! He might not be turned down — appalling dangers! Frustration of desire, if there was failure, cruel blow to pride, wound to the very root of personality. And, if success, fear (through all the triumph) of blackmail and police court. Poor wretch! He was horribly embarrassed at the sight of me. I just nodded and hurried past. B.'s hell — an underground lavatory with rows of urinals stretching to infinity in all directions and a boy at each. Beppo walking up and down the rows, for ever — his sweating self, but worse.

Chapter Eighteen. December 8th 1926

MORE GUESTS KEPT arriving — young people mostly, friends of Joyce and Helen. Dutifully, they crossed the drawing-room to the far corner where Mrs Amberley was sitting between Beppo Bowles and Anthony, said good evening, then hurried off to dance.

'They put one in one's middle-aged place all right,' said Anthony, but either Mrs Amberley preferred not to hear the remark, or else she was genuinely absorbed in what Beppo was saying with such loud

and fizzling enthusiasm about Berlin — the most amusing place in Europe nowadays! Where else would you find, for example, those special tarts for masochists? In top-boots; yes, genuine top-boots! And the Museum of Sexology: such photographs and wax models — almost too *trompe-l'œil* — such astounding objects in horn from Japan, such strange and ingenious tailoring for exhibitionists! And all those delicious little Lesbian bars, all those cabarets where the boys were dressed up as women . . .

'There's Mark Staithes,' said Mrs Amberley, interrupting him, and waved to a shortish, broad-shouldered man who had just entered the drawing-room. 'I forget,' she said, turning to Anthony, 'whether you know him.'

'Only for the last thirty years,' he answered, finding once again a certain malicious pleasure in insisting, to the point of exaggeration, on his vanished youth. If he were no longer young, then Mary had ceased to be young nine years ago.

'But with long gaps,' he qualified. 'During the war and then afterwards, for all that time he was in Mexico. And I've hardly had more than a glimpse of him since he came back. I'm delighted to have this chance . . .'

'He's a queer fish,' said Mary Amberley, thinking of the time, just after his return from Mexico, some eighteen months before, when he had first come to her house. His appearance, his manner, as of some savage and fanatical hermit, had violently attracted her. She had tried all her seductions upon him — without the smallest effect. He had ignored them — but so completely and absolutely that she felt no ill-will towards him for the rebuff, convinced, as she was, that in fact there hadn't been any rebuff, merely a display of symptoms, either, she diagnosed judicially, of impotence, or else, less probably (though of course one never knew, one never knew), of homosexuality. 'A queer fish,' she repeated, and decided that she'd take the next opportunity of asking Beppo about the homosexuality. He would be sure to know. They always did know about one another. Then, waving again, 'Come and sit with us, Mark,' she called through the noise of the gramophone.

Staithes crossed the room, drew up a chair and sat down. His hair had retreated from his forehead, and above the ears was already grey. The brown face — that fanatical hermit's face which Mary Amberley had found so strangely attractive — was deeply lined. No smooth obliterating layer of fat obscured its inner structure. Under the skin each strip of muscle in the cheek and jaw seemed to stand out distinct and separate like the muscles in those lime-wood statues of flayed human beings that were made for Renaissance anatomy rooms. When he smiled — and each time that happened it was as though the flayed statue had come to life and were expressing its agony — one could follow the whole mechanism of the excruciating grimace; the upward and outward pull of the *zygomaticus major*, the sideways tug of the *risorius*, the contraction of the great sphincters round the eyelids.

'Am I interrupting?' he asked, looking with sharp, inquisitorial movements from one to the other.

'Beppo was telling us about Berlin,' said Mrs Amberley.

'I popped over to get away from the General Strike,' Beppo explained.

'Naturally,' said Staithes, and his face twitched in the anguish of amused contempt.

'Such a heavenly place!' Beppo exploded irrepressibly.

'You feel like Lord Haldane about it? Your spiritual home?'

'Carnal,' Anthony amended.

Only too happy to plead guilty, Beppo giggled. 'Yes, those transvestists!' he had to admit rapturously.

'I was over there this winter,' said Staithes. 'On business. But of course one has to pay one's tribute to pleasure too. That night life . . .'

'Didn't you find it amusing?'

'Oh, passionately.'

'You see!' Beppo was triumphant.

'One of the creatures came and sat at my table,' Staithes went on. 'I danced with it. It looked like a woman.'

'You simply can't tell them apart,' Beppo cried excitedly, as though he were taking personal credit for the fact.

‘When we’d finished dancing, it painted its face a bit and we drank a little beer. Then it showed me some indecent photographs. That rather surgical, anti-aphrodisiac kind — you know. Damping. Perhaps that was why the conversation flagged. Anyhow, there were uncomfortable silences. Neither it nor I seemed to know what to say next. We were becalmed.’ He threw out his two thin and knotted hands horizontally, as though sliding them across an absolutely flat surface. ‘Utterly becalmed. Until, suddenly, the creature did a most remarkable thing. One of its regular gambits, no doubt; but never having had it played on me before, I was impressed. ‘Would you like to see something?’ it said. I said yes, and immediately it began to poke and pull at something under its blouse. ‘Now, look!’ it said at last. I looked. It smiled triumphantly, like a man playing the ace of trumps — or rather playing two aces of trumps; for what it plunked down on the table was a pair. A pair of superb artificial breasts, made of pink rubber sponge.’

‘But how revolting!’ cried Mrs Amberley, while Anthony laughed and Beppo’s round face took on an expression of pained distress. ‘How revolting!’ she repeated.

‘Yes, but how satisfactory!’ Staithes insisted, making that crooked and agonized grimace that passed with him for a smile. ‘It’s so good when things happen as they ought to happen — artistically, symbolically. Two rubber breasts between the beer mugs — that’s what vice ought to be. And when that was what it actually was — well, it felt as though something had clicked into place. Inevitably, beautifully. Yes, beautifully,’ he repeated. ‘Beautifully revolting.’

‘All the same,’ Beppo insisted, ‘you must admit there’s a lot to be said for a town where that sort of thing can happen. In public,’ he added earnestly, ‘in public, mind you. It’s the most tolerant in the world, the German Government. You’ve got to admit that.’

‘Oh, I do,’ said Staithes. ‘It tolerates everybody. Not only girls in boiled shirts and boys with rubber breasts, but also monarchists, fascists, Junkers, Krupps. Communists too, I’m thankful to say. All its enemies of every colour.’

‘I think that’s rather fine,’ said Mrs Amberley.

‘Very fine indeed, until its enemies rise up and destroy it. I only hope the communists will get in first.’

‘But seeing that they’re tolerated, why should its enemies want to destroy it?’

‘Why not? They don’t believe in tolerance. Quite rightly,’ he added.

‘You’re barbarous,’ Beppo protested.

‘As one should be if one lives in the Dark Ages. You people — you’re survivors from the Age of the Antonines.’ He looked from one to the other, smiling his flayed smile, and shook his head. ‘Imagining you’re still in the first volume of Gibbon. Whereas we’re well on in the third.’

‘Do you mean to say . . . ? But, good heavens,’ Mrs Amberley interrupted herself, ‘there’s Gerry!’

At her words, at the sight of Gerry Watchett himself, fox-trotting in from the back drawing-room with Helen, Anthony took out his pocket-book and quickly examined its contents. ‘Thank God!’ he said. ‘Only two pounds.’ Gerry had caught him with ten the previous month and, on the strength of a most improbably distressing story, borrowed them all. He ought to have disbelieved the story, of course, ought to have withheld the loan. Ten pounds were more than he could afford. He had said so, but had lacked the firmness to persist in his refusal. It had taken more than a fortnight of strict economy to make up that lost money. Economizing was an unpleasant process; but to say no and to go on saying it in the teeth of Gerry’s importunities and reproaches would have been still more unpleasant. He was always ready to sacrifice his rights to his conveniences. People thought him disinterested, and he would have liked, he did his best, to accept their diagnosis of his character. But awareness of the real state of affairs kept breaking through. When it did, he accepted self-knowledge with a laugh. He was laughing now. ‘Only two,’ he repeated. ‘Lucky I can afford . . .’

He broke off. Behind Mary’s back, Beppo had tapped him on the shoulder, was making significant grimaces. Anthony turned and saw that she was still staring intently and with knitted brows at the new arrivals.

‘He told me he wasn’t coming this evening,’ she said, almost as though she were speaking to herself. Then, through the music, ‘Gerry!’ she called sharply in a voice that had suddenly lost all its charm — a voice that reminded Anthony only too plainly of those distasteful scenes in which, long since, he had played his part. So that was it, he said to himself, and felt sorry for poor Mary.

Gerry Watchett turned, and with the expression of one who refers to some excellent shared joke gave her a quick smile and even a hint of a wink, then looked down again to go on talking to his partner.

Mrs Amberley flushed with sudden anger. Grinning at her like that! It was intolerable. Intolerable too — but how typical! — to appear like this, unannounced, out of the blue — casually dancing with another woman, as though it were the most natural thing in the world. This time, it was true, the other woman was only Helen; but that was merely because he hadn’t found anyone else to dance with, anyone worse. ‘The beast!’ she thought, as she followed him round the room with her eyes. Then, making an effort, she looked away, she forced herself to pay attention to what was going on around her.

‘. . . a country like this,’ Mark Staithes was saying, ‘a country where a quarter of the population’s genuinely bourgeois and another quarter passionately longs to be.’

‘You’re exaggerating,’ Anthony protested.

‘Not a bit. What does the Labour Party poll at an election? A third of the votes. I’m generously assuming it might some day poll half of them. The rest’s bourgeois. Either naturally bourgeois by interest and fear, or else artificially, by snobbery and imagination. It’s childish to think you can get what you want by constitutional methods.’

‘And what about unconstitutional ones?’

‘There’s a chance.’

‘Not much of a chance,’ said Anthony. ‘Not against the new weapons.’

‘Oh, I know,’ said Mark Staithes, ‘I know. If they use their strength, the middle classes can obviously win. They could win, most likely, even without tanks and planes — just because they’re potentially better soldiers than the proletariat.’

‘Better soldiers?’ Beppo protested, thinking of those guardsmen friends of his.

‘Because of their education. A bourgeois gets anything from ten to sixteen years of training — most of it, what’s more, in a boarding school; that’s to say, in barracks. Whereas a workman’s child lives at home and doesn’t get more than six or seven years at his day school. Sixteen years of obedience and esprit de corps. No wonder that Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton. If they’ll use only half their resources — use them ruthlessly — the game’s theirs.’

‘You think they won’t use their resources?’

Mark shrugged his shoulders. ‘Certainly the German republicans don’t seem ready to use theirs. And think of what happened here, during the Strike. Even the majority of industrialists were ready to compromise.’

‘For the simple reason,’ Anthony put in, ‘that you can’t be a successful industrialist unless you have the compromising habit. A business isn’t run by faith; it’s run by haggling.’

‘Anyhow,’ Mark went on, ‘the fact remains that the available resources weren’t used. That’s what allows one to hope that a revolution might succeed. Provided it were carried out very quickly. For, of course, once they realized they were seriously in danger, they’d forget their scruples. But they might hesitate long enough, I think, to make a revolution possible. Even a few hours of compunction would be sufficient. Yes, in spite of tanks, there’s still a chance of success. But you must be prepared to take a chance. Not like the imbeciles of the T.U.C. Or the rank and file of the Unions, for that matter. As full of scruples as the bourgeoisie. It’s the hang-over of evangelical Christianity. You’ve no idea what a lot of preaching and hymn-singing there was during the General Strike. I was flabbergasted. But it’s good to know the worst. Perhaps the younger generation . . .’ He shook his head. ‘But I don’t feel certain even of them. Methodism may be decaying. But look at those spiritualist chapels that are sprouting up all over the industrial areas! Like toadstools.’

* * *

The next time he passed, Gerry called her name; but Mary Amberley refused to acknowledge his greeting. Turning coldly away she pretended to be interested only in what Anthony was saying.

'Ass of a woman!' thought Gerry, as he looked at her averted face. Then, aloud, 'What do you say to putting on this record another time?' he asked his partner.

Helen nodded ecstatically.

The music of the spheres, the beatific vision . . . But why should heaven be a monopoly of ear or eye? The muscles as they move, they too have their paradise. Heaven is not only an illumination and a harmony; it is also a dance.

'Half a tick,' said Gerry, when they were opposite the gramophone.

Helen stood there as he wound up the machine, quite still, her arms hanging limp at her sides. Her eyes were closed; she was shutting the world away from her, shutting herself out of existence. In this still vacancy between two heavens of motion, existence was without a point.

The music stopped for a moment; then began again in the middle of a bar. Behind her closed eyelids, she was aware that Gerry had moved, was standing over her, very near; then his arm encircled her body.

'Onward, Christian soldiers!' he said; and they stepped out once more into the music, into the heaven of harmoniously moving muscles.

* * *

There had been a silence. Determined not to pay any attention to that beast, Mrs Amberley turned to Staithes. 'And those scents of yours?' she asked with an assumption of bright, amused interest.

'Flourishing,' he answered. 'I've had to order three new stills and take on more labour.'

Mrs Amberley smiled at him and shook her head. 'You of all people!' she said. 'It seems peculiarly ridiculous that you should be a scent-manufacturer.'

'Why?'

'The most unfrivolous of men,' she went on, 'the least gallant, the most implacable misogynist!' (Either impotent or homosexual — there couldn't be a doubt; and, after his story about Berlin, almost certainly impotent, she thought.)

With a smile of excruciated mockery, 'But hasn't it occurred to you,' Staithes asked, 'that those might be reasons for being a scent-maker?'

'Reasons?'

'A way of expressing one's lack of gallantry.' In point of fact, it was entirely by chance that he had gone into the scent business. His eye had been caught by an advertisement in *The Times*, a small factory for sale very cheap. . . . Just luck. But now, after the event, it heightened his self-esteem to say that he had chosen the profession deliberately, in order to express his contempt for the women for whom he catered. The lie, which he had willed and by this time half believed to be the truth, placed him in a position of superiority to all women in general and, at this moment, to Mary Amberley in particular. Leaning forward, he took Mary's hand, raised it as though he were about to kiss it, but, instead, only sniffed at the skin — then let it fall again. 'For example,' he said, 'there's civet in the stuff you've scented yourself with.'

'Well, why not?'

'Oh, no reason at all,' said Staithes, 'no reason at all, if you happen to have a taste for the excrement of polecats.'

Mrs Amberley made a grimace of disgust.

'In Abyssinia,' he went on, 'they have civet farms. Twice a week, you take a stick and go and poke the cats until they're thoroughly angry and frightened. That's when they secrete their stuff. Like children wetting their knickers when they're afraid. Then you catch them with a pair of tongs, so that they can't bite, and scrape out the contents of the little pouch attached to their genital organs. You do it with an egg-spoon and the stuff's a kind of yellow grease, rather like ear-wax. Stinks like hell when it's undiluted. We get it in London packed in buffalo horns. Huge cornucopias full of dark brown stinking ear-wax. At a hundred and seventeen shillings the ounce, what's more. That's one of the reasons why

your scent costs you so much. The poor can't afford to smear themselves with cat's mess. They have to be content with plain iso-eugenol and phenyl acetic aldehyde.'

* * *

Colin and Joyce had stopped dancing and were sitting on the landing outside the drawing-room door. Alone. It was Colin's opportunity for releasing some of the righteous indignation that had been accumulating within him, ever since dinner-time.

'I must say, Joyce,' he began, 'some of your mother's guests . . .'

Joyce looked at him with eyes in which there was anxiety as well as adoration. 'Yes, I know,' she apologized. 'I know,' and was abjectly in a hurry to agree with him about Beppo's degeneracy and Anthony Beavis's cynicism. Then, seeing that he was enjoying his indignation and that she herself rather profited than suffered by it, she even volunteered the information that that man who had come in last and was sitting with her mother was a Bolshevik. Yes, Mark Staithes was a Bolshevik.

The phrase that Colin had been meditating all the evening found utterance. 'I may be stupid and all that,' he said with an assumption of humility that cloaked an overweening self-satisfaction in what he regarded as the quite extraordinary quality of his ordinariness; 'I may be ignorant and badly educated; but at least' (his tone changed, he was proudly giving expression to his consciousness of being uniquely average), 'at least I know — well, I do know what's done. I mean, if one's a gentleman.' He underlined the words to make them sound slightly comic and so prove that he had a sense of humour. To speak seriously of what one took seriously — this, precisely, was one of the things that wasn't done. That touch of humour proved more cogently than any emphasis could do, any emotional trembling of the voice, that he did take these things seriously — as a uniquely average gentleman must take them. And of course Joyce understood that he did. She glanced at him worshippingly and pressed his hand.

* * *

Dancing, dancing . . . Oh, if only, thought Helen, one could go on dancing for ever! If only one didn't have to spend all that time doing other things! Wrong things, mostly, stupid things, things one was sorry for after they were done. Dancing, she lost her life in order to save it; lost her identity and became something greater than herself; lost perplexities and self-hatreds in a bright harmonious certitude; lost her bad character and was made perfect; lost the regretted past, the apprehended future, and gained a timeless present of consummate happiness. She who could not paint, could not write, could not even sing in tune, became while she danced an artist; no, more than an artist; became a god, the creator of a new heaven and a new earth, a creator rejoicing in his creation and finding it good.

'"Yes, sir, she's my baby. No, sir . . ."' Gerry broke off his humming. 'I won sixty pounds at poker last night,' he said. 'Pretty good, eh?'

She smiled up at him and nodded in a rapturous silence. Good, good — everything was wonderfully good.

* * *

'And I can't tell you,' Staithes was saying, 'how intensely I enjoy those advertisements.' The muscles in his face were working as though for an anatomical demonstration. 'The ones about bad breath and body odours.'

'Hideous!' Mrs Amberley shuddered. 'Hideous! There's only one Victorian convention I appreciate, and that's the convention of not speaking about those things.'

'Which is precisely why it's such fun to speak about them,' said Staithes, beaming at her between contracted sphincters. 'Forcing humans to be fully, verbally conscious of their own and other people's disgustingness. That's the beauty of this kind of advertising. It shakes them into awareness.'

'And into buying,' put in Anthony. 'You're forgetting the profits.'

Staithes shrugged his shoulders. 'They're incidental,' he said; and it was obvious, Anthony reflected, as he watched him, it was obvious that the man was telling the truth. For him, the profits were incidental. Breaking down your protective convention,' he went on, turning again to Mary, 'that's the real fun. Leaving you defenceless against the full consciousness of the fact that you can't do without your fellow humans, and that, when you're with them, they make you sick.'

Chapter Nineteen. July 7th 1912

MRS FOXE WAS looking through her engagement book. The succession of committee meetings, of district visitings, of afternoons at the cripples' playroom, darkened the pages. And in between whiles there would be calls, and tea at the vicarage and luncheon-parties in London. And yet (she knew it in advance) the total effect of the coming summer would be one of emptiness. However tightly crammed with activity, time always seemed strangely empty when Brian was away. In other years there had been a wedge of well-filled time each summer. But this July, after only a week or two at home, Brian was going to Germany. To learn the language. It was essential. She knew that he had to go; she earnestly wanted him to go. All the same, when the moment actually came for his departure, it was painful. She wished she could be frankly selfish and keep him at home.

'This time tomorrow,' she said, when Brian came into the room, 'you'll be driving across London to Liverpool Street.'

He nodded without speaking and, laying a hand on her shoulder, bent down and kissed her.

Mrs Foxe looked up at him and smiled. Then, forgetting for a moment that she had vowed not to say anything to him about her feelings, 'It'll be a sadly empty summer, I'm afraid,' she said; and immediately reproached herself for having brought that expression of distress to his face; reproached herself even while, with a part of her being, she rejoiced to find him so responsibly loving, so sensitively concerned with her feelings. 'Unless you fill it with your letters,' she added by way of qualification. 'You will write, won't you?'

'Of c-c-c . . . N-naturally, I'll wr-write.'

Mrs Foxe proposed a walk; or what about a little drive in the dogcart? Embarrassed, Brian looked at his watch.

'But I'm l-lunching with the Th-Thursleys,' he answered uncomfortably. 'There w-wouldn't be much t-t-t . . . much leisure' (how he hated these ridiculous circumlocutions!) 'for a drive.'

'But how silly of me!' cried Mrs Foxe. 'I'd quite forgotten your lunch.' It was true that she had forgotten; and this sudden, fresh realization that for long hours, on this last day, she would have to do without him was like a wound. She made an effort to prevent any sign of the pain she felt from appearing on her face or sounding in her voice. 'But there'll be time at least for a stroll in the garden, won't there?'

They walked out through the French window and down the long green alley between the herbaceous borders. It was a sunless day, but warm, almost sultry. Under the grey sky the flowers took on a brilliance that seemed somehow almost unnatural. Still silent, they turned at the end of the alley and walked back again.

'I'm glad it's Joan,' said Mrs Foxe at last; 'and I'm glad you care so much. Though in a way it's a pity you met her when you did. Because, I'm afraid, it'll be such a weary long time before you'll be able to get married.'

Brian nodded without speaking.

'It'll be a testing time,' she went on. 'Difficult; not altogether happy perhaps. All the same' (and her voice vibrated movingly), 'I'm glad it happened, I'm glad,' she repeated. 'Because I believe in love.' She believed in it, as the poor believe in a heaven of posthumous comfort and glory, because she had never known it. She had respected her husband, admired him for his achievements, had liked him for what was likeable in him, and, maternally, had pitied him for his weaknesses. But there had been no transfiguring passion, and his carnal approach had always remained for her an outrage, hardly supportable. She had never loved him. That was why her belief in love's reality was so strong. Love had to exist in order that the unfavourable balance of her own personal experience might be at least vicariously redressed. Besides, there were the attestations of the poets; it did exist and was wonderful, holy, a revelation. 'It's a kind of special grace,' she went on, 'sent by God to help us, to make us stronger and better, to deliver us from evil. Saying no to the worst is easy when one has said yes to the best.'

Easy, Brian was thinking in the ensuing silence, even when one hasn't said yes to the best. The woman who had come and sat at their table in the Café-Concert, when Anthony and he were learning French at Grenoble, two years before — it hadn't been difficult to resist that temptation.

'Tu as l'air bien vicieux,' she had said to him in the first entr'acte; and to Anthony, 'Il doit être terrible avec les femmes, hein?' Then she had suggested that they should come home with her. 'Tous les deux, j'ai une petite amie. Nous nous amuserons bien gentiment. On vous fera voir des choses drôles. Toi qui es si vicieux — ça t'amusera.'

No, that certainly hadn't been difficult to resist, even though he had never set eyes on Joan at the time. The real temptations were not the worst, but the best. At Grenoble, it had been the best in literature. Et son ventre, et ses seins, ces grappes de ma vigne. . . . Elle se coula à mon côté, m'appela des noms les plus tendres et des noms les plus effroyablement grossiers, qui glissaient sur ses lèvres en suaves murmures. Puis elle se tût et commença à me donner ces baisers qu'elle savait. . . . The creations of the best stylists had proved to be far more dangerously attractive, far less easily resistible than the sordid realities of the Café-Concert. And now that he had said yes to the best possible reality, the appeal of the worst was even less effective, had ceased altogether to be anything remotely resembling a temptation. Such temptation as there was came once more from the best. It had been impossible to desire the low, vulgar, half-animal creature of the Café-Concert. But Joan was beautiful, Joan was refined, Joan shared his interests — and precisely for those reasons was desirable. Just because she was the best (and this for him was the paradox that it was so painful and bewildering to live through), he desired her in the wrong way, physically. . . .

'Do you remember those lines of Meredith's?' said Mrs Foxe, breaking the silence. Meredith was one of her favourite authors. 'From the Woods,' she specified, affectionately abbreviating the title of the poem almost to a nickname. And she quoted:

'Love, the great volcano, flings

Fires of lower earth to sky.

Love's a kind of philosopher's stone,' she went on. 'Not only does it deliver us; it also transforms. Dross into gold. Earth into heaven.'

Brian nodded affirmatively. And yet, he was thinking, those voluptuous and faceless bodies created by the stylists had actually come to assume Joan's features. In spite of love, or just because of it, the succubi now had a name, a personality.

The stable clock struck twelve; and at the first stroke there was a noiseless explosion of doves, like snowflakes whirling up against the clotted darkness of the elms beyond.

'The beauty of it!' said Mrs Foxe with a kind of muted intensity.

But suppose, it suddenly occurred to Brian, suppose she were suddenly left with no money at all? And if Joan were as poor as that wretched woman at Grenoble, as hopelessly without an alternative resource?

Slowly the last bell note expired, and one by one the whirling doves dropped back on to their turreted cote above the clock.

'Perhaps,' said Mrs Foxe, 'you ought to be starting if you're going to get there punctually.'

Brian knew how reluctant his mother was to let him go; and this display of generosity produced in him a sense of guilt and, along with it (since he did not want to feel guilty), a certain resentment. 'B-but I d-don't need an hour,' he said almost angrily, 'to c-cycle three m-miles.'

A moment later he was feeling ashamed of himself for the note of irritation in his voice, and for the rest of the time he was with her he showed himself more than ordinarily affectionate.

At half past twelve he took his bicycle and rode over to the Thursleys'. The maid opened the nineteenth-century Gothic front door and he stepped into a faint smell of steamed pudding flavoured with cabbage. As usual. The vicarage always smelt of steamed pudding and cabbage. It was a symptom, he had discovered, of poverty and, as such, gave him a feeling of moral discomfort, as though he had done something wrong and were suffering from an uneasy conscience.

He was ushered into the drawing-room. Behaving as if he were some very distinguished old lady, Mrs Thursley rose from her writing-table and advanced to meet him. 'Ah, dear Brian!' she cried. Her professionally Christian smile was pearly with the flash of false teeth. 'So nice to see you!' She took and held his hand. 'And your dear mother — how's she? Sad because you're going to Germany, I'm sure. We're all sad, if it comes to that. You've got such a gift for making people miss you,' she continued in the same complimentary strain, while Brian blushed and fidgeted in an agony of discomfort. Saying nice things to people's faces, particularly to the faces of the rich, the influential, the potentially useful, was a habit with Mrs Thursley. A Christian habit she would have called it, if she had been pressed for an explanation. Loving one's neighbour; seeing the good in everybody; creating an atmosphere of sympathy and trust. But below the level of the avowal, almost below the level of consciousness, she knew that most people were greedy for flattery, however outrageous, and were prepared, in one way or another, to pay for it.

'Ah, but here's Joan,' she cried, interrupting her praise of him, and added, in a tone that was charged with sprightly meaning, 'You won't want to go on talking with her tiresome old mother — will he, Joanie?'

The two young people looked at one another in a speechless embarrassment.

The door suddenly flew open and Mr Thursley hurried into the room. 'Look at this!' he cried in a voice that trembled with rage, and held out a glass ink-pot. 'How do you expect me to do my work with an eighth of an inch of sediment? Dipping, dipping, dipping the whole morning. Never able to write more than two words at a time. . . .'

'Here's Brian, Daddy,' said Joan in the hope, which she knew in advance was vain, that the stranger's presence might shame him into silence.

His pointed nose still white with rage, Mr Thursley glared at Brian, shook hands and, turning away, at once went on with his angry complaint. 'It's always like that in this house. How can one be expected to do serious work?'

'Oh, God,' Joan inwardly prayed, 'make him stop, make him shut up.'

'As if he couldn't fill the pot himself!' Brian was thinking. 'Why doesn't she tell him so?'

But it was impossible for Mrs Thursley to say or even think anything of the kind. He had his sermons, his articles in the Guardian, his studies in Neo-Platonism. How could he be expected to fill his own ink-pot? For her as well as for him it was obvious, it had become, after these five and twenty years of abjectly given and unreflectingly accepted slavery, completely axiomatic that he couldn't do such a thing. Besides, if she were to suggest in any way that he wasn't perfectly right, his anger would become still more violent. Goodness only knew what he mightn't do or say — in front of Brian! It would be awful. She began to make excuses for the empty ink-pot. Abject excuses on her own behalf, on Joan's, on her servants'. Her tone was at once deprecatory and soothing; she spoke as though she were dealing with a mixture between Jehovah and a very savage dog that might bite at any moment.

The gong — the Thursleys had a gong that would have been audible from end to end of a ducal mansion — rumbled up to a thunderous fortissimo that reduced even the vicar to silence. But as the sound ebbed, he began again.

'It's not as though I asked for very much,' he said.

'He'll be quieter when he's had something to eat,' Mrs Thursley thought, and led the way into the dining-room, followed by Joan. Brian wanted the vicar to precede him; but even in his righteous anger Mr Thursley remembered his good manners. Laying his hand on Brian's shoulder, he propelled him towards the door, keeping up all the time a long-range bombardment of his wife.

'Only a little quiet, only the simplest material conditions for doing my work. The barest minimum. But I don't get it. The house is as noisy as a railway station, and my ink-pot's neglected till I have nothing but a little black mud to write with.'

Under the bombardment, Mrs Thursley walked as though shrunken and with bowed head. But Joan, Brian noticed, had gone stiff; her body was rigid and ungraceful with excess of tension.

In the dining-room they found the two boys, Joan's younger brothers, already standing behind their chairs. At the sight of them, Mr Thursley reverted from his ink-pot to the noise in the house. 'Like a railway station,' he repeated, and the righteous indignation flared up in him with renewed intensity. 'George and Arthur have been rushing up and down the stairs and round the garden the whole morning. Why can't you keep them in order?'

They were all at their places now; Mrs Thursley at one end of the table, her husband at the other; the two boys on the left; Joan and Brian on her right. They stood there, waiting for the vicar to say grace.

'Like hooligans,' said Mr Thursley; the flames of wrath ran through him; he was filled with a tingling warmth, horribly delicious. 'Like savages.'

Making an effort, he dropped his long cleft chin on his chest and was silent. His nose was still deathly pale with anger; like marine animals in an aquarium, the nostrils contracted and expanded in a pulse of regular but fluttering movement. In his right hand he still held the ink-pot.

'Benedictus benedicat, per Jesum Christum Dominum nostrum,' he said at last in his praying voice, which was deep, with the suspicion of a tremolo, and charged with transcendental significance.

With the noise of pent-up movement suddenly released, they all sat down.

'Screaming and howling,' said Mr Thursley, reverting from the tone of piety to his original shrill harshness. 'How am I expected to do my work?' With an indignant bang, he put the ink-pot down on the table in front of him, then unfolded his napkin.

At the other end of the table Mrs Thursley was cutting up the mock duck with extraordinary rapidity.

'Pass that to your father,' she said to the nearest boy. It was essential to get him eating as soon as possible.

A second or two later the parlour-maid was offering Mr Thursley the vegetable. Her apron and cap were stiff with starch and she was as well drilled as a guardsman. The vegetable dishes were hideous, but had been expensive; the spoons were of heavy Victorian silver. With them, the vicar helped himself first to boiled potatoes, then to cabbage, mashed and moulded into damp green bricks.

Still indulging himself in the luxury of anger, 'Women simply don't understand what serious work is,' Mr Thursley went on; then started eating.

When she had helped the others to their mock duck, Mrs Thursley ventured a remark. 'Brian's just off to Germany,' she said.

Mr Thursley looked up, chewing his food very rapidly with his front teeth, like a rabbit. 'What part of Germany?' he asked, darting a sharp inquisitorial look at Brian. His nose had flushed again to its normal colour.

'M-marburg.'

'Where there's the university?'

Brian nodded.

Startlingly, with a noise like coke being poured down a chute, Mr Thursley burst out laughing. 'Don't take to beer-drinking with the students,' he said.

The storm was over. In part out of the thankfulness of her heart, in part to make her husband feel that she had found his joke irresistible, Mrs Thursley also laughed. 'Oh, no,' she cried, don't take to that!'

Brian smiled and shook his head.

'Water or soda-water?' the parlour-maid asked confidentially, creaking with starch and whalebone as she bent over him.

'W-water, please.'

After lunch, when the vicar had returned to his study, Mrs Thursley suggested, in her bright, embarrassing significant way, that the two young people should go for a walk. The ogival front door slammed behind them. Like a prisoner at last restored to liberty, Joan drew a deep breath.

The sky was still overcast, and beneath the low ceiling of grey cloud the air was soft and as though limp with fatigue, as though weary with the burden of too much summer. In the woods, into which they

turned from the high-road, the stillness was oppressive, like the intentional silence of sentient beings, pregnant with unavowed thoughts and hidden feelings. An invisible tree-creeper started to sing; but it was as if the clear bright sound were coming from some other time and place. They walked on hand in hand; and between them was the silence of the wood and at the same time the deeper, denser, more secret silence of their own unexpressed emotions. The silence of the complaints she was too loyal to utter and the pity that, unless she complained, it would, he felt, be insulting for him to put into words; her longing for the comfort of his arms and those desires he did not wish to feel.

Their path led them between great coverts of rhododendrons, and suddenly they were in a narrow cleft, hemmed in by high walls of the impenetrable, black-green foliage. It was a solitude within a solitude, the image of their own private silence visibly hollowed out of the greater stillness of the wood.

‘Almost f-frightening,’ he whispered, as they stood there listening — listening (for there was nothing else for them to hear) to their own heart-beats and each other’s breathing and all the words that hung unspoken between them.

All at once, she could bear it no longer, ‘When I think of what it’ll be like at home . . .’ The complaint had uttered itself, against her will. ‘Oh, I wish you weren’t going, Brian!’

Brian looked at her and, at the sight of those trembling lips, those eyes bright with tears, he felt himself as it were disintegrated by tenderness and pity. Stammering her name, he put his arm about her. Joan stood for a little while quite still, her head bent, her forehead resting on his shoulder. The touch of her hair was electric against his lips, he breathed its perfume. All at once, as though waking from sleep, she stirred into motion and, drawing a little away from him, looked up into his face. Her regard had a desperate, almost inhuman fixity.

‘Darling,’ he whispered.

Joan’s only answer was to shake her head.

But why? What was she denying, what implication of his endearment was she saying no to? ‘But J-joan . . .?’ There was a note of anxiety in his voice.

Still she did not answer; only looked at him and once more slowly shook her head. How many negations were expressed in that single movement! The refusal to complain; the denial for herself of the possibility of happiness; the sad insistence that all her love and all his availed nothing against the pain of absence; the resolution not to exploit his pity, not to elicit, however much she longed for it, another, a more passionate avowal. . . .

Suddenly, he took her face between his hands and, stooping, kissed her on the mouth.

But this was what she had resolved not to extort from him, this was the gesture that could avail nothing against her inevitable unhappiness! For a second or two she stiffened her body in resistance, tried to shake her head again, tried to draw back. Then, vanquished by a longing stronger than herself, she was limp in his arms; the shut, resisting lips parted and were soft under his kisses; her eyelids closed, and there was nothing left in the world but his mouth and the thin hard body pressed against her own.

Fingers stirred the hair above the nape of her neck, slid round to the throat and dropped to her breast. The strength went out of her, she felt herself sinking deeper and deeper into that mysterious other world, behind her eyelids, into the sightless universe of touch.

Then, without warning, as though in precipitate obedience to some inaudible word of command, he broke away from her. For an instant she thought she was going to fall; but the strength came back to her knees, just in time. She swayed unsteadily, then recovered her balance, and with it the consciousness of the outrage he had inflicted upon her. She had leaned upon him with her whole being, soul as well as body, and he had allowed her to fall, had withdrawn his lips and arms and chest and left her suddenly cold and horribly exposed, defenceless and as if naked. She opened hurt, reproachful eyes and saw him standing there pale and strangely furtive; he met her glance for a moment, then averted his face.

Her resentful sense of outrage gave place to anxiety. ‘What is it, Brian?’

He looked at her for a moment, then turned away again. ‘Perhaps we’d better go home,’ he said in a low voice.

* * *

It was a day late in September. Under a pale blue sky the distances were mournful, were exquisitely tender with faint mist. The world seemed remote and unactual, like a memory or an ideal.

The train came to a standstill. Brian waved to the solitary porter, but he himself, nevertheless, got out with the heaviest of the suit-cases. By straining his muscles he found that he was able to relieve his conscience of some of the burden that the ability to buy a poor man's services tended, increasingly as he grew older, to impose upon it.

The porter came running up and almost snatched the bag out of Brian's hand. He too had his conscience. 'You leave that to me, sir,' he said, almost indignantly.

'T-two more in the c-c-c . . . inside,' he emended, long after the porter had stepped into the unpronounceable compartment to collect the remaining pieces. 'Sh-shall I give a hand?' he offered. The man was old — forty years older than himself, Brian calculated; white-haired and wrinkled, but called him 'sir', but carried his bags and would be grateful for a shilling. 'Sh-shall I . . . ?'

The old porter did not even answer, but swung the suit-cases down from the rack, taking evident pride in his well-directed strength.

A touch on his shoulder made Brian turn sharply round. The person who had touched him was Joan.

'In the king's name!' she said; but the laughter behind her words was forced, and there was an expression in her eyes of anxiety — the accumulated anxiety of weeks of bewildered speculation. All those queer, unhappy letters he had written from Germany — they had left her painfully uncertain what to think, how to feel, what to expect of him when he came back. In his letters, it was true, he had reproached only himself — with a violence for whose intensity she was unable to account. But to the extent that she was responsible for what had happened in the wood (and of course she was partly responsible; why not? what was so wrong with just a kiss?), she felt that the reproaches were also addressed to her. And if he reproached her, could he still love her? What did he really feel about her, about himself, about their relations to one another? It was because she simply couldn't wait an unnecessary minute for the answer that she had come, surreptitiously, to meet him at the station.

Brian stood there speechless; he had not expected to see her so soon, and was almost dismayed at thus finding himself, without preparation, in her presence. Automatically, he held out his hand. Joan took it and pressed it in her own, hard, hard, as if hoping to force the reality of her love upon him; but even while doing so, she swayed away from him in her apprehension, her embarrassed uncertainty of what he might have become, swayed away as she would have done from a stranger.

The grace of that shy, uneasy movement touched him as poignantly as it had touched him at their first meeting. It was the grace, in spite of the embarrassment that the movement expressed, of a young tree in the wind. That was how he thought of it then. And now it had happened again; and the beauty of the gesture was again a revelation, but more poignant than it had been the first time, because of its implication that he was once again an alien; but an alien, against whose renewed strangeness the pressure on his hand protested, almost violently.

Her face, as she looked up into his, seemed to waver; and suddenly that artificial brightness was quenched in profound apprehension.

'Aren't you glad to see me, Brian?' she asked.

Her words broke a spell; he was able to smile again, able to speak. 'G-glad?' he repeated; and, for answer, kissed her hand. 'But I didn't th-think you'd be here. It almost g-gave me a fright.'

His expression reassured her. During those first seconds of silence, his still, petrified face had seemed the face of an enemy. Now, by that smile, he was transfigured, was once more the old Brian she had loved; so sensitive, so kind and good; and so beautiful in his goodness, beautiful in spite of that long, queer face, that lanky body, those loose, untidily moving limbs.

Noisily, the train started, gathered speed and was gone. The old porter walked away to fetch a barrow. They were alone at the end of the long platform.

'I thought you didn't love me,' she said after a long silence.

‘But, J-joan!’ he protested. They smiled at one another; then, after a moment, he looked away. Not love her? he was thinking. But the trouble was that he loved her too much, loved her in a bad way, even though she was the best.

‘I thought you were angry with me.’

‘But why sh-should I be?’ His face was still averted.

‘You know why.’

‘I wasn’t a-angry with you.’

‘But it was my fault.’

Brian shook his head. ‘It w-wasn’t.’

‘It was,’ she insisted.

At the thought of what his sensations had been as he held her there, in the dark cleft between the rhododendron coverts, he shook his head a second time, more emphatically.

The old porter was there again with his barrow and his comments on the weather, his scraps of news and gossip. They followed him, playing for his benefit their parts as supernumerary characters in the local drama.

When they were almost at the gate, Joan laid a hand on Brian’s arm. ‘It’s all right, isn’t it?’ Their eyes met. ‘I’m allowed to be happy?’

He smiled without speaking and nodded.

In the dogcart on the way to the house he kept remembering the sudden brightening of her face in response to that voiceless gesture of his. And all he could do to repay her for so much love was to . . . He thought of the rhododendron coverts again and was overcome with shame.

When she learned from Brian that Joan had been at the station, Mrs Foxe felt a sharp pang of resentment. By what right? Before his own mother . . . And besides, what bad faith! For Joan had accepted her invitation to come to lunch the day after Brian’s return. Which meant that she had tacitly admitted Mrs Foxe’s exclusive right to him on the day itself. But here she was, stealing surreptitiously to the station to catch him as he stepped out of the train. It was almost dishonest.

Mrs Foxe’s passion of indignant jealousy lasted only a few seconds; its very intensity accelerated her recognition of its wrongness, its unworthiness. No sign of what she felt had appeared on her face, and it was with a smile of amused indulgence that she listened to Brian’s vaguely stammered account of the meeting. Then, with a strong effort of the will, she not only shut off the expression of her emotion, but even excluded the emotion itself from her consciousness. All that, as it seemed, an impersonal regard for right conduct justified her in still feeling was a certain regretful disapproval of Joan’s — how should she put it? — disingenuousness. For the girl to have stolen that march upon her was not quite right.

Not quite right; but still very understandable, she now went on to reflect, very excusable. When one’s in love . . . And Joan’s was an impulsive, emotional character. Which had its fortunate side, Mrs Foxe reflected. The impulses were as strong towards right as towards wrong. If one could canalize that deep and powerful stream of life within her, if one could make the right appeal to what was best in her, if one could confirm her in those fine generous aspirations of hers — why, she would be a splendid person. Splendid, Mrs Foxe insisted to herself.

‘Well,’ she said next day, when Joan came over to lunch, ‘I hear you caught our migrant on the wing before he’d even had time to settle.’ The tone was playful, there was a charming smile on Mrs Foxe’s face. But Joan blushed guiltily.

‘You didn’t mind, did you?’ she asked.

‘Mind?’ Mrs Foxe repeated. ‘But, my dear, why should I? I only thought we’d agreed on today. But, of course, if you felt you absolutely couldn’t wait . . .’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Joan. But something that was almost hatred mounted hot within her.

Mrs Foxe laid her hand affectionately on the girl’s shoulder. ‘Let’s stroll out into the garden,’ she suggested, ‘and see if Brian’s anywhere about.’

Chapter Twenty. December 8th 1926

TIPTOEING OUT OF the back drawing-room, Hugh Ledwidge had hoped to find the refreshment of a little solitude; but on the landing he was caught by Joyce and Colin. And Colin, it appeared, was tremendously keen on natives, had always been anxious to talk to a professional ethnologist about his experiences on shikar. For nearly half an hour he had to listen, while the young man poured out his illiterate nonsense about India and Uganda. An immense fatigue overwhelmed him. His one desire was to escape, to get away from this parrot house of stupid chatter, back to delicious silence and a book.

They left him, thank God, at last, and drawing a deep breath, he braced himself for the final ordeal of leave-taking. That saying good-bye at the end of an evening was one of the things Hugh most intensely disliked. To have to expose yourself yet once more to personal contact, to be compelled, weary as you were and thirsty for solitude, to grin again and gibber and make yet another effort of hypocrisy — how odious that could be! Particularly with Mary Amberley. There were evenings when the woman simply wouldn't allow you to say good-bye but clung to you desperately, as though she were drowning. Questions, confidences, scabrous discussions of people's love-affairs — anything to keep you a few minutes longer. She seemed to regard each successive departure of a guest as the death of a fragment of her own being. His heart sank as he made his way across the room towards her. 'Damned woman!' he thought, and positively hated her; hated her, as well as for all the other reasons, because Helen was still dancing with that groom; and now with a fresh access of malevolence, because, as he suddenly perceived through the mists of his dim sight, Staithes and that man Beavis were sitting with her. All his insane thoughts about the plot came rushing back into his mind. They had been talking about him, him and the fire escape, him on the football field, him when they threw the slippers over the partition of his cubicle. For a moment, he thought of turning back and slipping out of the house without a word. But they had seen him coming, they would suspect the reason of his flight, they would laugh all the louder. His common sense returned to him, it was all nonsense, there was no plot. How could there be a plot? And even if Beavis did remember, what reason had he to talk? But all the same, all the same . . . Squaring his narrow shoulders, Hugh Ledwidge marched resolutely towards the anticipated ambush.

To his immense relief, Mary Amberley let him go almost without a protest. 'Must you be off, Hugh? So soon?' That was all. She seemed to be absent, thinking of something else.

Beppo fizzled amiably; Staithes merely nodded; and now it was Beavis's turn. Was that smile of his what it seemed to be — just vaguely and conventionally friendly? Or did it carry hidden significances, did it secretly imply derisive reminders of those past shames? Hugh turned and hurried away. Why on earth, he wondered, did one ever go to these idiotic parties? Kept on going, what was more, again and again, when one knew it was all utterly pointless and boring. . . .

Mark Staithes turned to Anthony. 'You realize who that is?' he asked.

'Who? Ledwidge? Is he anyone special?'

Staithes explained.

'Goggler!' Anthony laughed. 'Why of course. Poor Goggler! How fiendish we were to him!'

'That's why I've always pretended I didn't know who he was,' said Staithes, and smiled an anatomical smile of pity and contempt. 'I think it would be charitable,' he added, 'if you did the same.' Protecting Hugh Ledwidge gave him genuine pleasure.

Utterly pointless and boring — yes, and humiliating, Hugh was thinking, humiliating as well. For there was always some humiliation. A Beavis smiling; a Gerry Watchett, like an insolent groom . . .

There was a hurrying of feet on the stairs behind him. 'Hugh! Hugh!' He started almost guiltily and turned round. 'Why were you slinking away without saying good night to me?'

Essaying a joke, 'You seemed so busy,' he began, twinkling up at Helen through his spectacles; then fell silent in sudden astonishment, almost in awe.

She was standing there, three steps above him, one hand on the banister, the fingers of the other splayed out against the opposite wall, leaning forward as though on the brink of flight. But what had happened to her, what miracle? The flushed face that hung over him seemed to shine with an inward illumination. This was not Helen, but some supernatural creature. In the presence of such unearthly beauty, he blushed for the ignoble irrelevance of his waggery, his knowing look.

‘Busy?’ she echoed. ‘But I was only dancing.’ And it was as though some ingenuous and unconscious Moses had said to his bedazzled Israelites: ‘I was only talking to Jehovah.’ ‘You had no excuse,’ she went on. Then quickly, as though a new and curious idea had suddenly occurred to her, ‘Or were you cross with me for some reason?’ she added in another tone.

He began by shaking his head; but felt impelled, on second thoughts, to try to explain a little. ‘Not cross,’ he distinguished, ‘just . . . just a bit unsociable.’

The light behind her face seemed to leap up in a quivering rush of intenser flame. Unsociable! That was really too exquisitely funny! The dancing had made her perfect, had transformed earth into heaven. At the idea that one could be (preposterous word!) unsociable, that one could feel anything but an overflowing love for everyone and everything, she could only laugh.

‘You are funny, Hugh!’

‘I’m glad you think so.’ His tone was offended. He had turned away his head.

The silk of her dress rustled sharply; a little gust of perfume was cool on his cheek — and she was standing only one step above him, very close. ‘You’re not hurt because I said you were funny?’ she asked.

He lifted his eyes again and found her face on a level with his own. Mollified by that expression of genuine solicitude he shook his head.

‘I didn’t mean funny in the horrid way,’ she explained. ‘I meant . . . well, you know: nicely funny. Funny, but a darling.’

In threateningly personal circumstances, a well-timed foolery is a sure defence. Smiling, Hugh raised his right hand to his heart. ‘Je suis pénétré de reconnaissance’, was what he was going to say by way of acknowledgement for that ‘darling’. The courtly jape, the mock-heroic gesture were his immediate and automatic reaction to her words. ‘Je suis pénétré . . .’

But Helen gave him no time to take cover behind his dix-huitième waggery. For she followed up her words by laying her two hands on his shoulders and kissing him on the mouth.

For a moment he was almost annihilated with surprise and confusion and a kind of suffocating, chaotic joy.

Helen drew back a little and looked at him. He had gone very pale — looked as though he had seen a ghost. She smiled — for he was funnier than ever — then bent forward and kissed him again.

The first time she had kissed him, it had been out of the fullness of the life that was in her, because she was made perfect in a perfect world. But his scared face was so absurdly comic that the sight of it somehow transformed this fullness of perfect life into a kind of mischievous wantonness. The second time she kissed him, it was for fun; for fun and, at the same time, out of curiosity. It was an experiment, made in the spirit of hilarious scientific inquiry. She was a vivisector — licensed by perfection, justified by happiness. Besides, Hugh had an extraordinarily nice mouth. She had never kissed such full soft lips before; the experience had been startlingly pleasurable. It was not only that she wanted to see, scientifically, what the absurd creature would do next; she also wanted to feel once more that cool resilience against her mouth, to experience that strange creeping of pleasure that tingled out from her lips and ran, quick and almost unbearable, like moths, along the surface of her body.

‘You were so sweet to take all that trouble,’ she said by way of justification for the second kiss. The moths had crept again, deliciously, had settled with an electric tremor of vibrating wings on her breasts. ‘All that trouble about my education.’

But ‘Helen!’ was all that he could whisper; and, before he had time to think, he had put his arms about her and kissed her.

His mouth, for the third time; and those hurrying moths along the skin . . . But, oh, how quickly he drew away!

‘Helen!’ he repeated.

They looked at one another; and now that he had had the time to think, Hugh found himself all of a sudden horribly embarrassed. His hands dropped furtively from her body. He didn’t know what to say to her — or, rather, knew, but couldn’t bring himself to say it. His heart was beating with a painful violence. ‘I love you, I want you,’ he was crying, he was positively shouting, from behind his embarrassed silence. But no word was uttered. He smiled at her rather foolishly, and dropped his eyes — the eyes, he now reflected, that must look so hideous, like a fish’s eyes, through the thick lenses of his spectacles.

‘How funny he is,’ Helen thought. But her scientific laughter had died down. His shyness was infectious. To put an end to the uncomfortable situation, ‘I shall read all those books,’ she said. ‘And that reminds me, you must give me the list.’

Grateful to her for supplying him with a subject about which it was possible to talk, he looked up at her again — for a moment only, because of those fish-eyes, goggling. ‘I’ll fill in the gaps and send it you,’ he said. Then, after a second or two, he realized that in his improvidence he had exhausted the preciously impersonal topic of the books in a single sentence. The silence persisted, distressingly; and at last, in despair, because there was nothing else to say, he decided to say good night. Trying to charge his voice with an infinity of loving significance, ‘Good night, Helen,’ he said. The words were intended to be as eloquent as a whole speech. But would she hear the eloquence, would she understand the depths of his implied meaning? He bent forward and kissed her again, quickly, very lightly, a kiss of tenderly respectful devotion.

But he had not reckoned with Helen. The embarrassment that had momentarily clouded her wanton perfection had evaporated at the touch of his lips; she was once more the laughing vivisector.

‘Kiss me again, Hugh,’ she said. And when he obeyed, she would not let him go; but kept his mouth pressed to hers, second after second . . .

The noise of voices and music became suddenly louder; somebody had opened the drawing-room door.

‘Good night, Hugh,’ she whispered against his lips; then loosed her hold and ran up the stairs two at a time.

* * *

Looking after her, as she ran out of the room to say good night to old Ledwidge, Gerry had smiled to himself complacently. Pink in the face; with shining eyes. As though she’d drunk a bottle of champagne. Absolutely buffy with the dancing. It was fun when they lost their heads like that; lost them so enthusiastically, so ungrudgingly, so completely. Not keeping anything back, but chucking it all out of the window, so to speak. Most girls were so damned avaricious and calculating. They’d only lose half their heads and carefully keep the other half to play the outraged virgin with. Mean little bitches! But with Helen you felt that the engine was all out. She stepped on the gas and didn’t care what was in the way. He liked that sort of thing, and liked it not only because he hoped to profit by the lost head, but also disinterestedly, because he couldn’t help admiring people who let themselves go and didn’t care two hoots about the consequences. There was something fine and generous and spirited about such people. He was like that himself, when he could afford it. Guts: that was what she’d got. And the makings of a temperament, he was thinking with an inward satisfaction, when a touch on his arm from behind made him suddenly start. His surprise turned almost instantaneously to anger. There was nothing he hated more than to be taken unawares, off his guard. He turned sharply round and, seeing that the person who had touched him was Mary Amberley, tried to readjust his face. Vainly; the hard resentful eyes belied his smile.

But Mary was herself too angry to notice the signs of his annoyance. ‘I want to talk to you, Gerry,’ she said in a low voice that she tried to keep level and unemotional, but that trembled in spite of all her efforts.

‘Christ!’ he thought; ‘a scene’, and felt angrier than ever with the tiresome woman. ‘Talk away,’ he said aloud; and, with an offensive air of detachment, he took out his cigarette-case, opened and proffered it.

‘Not here,’ she said.

Gerry pretended not to understand her. ‘Sorry. I thought you didn’t mind people smoking here.’

‘Fool!’ Her anger broke out with sudden violence. Then, catching him by the sleeve, ‘Come!’ she commanded, and almost dragged him to the door.

Running upstairs, Helen was in time to see her mother and Gerry mounting from the drawing-room landing towards the higher floors of the tall house. ‘I shall have to find somebody else to dance with,’ was all she thought; and a moment later she had found little Peter Quinn and was gliding away once more into paradise.

‘Talk of floaters!’ said Anthony as their hostess left the room with Gerry Watchett. ‘I didn’t realize that Gerry was the present incumbent. . . .’

Beppo nodded. ‘Poor Mary!’ he sighed.

‘On the contrary,’ said Staithes, ‘rich Mary! She’ll be poor later.’

‘And nothing can be done about it?’ asked Anthony.

‘She’d hate you if you tried.’

Anthony shook her head. ‘These dismal compulsions! Like cuckoos in August. Like stags in October.’

‘She showed symptoms of having a compulsion about me,’ said Staithes. ‘Just after I first met her, it was. But I soon cured her of that. And then that ruffian Watchett turned up.’

‘Fascinating, the way these aristocrats can behave!’ Anthony’s tone was one of scientific enthusiasm.

Staithes’s flayed face twisted itself into a grimace of contempt. ‘Just a coarse, vulgar gangster,’ he said. ‘How on earth you ever put up with him at Oxford, I simply cannot imagine.’ In fact, of course, he was busily imagining that Anthony had done it out of mere ignoble toadyism.

‘Just snobbery,’ said Anthony, depriving the other of half his pleasure by the easy confession. ‘But, then, I insist, people like Gerry are an essential part of any liberal education. There was something really rather magnificent about him when he was rich. A certain detached and disinterested recklessness. Now . . .’ He raised his hand and let it fall again. ‘Just a gangster — you’re quite right. But that’s the fascinating thing — the ease with which aristocrats turn into gangsters. Very comprehensible, when you come to think of it. Here’s a man brought up to believe that he has a divine right to the best of everything. And so long as he gets his rights it’s all noblesse oblige and honour and all the rest of it. Inextricably mixed up with insolence, of course; but genuinely there. Now, take away his income; the oddest things are liable to happen. Providence intended you to have the best of everything; therefore intended you to have the means for procuring the best of everything; therefore, when the means don’t come to you legitimately, justifies you in getting them illegitimately. In the past, our Gerry could have gone in for banditry or simony. He’d have made an admirable condottiere, an almost perfect cardinal. But nowadays the church and the army are too respectable, too professional. They’ve no place for amateurs. The impoverished nobleman finds himself driven into business. Selling cars. Touting stocks and shares. Promoting dubious companies. To the accompaniment, of course, if he’s presentable, of a judicious prostitution of his body. If he has the luck to be born with a gift of the gab, he can make a good living out of the politer forms of blackmail and sycophancy — as a gossip writer. Noblesse oblige; but so does poverty. And when they both oblige simultaneously — well, we of the middle classes had better start counting the silver. Instead of which . . .’ He shrugged his shoulders. ‘Poor Mary!’

* * *

Upstairs, in the bedroom, the torrent of Mary’s reproaches and abuse streamed on, unceasingly. Gerry did not even look at her. Averted, he seemed absorbed in the contemplation of the Pascin hanging over the mantelpiece. The painting showed two women lying foreshortened on a bed, naked.

‘I like this picture,’ he said with deliberate irrelevance, when Mrs Amberley had paused for breath. ‘You can see that the man who painted it had just finished making love to those girls. Both of them. At the same time,’ he added.

Mary Amberley went very pale; her lips trembled, her nostrils fluttered as though with a separate and uncontrollable life of their own.

'You haven't even been listening to me,' she cried. 'Oh, you're awful, you're horrible!' The torrent began to flow again, more vehemently than ever.

Still turning his back to her, Gerry went on looking at the Pascin nudes; then at last, blowing out a final cloud of tobacco-smoke, he threw the stump of his cigarette into the fireplace and turned round.

'When you've quite done,' he said in a tired voice, 'we may as well go to bed.' And after a little pause, while, unable to speak, she glared furiously in his face, 'Seeing that that's what you really want,' he added, and, smiling ironically, advanced across the room towards her. When he was quite near her, he halted and held out his hands invitingly. They were large hands, immaculately kept, but coarse, insensitive, brutal. 'Hideous hands,' Mary thought as she looked at them, 'odious hands!' All the more odious now, because it was by their very ugliness and brutality that she had first been attracted, was even at this very moment being attracted, shamefully, in spite of all the reasons she had for hating him. 'Well, aren't you coming?' he asked in the same bored, derisive tone.

For an answer, she hit out at his face. But he was too quick for her, caught the flying hand in mid-air and, when she tried to bring the other into play, caught that too. She was helpless in his grasp.

Still smiling down at her, and without a word, he pushed her backwards, step by step, towards the bed.

'Beast!' she kept repeating, 'beast!' and struggled, vainly, and found an obscure pleasure in her helplessness. He pushed her against the end of the low divan, further and further, inexorably, and at last she lost her balance and fell back across the counterpane — (fell back, while, with one knee on the edge of the bed, he bent over her, still smiling the same derisive smile). 'Beast, beast!' But in fact, as she secretly admitted to herself — and the consciousness was intoxicating in its shamefulness — in fact, she really wanted to be treated as he was treating her — like a prostitute, like an animal; and in her own house, what was more, with her guests all waiting for her, and the door unlocked, and her daughters wondering where she was, perhaps at this very moment coming up the stairs to look for her. Yes, she really wanted it. Still struggling, she gave herself up to the knowledge, to the direct physical intuition that this intolerable degradation was the accomplishment of an old desire, was a revelation marvellous as well as horrible, was the Apocalypse, the Apocalypse at once angel and beast, plague, lamb and whore in a single divine, revolting, overwhelming experience. . . .

* * *

'Civilization and sexuality,' Anthony was saying: 'there's a definite correlation. The higher the one, the intenser the other.'

'My word,' said Beppo, fizzling with pleasure, 'we must be civilized!'

'Civilization means food and literature all round. Beefsteaks and fiction magazines for all. First-class proteins for the body, fourth-class love-stories for the spirit. And this in a safe urban world, where there are no risks, no physical fatigues. In a town like this, for example, one can live for years at a time without being made aware that there's such a thing as nature. Everything's man-made and punctual and convenient. But people can have too much of convenience; they want excitement, they want risks and surprises. Where are they going to find them under our dispensation? In money-making, in politics, in occasional war, in sport, and finally in sex. But most people can't be speculators or active politicians; and war's getting to be too much of a good thing; and the more elaborate and dangerous sports are only for the rich. So that sex is all that's left. As material civilization rises, the intensity and importance of sexuality also rises. Must rise, inevitably. And since at the same time food and literature have increased the amount of available appetite . . .' He shrugged his shoulders. 'Well, you see!'

Beppo was charmed. 'You explain it all,' he cried. 'Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner.' He felt delightedly, that Anthony's argument gave, not only absolution, but also a plenary indulgence — to everyone (for Beppo unselfishly wanted everyone to be as happy as he was) and for everything, everything, from the ravishing barmen at Toulon to those top-booted tarts (so definitely not for him) on the Kurfürstendamm.

Staithes said nothing. If social progress, he was thinking, just meant greater piggishness for more people, why then — then, what?

‘Do you remember that remark of Dr Johnson’s?’ Anthony began again with a note of elation in his voice. It had suddenly come to him, an unexpected gift from his memory to his discursive reason — come to enrich the pattern of his thinking, to fill out his argument and extend its scope. His voice reflected the sudden triumphant pleasure that he felt. ‘How does it go? “A man is seldom so innocently employed as when he is making money.” Something like that. Admirable!’ He laughed aloud. ‘The innocence of those who grind the faces of the poor, but refrain from pinching the bottoms of their neighbours’ wives! The innocence of Ford, the innocence of Rockefeller! The nineteenth century was the Age of Innocence — that sort of innocence. With the result that we’re now almost ready to say that a man is seldom more innocently employed than when making love.’

There was a silence. Staithes looked at his watch. ‘Time one was getting out of here,’ he said. ‘But the problem,’ he added, turning round in his chair to scan the room, ‘the problem is one’s hostess.’

They got up, and while Beppo hurried off to greet a couple of young acquaintances on the other side of the room, Staithes and Anthony made their way to the door.

‘The problem,’ Staithes kept repeating, ‘the problem . . .’

On the landing, however, they met Mrs Amberley and Gerry coming down the stairs.

‘We were looking for you,’ said Anthony. ‘To say good night.’

‘So soon?’ cried Mary with a sudden access of anxiety.

But they were firm. A couple of minutes later the three of them, Staithes, Gerry Watchett, and Anthony, were walking up the street together.

It was Gerry who broke the silence. ‘These old hags,’ he said in a tone of meditative rancour, and shook his head. Then more cheerfully. ‘What about a game of poker?’ he suggested. But Anthony didn’t know how, and Mark Staithes didn’t desire, to play poker; he had to go off alone in search of more congenial company.

‘Good riddance,’ said Mark. ‘And now what about coming to my rooms for an hour?’

* * *

It was the most important thing, Hugh Ledwidge felt as he walked home, the most important and also the most extraordinary, most incredible thing that had ever happened to him. So beautiful, so young. ‘Fashioned so slenderly.’ (If only she had thrown herself into the Thames and he had rescued her! ‘Helen! My poor child!’ And, ‘Hugh!’ she would have murmured gratefully. ‘Hugh . . .’) But even without the suicide it had been astonishing enough. Her mouth against his. Oh, why hadn’t he shown more courage, more presence of mind? All the things he might have said to her, the gestures he ought to have made! And yet, in a certain sense, it was better that he should have behaved as he did — stupidly, timidly, ineptly. Better, because it proved more conclusively that she cared for him; because it gave a higher value to her action, so young, so pure — and yet spontaneously, under no compulsion of his, in the teeth, indeed, of what had almost been his resistance, she had stepped down, had laid her hands on his shoulders, had kissed him. Kissed him in spite of everything, he repeated to himself with a kind of astonished triumph that mingled strangely with his sense of shame, his conviction of weakness and futility; in spite of everything. *Non più andrai*, he hummed to himself as he walked along; then, as though the dank London night were a morning on the downs in spring, broke out into unequivocal singing.

Delle belle turbando il riposo,

Narcissetto, Adoncino d’amor. . . .

At home, he sat down at once to his desk and began to write to her.

Helen, Helen. . . . If I repeat the syllables too often, they lose their sense, become just a noise in my silent room — terrifying in their meaninglessness. But if I say the name just two or three times, very softly, how rich it becomes, how full! Charged with echoes and reminders. Not so much, for me, of the original Greek Helen. I can’t feel that she was ever anything but a mature woman — never anything but married to Menelaus and eloping with Paris. Never really young, as you are — exquisitely, exquisitely,

like a flower. No, it's more Poe's Helen I catch sight of through the name. The beauty that carries the traveller back to his own native shore — takes him home. Not to the obvious, worldly home of the passions. No; to that further, rarer, lovelier home, beyond and above them. Beyond and above; and yet implying, yet including, even while transcending, the passions . . .

It was a long letter; but he was in time, running out, to catch the midnight post. The sense of triumph with which he returned this second time was almost unalloyed. Momentarily, he had forgotten his shyness, his humiliating cowardice; he remembered only that consciousness of soaring power that had filled him while he wrote his letter. Exalted above his ordinary self, he forgot, when undressing, to put his truss away in the chest of drawers, so that Mrs Brinton shouldn't see it when she came in with his early tea in the morning. In bed, he lay for a long time thinking tenderly, paternally, poetically, thinking at the same time with desire, but a desire so lingeringly gentle that lasciviousness assumed the quality of prayer, thinking of Helen's exquisite youthfulness, fashioned so slenderly, and her innocence, her slender innocence, and those unexpected, those extraordinary kisses.

Chapter Twenty-One. August 31st 1933

HELEN RANG THE bell, then listened. In the silence behind the closed door, nothing stirred. She had come straight from the station after a night in the train; it was not yet ten; her mother would still be asleep. She rang again; then, after a pause, once more. Heavily asleep — unless, of course, she had stayed out all night. Where? And with whom? Remembering that horrible Russian she had met at her mother's flat the last time she was in Paris, Helen frowned. She rang a fourth time, a fifth. From within the apartment there was suddenly an answering sound of movement. Helen sighed, partly with relief that her mother had only been asleep, partly in apprehension of what the coming minutes or hours held in store. The door opened at last, opened on a twilight that smelt of cats and ether and stale food; and there, in dirty pink pyjamas, her dyed orange hair dishevelled, and still blinking, still strangely swollen with sleep, stood her mother. For a second the face was a mask, bloated and middle-aged, of stupefied incomprehension; then, in a flash, it came back to life, almost back to youth, with a sudden smile of genuine delight.

'But what fun!' cried Mrs Amberley. 'Darling, I'm so glad.'

If she hadn't known — by how bitter an experience! — that this mood of gaiety and affectionateness would inevitably be followed by, at the best, a spiteful despondency, at the worst, by a fit of insanely violent anger, Helen would have been touched by the warmth of her mother's greeting. As it was, she merely suffered herself to be kissed and, her face still set and stony, stepped across the threshold into the horribly familiar nightmare of her mother's life.

This time, she found, the nightmare had a comic element.

'It's all because of that beastly old femme de ménage,' Mrs Amberley explained as they stood there in the smelly little lobby. 'She was stealing my stockings. So I had to lock the bedroom door when I went out. And then somehow I lost the key. You know what I am,' she added complacently, boasting by force of habit of that absent-mindedness of which she had always been so proud. 'Hopeless, I'm afraid.' She shook her head and smiled that crooked little smile of hers, conspiratorially. 'When I got home, I had to smash that panel.' She pointed to the oblong aperture in the lower half of the door. 'You should have seen me, banging away with the flat-iron!' Her voice was richly vibrant with laughter. 'Luckily it was like matchwood. Cheap and nasty to a degree. Like everything in this beastly place.'

'And you crawled through?' Helen asked.

'Like this.' And going down on her hands and knees, Mrs Amberley pushed her head through the hole, turned sideways so as to admit an arm and shoulder, then, with surprising agility, pulled and pushed with a hand beyond and feet on the hither side of the door, till only her legs remained in

the lobby. First one, then the other, the legs were withdrawn, and an instant later, as though from a dog-kennel, Mrs Amberley's face emerged, a little flushed, through the aperture.

'You see,' she said. 'It's as easy as winking. And the beauty of it is that old Madame Roger's much too fat. No possible chance of her getting through. I don't have to worry about my stockings any more.'

'Do you mean to say she never goes into your bedroom?'

Mrs Amberley shook her head. 'Not since I lost the key; and that was three weeks ago, at least.' Her tone was one of triumph.

'But who makes the bed and does the cleaning?'

'Well . . .' There was a moment's hesitation. 'Why, I do, of course,' the other replied a little irritably. 'You?'

'Why not?' From her kennel door, Mrs Amberley looked up almost defiantly into her daughter's face. There was a long silence; then, simultaneously, both of them burst out laughing.

Still smiling, 'Let's have a look,' said Helen, and went down on all fours. The stony face had softened into life; she felt an inward warmth. Her mother had been so absurd, peering up like that out of her kennel, so childishly ridiculous, that suddenly she was able to love her again. To love her while she laughed at her, just because she could laugh at her.

Mrs Amberley withdrew her head. 'Of course it is a bit untidy,' she admitted rather anxiously, as Helen wriggled through the hole in the door. Still kneeling, she pushed some dirty linen and the remains of yesterday's lunch under the bed.

On her feet again, inside the bedroom, Helen looked round. It was filthier even than she had expected — much filthier. She made an effort to go on smiling; but the muscles of her face refused to obey her.

* * *

Three days later Helen was on her way back to London. Opening the English newspaper she had bought at the Gare du Nord, she read, with an equal absence of interest, about the depression, the test match, the Nazis, the New Deal. Sighing, she turned the page. Printed very large, the words, 'An Exquisite First Novel,' caught her eye. And below, in small letters, 'The Invisible Lover. By Hugh Ledwidge. Reviewed by Catesby Rudge.' Helen folded back the page to make it more manageable and read with an intense and fixed attention.

Just another book, I thought, like all the rest. And I was on the point of throwing it aside, unread. But luckily something — some mystic intuition, I suppose — made me change my mind. I opened the book. I turned over the pages, glancing at a sentence here and there. And the sentences, I found, were gems — jewels of wrought crystal. I decided to read the book. That was at nine in the evening. And at midnight I was still reading, spellbound. It was nearly two before I got to bed — my mind in a whirl of enthusiasm for this masterpiece I had just read.

How shall I describe the book to you? I might call it a fantasy. And as far as it goes, that description holds good. The Invisible Lover is a fantasy. But a fantasy that is poignant as well as airy; profound as well as intriguing and light; fraught with tears as well as with smiles; at once subtly humorous and of a high, Galahad-like spirituality. It is full of a kind of broken-hearted fun, and its laughter is dewy with tears. And throughout runs a vein of naïve and child-like purity, infinitely refreshing in a world full of Freudians and sex-novelists and all their wearisome ilk. This fantasy of the invisible but ever present, ever watchful, ever adoring lover and his child-beloved has an almost celestial innocence. If I wanted to describe the book in a single phrase, I should say that it was the story of Dante and Beatrice told by Hans Andersen. . . .

Falling into her memories of Hugh's few ignominious attempts to make love to her, the words produced in Helen's mind a kind of violent chemical reaction. She burst out laughing; and since the ridiculous phrases went echoing on, since the grotesque memories kept renewing themselves with ever heightened intensity and in ever fuller, more painfully squalid detail, the laughter continued, irrepressibly. The story of Dante and Beatrice told by Hans Andersen! Tears of hysterical merriment ran down her cheeks; she was breathless, and the muscles of her throat were contracted in a kind of agonizing cramp.

But still she went on laughing — was utterly unable to stop; it was as though she were possessed by a demon. Luckily, she was alone in the compartment. People would have taken her for a mad-woman.

In the cab, on the way to Hugh's flat — her flat too, in spite of Dante and Beatrice and Hans Andersen — she wondered whether he'd have gone to bed already, and just how upset he'd be to see her. She hadn't warned him of her arrival; he would be unprepared to receive her, unbraced against the shock of her grossly physical presence. Poor old Hugh! she thought with a derisive pity. Enjoying his private and invisible fun, like Dante with his phantom, and then having to suffer the trampling intrusion of Signora Alighieri! But tonight, she realized, as she stood at last before the door of the flat, looking in her bag for the latch-key, that invisible solitude of his had already been invaded. Somebody was playing the piano; there was a sound of laughter and voices. Hugh must be having a party. And all at once Helen saw herself making a dramatic entrance like Banquo's ghost, and was delighted by the vision. The reading of that article had momentarily transposed her entire being into the key of laughter. Everything was a vast, extravagant, savage joke — or if it wasn't already, should be made so. It was with a tingling sense of excited anticipation that she opened the door and silently slipped into the hall. An assortment of strange hats hung on the pegs, lay on the chairs — a couple of rich hats, she noticed, very new and shapely, and the rest deformed, and ancient; hats, one could see, of the intellectual poor. There were some letters on the marble-topped table; she bent down by mere force of habit to look at them, and found that one was addressed to her — from Anthony, she recognized; and that too was a joke. Did he seriously imagine that she would read his letters? Enormous ass! She popped the envelope unopened into her bag, then tiptoed along the passage to her room. How tidy it was! How dead! Like a family vault under dust-sheets. She took off her coat and hat, washed, combed her hair, made up her face, then, as silently as she had come, crept back to the hall and stood at the door of the sitting-room, trying to guess by the sound of their voices who were the guests. Beppo Bowles, for one; that giggle, those squeaks and fizzlings were unmistakable. And Mark Staithes. And then a voice she wasn't sure of, and another, very soft and confidential, that must be old Croyland's. And who was that ridiculous foreigner who spoke so slowly and ponderously, all on one note? She stood there at the door for a long minute, then very gently turned the handle, drew the door gradually open, and without a sound edged into the room. Nobody had noticed her. Mark Staithes was seated at the piano, with Beppo, a Beppo fatter than ever, she noticed, and balder and more nervously agitated, and — yes, beard and all! — old Croyland, standing one on either side of him, leaning on the instrument and looking down at him while he spoke. Hugh was on the sofa near the fireplace, with the owner of the voice she hadn't recognized, but who turned out to be Caldwell, the publisher — the publisher, of course, of *The Invisible Lover*, she reflected, and had great difficulty in checking another uprush of mirth. With them was a young man she had never seen before — a young man with very pale flaxen hair and a ruddy open face that wore at the moment an expression of almost child-like seriousness. His, it was evident, had been the foreign accent — German, she supposed.

But now the moment had come.

'Good evening,' she called, and stepped forward.

They were all startled; but as for poor Hugh — he jumped as though someone had fired a cannon in his ear. And after the first fright, what an expression of appalled dismay! Irresistibly comic!

'Well, Hugh,' she said.

He looked up into her laughing face, unable to speak. Ever since the first laudatory notices of his book had begun to come in, he had been feeling so strong, so blissfully secure. And now here was Helen — come to humiliate him, come to bear shameful witness against him.

'I didn't expect,' he managed to mumble incoherently. 'I mean, why did you . . . ?'

But Caldwell, who had a reputation for after-dinner speaking to keep up, interrupted him. Raising the glass he was holding, 'To the Muse,' he called out. 'The Muse and also — I don't think it's an indiscretion if I say so — also the heroine of our masterpiece.' Charmed by the felicity of his own phrasing, he beamed at Helen; then, turning to Hugh with a gesture of affectionate proprietorship, he

patted him on the shoulder. 'You must drink too, old man. It's not a compliment to you — not this time.' And he uttered a rich chuckle.

Hugh did as he was told and, averting his eyes, took a gulp of whisky-and-soda.

'Thank you, thank you,' cried Helen. The laughter was seething within her, like water in a kettle. She gave one hand to Caldwell and the other to Hugh. 'I can't tell you how thrilled I was,' she went on. 'Dante and Beatrice by Hans Andersen — it sounds too delicious.'

Blushing, Hugh tried to protest. 'That frightful article . . .'

Cutting him short, 'But why did you keep it up your sleeve?' she asked.

Yes why, why? Hugh was thinking; and that he had been mad to publish the book without first showing it to Helen. He had always wanted to show it to her — and always, at the last moment, found the task too difficult, too embarrassing. But the desire to publish had remained with him, had grown stronger, until at last, senselessly, he had taken the manuscript to Caldwell and, after its acceptance, arranged with him that it should appear while Helen was out of the country. As though that would prevent her knowing anything about it! Madness, madness! And the proof that he had been mad was her presence here tonight, with that strange wild smile on her face, that brightness in the eyes. An uncalculating recklessness was one of the child-beloved's most characteristic and engaging traits; she was a celestial enfant terrible. But in the real Helen this recklessness seemed almost fiendish. She was capable of doing anything, absolutely anything.

'Why did you?' she insisted.

He made a vague apologetic noise.

'You ought to have told me you were Dante Andersen. I'd have tried to live up to you. Beatrice and the Little Match Girl rolled into one. Good evening, Beppo! and Mark!' They had come over from the piano to greet her. 'And, Mr Croyland, how are you?'

Mr Croyland gave a perfect performance of an old gentleman greeting a lovely young woman — benevolently, yet with a touch of playfulness, an attenuated echo of gallantry.

'Such an unexpected enchantment,' he breathed in the soft, deliberately ecstatic voice he ordinarily reserved for describing quattrocento paintings or for addressing the celebrated or the very rich. Then, with a gesture that beautifully expressed an impulsive outburst of affection, Mr Croyland sandwiched her hand between both of his. They were very pale, soft hands, almost gruesomely small and dainty. By comparison, it seemed to Helen that her own brown hand was like a peasant's. Mr Croyland's silvery and prophetic beard parted in a smile that ought to have been the gracious confirmation of his words and gestures, but which, with its incongruous width and the sudden ferocity of all its large and yellowing teeth, seemed instead to deny all reality to the old gentleman's exquisite refinement of manner. That smile belonged to the Mr Croyland who had traded so profitably in the Old Masters; the little white hands and their affectionate gestures, the soft, ecstatic voice and its heart-felt words, were the property of that other, that ethereal Croyland who only cared about Art.

Helen disengaged her hand. 'Did you ever see those china mugs, Mr Croyland,' she asked, 'you who know Italy so well? The ones they sell at Montecatini for drinking the purgative waters out of? White, with an inscription in golden letters: Io son Beatrice che ti faccio andare.'

'But what an outrage!' Mr Croyland exclaimed, and lifted his small hands in horror.

'But it's the sort of joke I really enjoy. Particularly now that Beatrice is really me . . .'

 Becoming aware that the flaxen-haired young man was standing at attention about a yard to the west of her, evidently trying to attract her notice, Helen interrupted herself and turned towards him, holding out her hand.

The young man took it, bowed stiffly from the waist and, saying 'Giesebrecht', firmly squeezed it.

Laughing (it was another joke), Helen answered, 'Ledwidge'; then, as an afterthought, 'geboren Amberley.'

Nonplussed by this unexpected gambit, the young man bowed again in silence.

Staithes intervened to explain that Giesebrecht was his discovery. A refugee from Germany. Not because of his nose, he added as (taking pity on poor old Hugh) he drew her confidentially out of the

group assembled round the sofa; not because of his nose — because of his politics. Aryan, but communist — ardently and all along the line.

‘He believes that as soon as all incomes are equalized, men will stop being cruel. Also that all power will automatically find itself in the hands of the best people. And he’s absolutely convinced that nobody who obtains power will be capable of even wishing to abuse it.’ Staithes shook his head. ‘One doesn’t know whether to admire and envy or to thank God for not having made one such an ass. And to complicate matters, he’s such a thoroughly good ass. An ass with the moral qualities of a saint. Which is why he’s such an admirable propagandist. Saintliness is almost as good as sex-appeal.’ He pulled up a chair for Helen, and himself sat down again at the piano and began to play the first few bars of Beethoven’s *Für Elise*; then broke off and, turning back to her, ‘The trouble,’ he resumed, ‘is that nothing works. Not faith, not intelligence, not saintliness, not even villainy — nothing. Faith’s just organized and directed stupidity. It may remove a mountain or two by dint of mere obstinate butting; but it’s blinkered, it can’t see that if you move the mountains, you don’t destroy them, you merely shove them from one place to another. You need intelligence to see that; but intelligence isn’t much good because people can’t feel enthusiastic about it; it’s at the mercy of the first Hitler or Mussolini that comes along — of anyone who can rouse enthusiasm; and one can rouse enthusiasm for any cause however idiotic and criminal.’

Helen was looking across the room. ‘I suppose his hair’s naturally that colour?’ she said, more to herself than to her companion. Then, turning back to Staithes, ‘And what about saintliness?’ she asked.

‘Well, look at history,’ he answered.

‘I don’t know any.’

‘Of course not. But I take it that you’ve heard of someone called Jesus? And occasionally, no doubt, you read the papers? Well, put two and two together, the morning’s news and the saint, and draw your own conclusions.’

Helen nodded. ‘I’ve drawn them.’

‘If saintliness were enough to save the world,’ he went on, ‘then obviously the world would have been saved long ago. Dozens of times. But saintliness can exist without intelligence. And though it’s attractive, it isn’t more attractive than lots of other things — good food, for example, comfort, going to bed with people, bullying, feeling superior.’

Laughing (for this also was laughable), ‘It looks,’ said Helen, ‘as if there were nothing to do but throw up everything and become an invisible lover.’ She helped herself to a sandwich and a tumbler of white wine from the tray.

The group at the other end of the room had disintegrated, and Beppo and Mr Croyland were drifting back towards the piano. Staithes smiled at them and, picking up the thread of the argument that Helen’s arrival had interrupted, ‘Alternatively,’ he said, ‘one might become an aesthete.’

‘You use the word as though it were an insult,’ Beppo protested with the emphatic peevishness that had grown upon him with age. Life was treating him badly — making him balder, making him stouter, making young men more and more reluctant to treat him as their contemporary, making sexual successes increasingly difficult of achievement, making that young German of Staithes’s behave almost rudely to him. ‘Why should one be ashamed of living for beauty?’

The thought of Beppo living for beauty — living for it with his bulging waistcoat and the tight wide seal of his check trousers and his bald crown and Florentine page’s curls — almost made Helen choke over her wine.

From the depths of his armchair, ‘ ”Glory be to God for dappled things”,’ murmured Mr Croyland. ‘I’ve been re-reading Father Hopkins lately. So poignant! Like a dagger. “What lovely behaviour of silk-sack clouds!”’ He sighed, he pensively shook his head. ‘They’re among the things that wound one with their loveliness. Wound and yet sustain, make life liveable.’

There was a cathedral silence.

Then, making an effort to keep the laughter out of her voice, ‘Be an angel, Beppo,’ said Helen, ‘and give me some more of that hock.’

Mr Croyland sat remote, behind half-closed eyelids, the inhabitant of a higher universe.

When the clinking of the glasses had subsided, ‘”Ripeness is all”,’ he quoted. ‘”That sober certainty of waking bliss.” Waking,’ he insisted. ‘Piercingly conscious. And then, of course, there are pictures — the Watteaus at Dresden, and Bellini’s Transfiguration, and those Raphael portraits at the Pitti. Buttresses to shore up the soul. And certain philosophies, too. Zarathustra, the Symposium.’ He waved his little hand. ‘One would be lost without them — lost!’

‘And, with them, I take it, you’re saved?’ said Mark from his seat at the piano; and, without waiting for an answer, ‘I wish I were,’ he went on. ‘But there seems to be so little substance in it all. Even in the little that’s intrinsically substantial. For of course most thinking has never been anything but silly. And as for Art, as for literature — well, look at the museums and the libraries. Look at them! Ninety-nine per cent of nonsense and mere rubbish.’

‘But the Greeks,’ Mr Croyland protested, ‘the Florentines, the Chinese . . .’ He sketched in the air an exquisitely graceful gesture, as though he were running his fingers over the flanks of a Sung jar, round the cup-shaped navel of a High Renaissance water-nymph. Subtly, with what was meant to be the expression of a Luini madonna, he smiled; but always, through the opening fur, his large yellow teeth showed ferociously, rapaciously — even when he talked about the Schifanoia frescoes, even when he whispered, as though it were an Orphic secret, the name of Vermeer of Delft.

But nonsense, Staithes insisted, almost invariably nonsense and rubbish. And most of what wasn’t nonsense or rubbish was only just ordinarily good. ‘Like what you or I could do with a little practice,’ he explained. ‘And if one knows oneself — the miserable inept little self that can yet accomplish such feats — well, really, one can’t be bothered to take the feats very seriously.’

Mr Croyland, it was evident from his frown, didn’t think of his own self in quite this spirit.

‘Not but what one can enjoy the stuff for all kinds of irrelevant reasons,’ Staithes admitted. ‘For its ingenuity, for example, if one’s in any way a technician or an interpreter. Steady progressions in the bass, for example, while the right hand is modulating apparently at random. Invariably delightful! But then, so’s carpentry. No; ultimately it isn’t interesting, that ordinarily good stuff. However great the accomplishment or the talent. Ultimately it’s without value; it differs from the bad only in degree. Composing like Brahms, for example — what is it, after all, but a vastly more elaborate and intellectual way of composing like Meyerbeer? Whereas the best Beethoven is as far beyond the best Brahms as it’s beyond the worst Meyerbeer. There’s a difference in kind. One’s in another world.’

‘Another world,’ echoed Mr Croyland in a religious whisper. ‘But that’s just what I’ve been trying to get you to admit. With the highest art one enters another world.’

Beppo fizzled with emphatic agreement.

‘A world,’? Mr Croyland insisted, ‘of gods and angels.’

‘Don’t forget the invisible lovers,’ said Helen, who was finding, as she drank her white wine, that everything was becoming more and more uproariously amusing.

Mr Croyland ignored the interruption. ‘A next world,’ he went on. ‘The great artists carry you up to heaven.’

‘But they never allow you to stay there,’ Mark Staithes objected. ‘They give you just a taste of the next world, then let you fall back, flop, into the mud. Marvellous while it lasts. But the time’s so short. And even while they’ve actually got me in heaven, I catch myself asking: Is that all? Isn’t there anything more, anything further? The other world isn’t other enough. Even Macbeth, even the Mass in D, even the El Greco Assumption.’ He shook his head. ‘They used to satisfy me. They used to be an escape and a support. But now . . . now I find myself wanting something more, something heavenlier, something less human. Yes, less human,’ he repeated. Then the flayed face twisted itself up into an agonized smile. ‘I feel rather like Nurse Cavell about it,’ he added. ‘Painting, music, literature, thought — they’re not enough.’

‘What is enough, then?’ asked Beppo. ‘Politics? Science? Moneymaking?’

Staithes shook his head after every suggestion.

‘But what else is there?’ asked Beppo.

Still anatomically smiling, Mark looked at him for a moment in silence, then said, ‘Nothing — absolutely nothing.’

‘Speak for yourself,’ said Mr Croyland. ‘They’re enough for me.’ He dropped his eyelids once more and retired into spiritual fastnesses.

Looking at him, Staithes was moved by the sudden angry desire to puncture the old gentleman’s balloon-like complacency — to rip a hole in that great bag of cultural gas, by means of which Mr Croyland contrived to hoist his squalid traffickings sky-high into the rarefied air of pure aesthetics. ‘And what about death? You find them adequate against death?’ he insisted in a tone that had suddenly become brutally inquisitorial. He paused, and for a moment the old man was enveloped in a horribly significant silence — the silence of those who in the presence of a victim or an incurable tactfully ignore the impending doom. ‘Adequate against life, for that matter,’ Mark Staithes went on, relenting; ‘against life in any of its more unpleasant or dangerous aspects.’

‘Such as dogs falling on one out of aeroplanes!’ Helen burst out laughing.

‘But what are you talking about?’ cried Beppo.

‘Father Hopkins won’t keep dogs off,’ she went on breathlessly. ‘I agree with you, Mark. A good umbrella, any day . . .’

Mr Croyland rose to his feet. ‘I must go to bed,’ he said. ‘And so should you, my dear.’ The little white hand upon her shoulder was benevolent, almost apostolic. ‘You’re tired after your journey.’

‘You mean, you think I’m drunk,’ Helen answered, wiping her eyes. ‘Well, perhaps you’re right. Gosh,’ she added, ‘how nice it is to laugh for a change!’

When Mr Croyland was gone, and Beppo with him, Staithes turned towards her. ‘You’re in a queer state, Helen.’

‘I’m amused,’ she explained.

‘What by?’

‘By everything. But it began with Dante; Dante and Hans Andersen. If you’d been married to Hugh, you’d know why that was so extraordinarily funny. Imagine Europa if the bull had turned out after all to be Narcissus!’

‘I don’t think you’d better talk so loud,’ said Staithes, looking across the room to where, with an expression on his face of hopeless misery, Hugh was pretending to listen to an animated discussion between Caldwell and the young German.

Helen also looked round for a moment; then turned back with a careless shrug of the shoulders. ‘If he says he’s invisible, why shouldn’t I say I’m inaudible?’ Her eyes brightened again with laughter. ‘I shall write a book called *The Inaudible Mistress*. A woman who says exactly what she thinks about her lovers while they’re making love to her. But they can’t hear her. Not a word.’ She emptied her glass and refilled it.

‘And what does she say about them?’

‘The truth, of course. Nothing but the truth. That the romantic Don Juan is just a crook. Only I’m afraid that in reality she wouldn’t find that out till afterwards. Still, one might be allowed a bit of poetic licence — make the *esprit d’escalier* happen at the same time as the romantic affair. The moonlight, and “My darling”, and “I adore you”, and those extraordinary sensations — and at the same moment “You’re nothing but a sneakthief, nothing but a low blackguardly swindler”. And then there’d be the spiritual lover — Hans Dante, in fact.’ She shook her head. ‘Talk of Krafft-Ebing!’

‘But what does she say to him?’

‘What indeed!’ Helen took a gulp of wine. ‘Luckily she’s inaudible. We’d better skip that chapter and come straight to the epicurean sage. With the sage, she doesn’t have to be quite so obscure. “You think you’re a man, because you happen not to be impotent”. That’s what she says to him. “But in fact you’re not a man. You’re sub-human. In spite of your sageness — because of it even. Worse than the crook in some ways.” And then, bang, like a sign from heaven, down comes the dog!’

‘But what dog?’

‘Why, the dog Father Hopkins can’t protect you from. The sort of dog that bursts like a bomb when you drop it out of an aeroplane. Bang!’ The laughing excitement seethed and bubbled within her, seeking expression, seeking an outlet; and the only possible assuagement was through some kind of outrage, some violence publicly done to her own and other people’s feelings. ‘It almost fell on Anthony and me,’ she went on, finding a strange relief in speaking thus openly and hilariously about the unmentionable event. ‘On the roof of his house it was. And we had no clothes on. Like the Garden of Eden. And then, out of the blue, down came that dog — and exploded, I tell you, literally exploded.’ She threw out her hands in a violent gesture. ‘Dog’s blood from head to foot. We were drenched — but drenched! In spite of which this imbecile goes and writes me a letter.’ She opened her bag and produced it. ‘Imagining I’d read it, I suppose. As though nothing had happened, as though we were still in the Garden of Eden. I always told him he was a fool. There!’ She handed the letter to Staithes. ‘You open it and see what the idiot has to say. Something witty, no doubt; something airy and casual; humorously wondering why I took it into my funny little head to go away.’ Then, noticing that Mark was still holding the letter unopened. ‘But why don’t you read it?’ she asked.

‘Do you really want me to?’

‘Of course. Read it aloud. Read it with expression.’ She rolled the r derisively.

‘Very well, then.’ He tore open the envelope and unfolded the thin sheets. ‘ ”I went to look for you at the hotel,” ’ he read out slowly, frowning over the small and hurried script. ‘ ”You were gone — and it was like a kind of death.” ’

‘Ass!’ commented Helen.

‘ ”It’s probably too late, probably useless; but I feel I must try to tell you in this letter some of the things I meant to say to you, yesterday evening, in words. In one way it’s easier — for I’m inept when it comes to establishing a purely personal contact with another human being. But in another way, it’s much more difficult; for these written words will be just words and no more, will come to you, floating in a void, unsupported, without the life of my physical presence.” ’

Helen gave a snort of contemptuous laughter. ‘As though that would have been a recommendation!’ She drank some more wine.

‘ ”Well, what I wanted to tell you,” ’ Staithes read on, ‘ ”was this: that suddenly (it was like a conversion, like an inspiration) while you were kneeling there yesterday on the roof, after that horrible thing had happened . . .” ’

‘He means the dog,’ said Helen. ‘Why can’t he say so?’

‘ ”. . . suddenly I realized . . .” ’ Mark Staithes broke off. ‘Look here,’ he said, ‘I really can’t go on.’

‘Why not? I insist on you going on,’ she cried excitedly.

He shook his head. ‘I’ve got no right!’

‘But I’ve given you the right.’

‘Yes, I know. But he hasn’t.’

‘What has he got to do with it? Now that I’ve received the letter . . .’

‘But it’s a love-letter.’

‘A love-letter?’ Helen repeated incredulously, then burst out laughing. ‘That’s too good!’ she cried. ‘That’s really sublime! Here, give it to me.’ She snatched the letter out of his hand. ‘Where are we? Ah, here! “. . . kneeling on the roof after that horrible thing had happened, suddenly I realized that I’d been living a kind of outrageous lie towards you!” ’ She declaimed the words rhetorically and to the accompaniment of florid gesticulations. ‘ ”I realized that in spite of all the elaborate pretence that it was just a kind of detached irresponsible amusement, I really loved you.” He really lo-o-oved me,’ she repeated, drawing the word into a grotesque caricature of itself. ‘Isn’t that wonderful? He really lo-o-oved me.’ Then, turning round in her chair, ‘Hugh!’ she called across the room.

‘Helen, be quiet!’

But the desire, the need to consummate the outrage was urgent within her.

She shook off the restraining hand that Staithes had laid on her arm, shouted Hugh's name again and, when they all turned towards her, 'I just wanted to tell you he really lo-o-oved me,' she said, waving the letter.

'Oh, for God's sake shut up!'

'I certainly won't shut up,' she retorted, turning back to Mark. 'Why shouldn't I tell Hugh the good news? He'll be delighted, seeing how much he lo-o-oves me himself. Don't you, Hughie?' She swung back again, and her face was flushed and brilliant with excitement. 'Don't you?' Hugh made no answer, but sat there pale and speechless, looking at the floor.

'Of course you do,' she answered for him. 'In spite of all appearances to the contrary. Or rather,' she emended, uttering a little laugh, 'in spite of all disappearances — seeing that it was always invisible, that love of yours. Oh yes, Hughie darling, definitely invisible. But still . . . still, in spite of all disappearances to the contrary, you do lo-o-ove me, don't you? Don't you?' she insisted, trying to force him to answer her, 'don't you?'

Hugh rose to his feet and, without speaking a word, almost ran out of the room.

'Hugh!' Caldwell shouted after him, 'Hugh!' There was no answer. Caldwell looked round at the others. 'I think perhaps one ought to see that he's all right,' he said, with the maternal solicitude of a publisher who sees a first-rate literary property rushing perhaps towards suicide. 'One never knows.' And jumping up he hurried after Hugh. The door slammed.

There was a moment's silence. Then, startlingly, Helen broke into laughter. 'Don't be alarmed, Herr Giesebrecht,' she said, turning to the young German. 'It's just a little bit of English family life. Die Familie im Wohnzimmer, as we used to learn at school. Was tut die Mutter? Die Mutter spielt Klavier. Und was tut der Vater? Der Vater sitzt in einem Lehnstuhl und raucht seine Pfeife. Just that, Herr Giesebrecht, no more. Just a typical bourgeois family.'

'Bourgeois,' the young man repeated, and nodded gravely. 'You say better than you know.'

'Do I?'

'You are a wictim,' he went on, very slowly, and separating word from word, 'a wictim of capitalist society. It is full of wices . . .'

Helen threw back her head and laughed again more loudly than before; then, controlling herself with an effort, 'You mustn't think I'm laughing at you,' she gasped. 'I think you're being sweet to me — extraordinarily decent. And probably you're quite right about capitalist society. Only somehow at this particular moment — I don't know why — it seemed rather . . . rather . . .'

The laughter broke out once more. 'I'm sorry.'

'We must be going,' said Mark, and rose from his chair. The young German also got up and came across the room towards them. 'Good night, Helen.'

'Good night, Mark. Good night, Mr Giesebrecht. Come and see me again, will you? I'll behave better next time.'

He returned her smile and bowed. 'I will come whenever you wish,' he said.

Chapter Twenty-Two. December 8th 1926

MARK LIVED IN a dingy house off the Fulham Road. Dark brown brick with terra-cotta trimmings; and, within, patterned linoleum; bits of red Axminster carpet; wallpapers of ochre sprinkled with bunches of cornflowers, of green, with crimson roses; fumed oak chairs and tables; rep curtains; bamboo stands supporting glazed blue pots. The hideousness, Anthony reflected, was so complete, so absolutely unrelieved, that it could only have been intentional. Mark must deliberately have chosen the ugliest surroundings he could find. To punish himself, no doubt — but why, for what offence?

'Some beer?'

Anthony nodded.

The other opened a bottle, filled a single glass; but himself did not drink.

‘You still play, I see,’ said Anthony, pointing in the direction of the upright piano.

‘A little,’ Mark had to admit. ‘It’s a consolation.’

The fact that the Matthew Passion, for example, the Hammerklavier Sonata, had had human authors was a source of hope. It was just conceivable that humanity might some day and somehow be made a little more John-Sebastian-like. If there were no Well-Tempered Clavichord, why should one bother even to wish for revolutionary change?

‘Turning one kind of common humanity into common humanity of a slightly different kind — well, if that’s all that revolution can do, the game isn’t worth the candle.’

Anthony protested. For a sociologist it was the most fascinating of all games.

‘To watch or to play?’

‘To watch, of course.’

A spectacle bottomlessly comic in its grotesqueness, endlessly varied. But looking closely, one could detect the uniformities under the diversity, the fixed rules of the endlessly shifting game.

‘A revolution to transform common humanity into common humanity of another variety. You will find it horrifying. But that’s just what I’d like to live long enough to see. Theory being put to the test of practice. To detect, after your catastrophic reform of everything, the same old uniformities working themselves out in a slightly different way — I can’t imagine anything more satisfying. Like logically inferring the existence of a new planet and then discovering it with a telescope. As for producing more John Sebastians . . .’ He shrugged his shoulders. ‘You might as well imagine that revolution will increase the number of Siamese twins.’

That was the chief difference between literature and life. In books, the proportion of exceptional to commonplace people is high; in reality, very low.

‘Books are opium,’ said Mark.

‘Precisely. That’s why it’s doubtful if there’ll ever be such a thing as proletarian literature. Even proletarian books will deal with exceptional proletarians. And exceptional proletarians are no more proletarian than exceptional bourgeois are bourgeois. Life’s so ordinary that literature has to deal with the exceptional. Exceptional talent, power, social position, wealth. Hence those geniuses of fiction, those leaders and dukes and millionaires. People who are completely conditioned by circumstances — one can be desperately sorry for them; but one can’t find their lives very dramatic. Drama begins where there’s freedom of choice. And freedom of choice begins when social or psychological conditions are exceptional. That’s why the inhabitants of imaginative literature have always been recruited from the pages of Who’s Who.’

‘But do you really think that people with money or power are free?’

‘Freer than the poor, at any rate. Less completely conditioned by matter and other people’s wills.’

Mark shook his head. ‘You don’t know my father,’ he said. ‘Or my disgusting brothers.’

At Bulstrode, Anthony remembered, it was always, ‘My pater says . . .’ or ‘My frater at Cambridge . . .’

‘The whole vile brood of Staitheses,’ Mark went on.

He described the Staithes who was now a Knight Commander of St Michael and St George and a Permanent Under-Secretary. Pleased as Punch with it all, and serenely conscious of his own extraordinary merits, adoring himself for being such a great man.

‘As though there were any real difficulty in getting where he’s got! Anything in the least creditable about that kind of piddling little conquest!’ Mark made a flayed grimace of contemptuous disgust. ‘He thinks he’s a marvel.’

And the other Staitheses, the Staitheses of the younger generation — they also thought that they were marvels. There was one of them at Delhi, heroically occupied in bullying Indians who couldn’t stand up for themselves. And the other was on the Stock Exchange and highly successful. Successful as what? As a cunning exploiter of ignorance and greed and the insanity of gamblers and misers. And on top of everything the man prided himself on being an amorist, a professional Don Juan.

(Why the poor devil shouldn't be allowed to have a bit of fun, Anthony was unable, as he sipped his beer, to imagine.)

One of the boys! One of the dogs! A dog among bitches — what a triumph!

'And you call them free,' Mark concluded. 'But how can a climber be free? He's tied to his ladder.'

'But social ladders,' Anthony objected, 'become broader as they rise. At the bottom, you can only just get your foot on to them. At the top the rungs are twenty yards across.'

'Well, perhaps it's a wider perch than the bank clerk's,' Mark admitted. 'But not wide enough for me. And not high enough; above all, not clean enough.'

The rage they had been in when he enlisted during the war as a private! Feeling that he'd let the family down. The creatures were incapable of seeing that, if you had the choice, it was more decent to elect to be a private than a staff lieutenant.

'Turds to the core,' he said. 'So they can't think anything but turdish thoughts. And above all, they can't conceive of anyone else thinking differently. Turd calls to turd; and, when it's answered by non-turd, it's utterly at a loss.'

And when the war was over, there was that job his father had taken such pains to find for him in the City — with Lazarus and Coit, no less! — just waiting for him to step into the moment he was demobilized. A job with almost unlimited prospects for a young man with brains and energy — for a Staithes, in a word. 'A five-figure income by the time you're fifty,' his father had insisted almost lyrically, and had been really hurt and grieved, as well as mortally offended, furiously angry, when Mark replied that he had no intention of taking it.

'"But why not?"' the poor old turd kept asking. "Why not?" And simply couldn't see that it was just because it was so good that I couldn't take his job. So unfairly good! So ignobly good! He just couldn't see it. According to his ideas, I ought to have rushed at it, headlong, like all the Gadarene swine rolled into one. Instead of which I returned him his cow-pat and went to Mexico — to look after a coffee finca.'

'But did you know anything about coffee?'

'Of course not. That was one of the attractions of the job.' He smiled. 'When I did know something about it, I came back to see if there was anything doing here.'

'And is there anything doing?'

The other shrugged his shoulders. God only knew. One joined the Party, one distributed literature, one financed pressure-groups out of the profits on synthetic carnations, one addressed meetings and wrote articles. And perhaps it was all quite useless. Perhaps, on the contrary, the auspicious moment might some day present itself . . .

'And then what?' asked Anthony.

'Ah, that's the question. It'll be all right at the beginning. Revolution's delightful in the preliminary stages. So long as it's a question of getting rid of the people at the top. But afterwards, if the thing's a success — what then? More wireless sets, more chocolates, more beauty parlours, more girls with better contraceptives.' He shook his head. 'The moment you give people the chance to be piggish, they take it — thankfully. That freedom you were talking about just now, the freedom at the top of the social ladder — it's just the licence to be a pig; or alternatively a prig, a self-satisfied pharisee like my father. Or else both at once, like my precious brother. Pig and prig simultaneously. In Russia they haven't yet had the chance to be pigs. Circumstances have forced them to be ascetics. But suppose their economic experiment succeeds; suppose a time comes when they're all prosperous — what's to prevent them turning into Babbitts? Millions and millions of soft, piggish Babbitts, ruled by a small minority of ambitious Staitheses.'

Anthony smiled. 'A new phase of the game played according to the old unchanging rules.'

'I'm horribly afraid you're right,' said the other. 'It's orthodox Marxism, of course. Behaviour and modes of thoughts are the outcome of economic circumstances. Reproduce Babbitt's circumstances and you can't help reproducing his manners and customs. Christ!' He rose, walked to the piano and, drawing up a chair, sat down in front of it, 'Let's try to get that taste out of our mouths.' He held his large bony

hands poised for a moment above the keyboard; then began to play Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D. They were in another universe, a world where Babbitts and Staitheses didn't exist, were inconceivable.

Mark had played for only a minute or two when the door opened and an elderly woman, thin and horse-faced, in a brown silk dress and wearing round her neck an old diseased brown fur, entered the room. She walked on tiptoe, acting in elaborate pantomime the very personification of silence, but in the process produced an extraordinary volume and variety of disturbing noises — creaking of shoes, rustling of silk, glassy clinkings of bead necklaces, jingling of the silver objects suspended by little chains from the waist. Mark went on playing without turning his head. Embarrassed, Anthony rose and bowed. The horse-faced creature waved him back to his place, and cautiously, in a final prolonged explosion of noise, sat down on the sofa.

'Exquisite!' she cried when the final chord had been struck. 'Play us some more, Mark.'

But Mark got up, shaking his head. 'I want to introduce you to Miss Pendle,' he said to Anthony; and to the old woman, 'Anthony Beavis was at Bulstrode with me,' he explained.

Anthony took her hand. She gave him a smile. The teeth, which were false ones and badly fitting, were improbably too white and bright. 'So you were at Bulstrode with Mark!' she cried. 'Isn't that extraordinary!'

'Extraordinary that we should still be on speaking terms?' said Mark.

'No, no,' said Miss Pendle, and with a playfulness that Anthony found positively ghoulish, gave him a little slap on the arm. 'You know exactly what I mean. He always was like that, Mr Beavis, even when he was a boy — do you remember?'

Anthony duly nodded assent.

'So sharp and sarcastic! Even before you knew him at Bulstrode. Shocking!' She flashed her false teeth at Mark in a sparkle of loving mock-reprobation. 'He was my first pupil, you know,' she went on confidentially. 'And I was his first teacher.'

Anthony rose gallantly to the occasion. 'Let me congratulate Mark,' he said, 'and condole with you.'

Miss Pendle looked at Mark. 'Do you think I need his condolences?' she asked, almost archly, like a young girl, coquettishly fishing for compliments.

Mark did not answer, only smiled and shrugged his shoulders. 'I'll go and make some tea,' he said. 'You'd like tea, wouldn't you Penny?' Miss Pendle nodded, and he rose and left the room.

Anthony was wondering rather uncomfortably what he should say to this disquietingly human old hag, when Miss Pendle turned towards him. 'He's wonderful, Mark is; really wonderful.' The false teeth flashed, the words came gushingly with an incongruously un-equine vehemence. Anthony felt himself writhing with an embarrassed distaste. 'Nobody knows how kind he is,' she went on. 'He doesn't like it told; but I don't mind — I want people to know.' She nodded so emphatically that the beads of her necklace rattled. 'I was ill last year,' she went on. Her savings had gone, she couldn't get another job. In despair, she had written to some of her old employers, Sir Michael Staithes among them. 'Sir Michael sent me five pounds,' she said. 'That kept me going for a bit. Then I had to write again. He said he couldn't do anything more. But he mentioned the matter to Mark. And what do you think Mark did?' She looked at Anthony in silence, a horse transfigured, with an expression at once of tenderness and triumph and her red-lidded brown eyes full of tears.

'What did he do?' asked Anthony.

'He came to me where I was staying — I had a room in Camberwell then — he came and he took me away with him. Straight away, the moment I could get my things packed up, and brought me here. I've kept house for him ever since. What do you think of that, Mr Beavis?' she asked. Her voice trembled and she had to wipe her eyes; but she was still triumphant. 'What do you think of that?'

Anthony really didn't know what to think of it; but said, meanwhile, that it was wonderful.

'Wonderful,' the horse repeated, approvingly. 'That's exactly what it is. But you mustn't tell him I told you. He'd be furious with me. He's like that text in the Gospel about not letting your left hand know what your right hand is doing. That's what he's like.' She gave her eyes a final wipe and blew her nose. 'There, I hear him coming,' she said, and, before Anthony could intervene, had jumped up, darted

across the room in a storm of rustlings and rattlings, and opened the door. Mark entered, carrying a tray with the tea-things and a plate of mixed biscuits.

Miss Pendle poured out, said she oughtn't to eat anything at this time of night, but, all the same, took a round biscuit with pink sugar icing on it.

'Now, tell me what sort of a boy young Master Mark was at Bulstrode,' she said in that playful way of hers. 'Up to all kind of mischief, I'll be bound!' She took another bite at her biscuit.

'He bullied me a good deal,' said Anthony.

Miss Pendle interrupted her quick nibbling to laugh aloud. 'You naughty boy!' she said to Mark; then the jaws started to work again.

'Being so good at football, he had the right to bully me.'

'Yes, you were captain of the eleven, weren't you?'

'I forget,' said Mark.

'He forgets!' Miss Pendle repeated, looking triumphantly at Anthony. 'That's typical of him. He forgets!' She helped herself to a second biscuit, pushing aside the plain ones to select another with icing on it, and began to nibble once more with the intense and concentrated passion of those whose only sensual pleasures have been the pleasures of the palate.

When she had gone to bed, the two men sat down again by the fire. There was a long silence.

'She's rather touching,' said Anthony at last.

For some time Mark made no comment. Then, 'A bit too touching,' he brought out.

Anthony looked into his face and saw there a demonstration of the anatomy of sardonic irony. There was another silence. The clock, which was supported by two draped nymphs in gilded bronze, ticked from its place among the imitation Dresden figures that thronged the shelves of the elaborate overmantel. Hideous on purpose, Anthony said to himself, as his eye took in the details of each separate outrage on good taste. And the poor old horse — was she merely the largest, the most monstrous of the knick-knacks? 'I'm surprised,' he said aloud, 'that you don't wear a hair-shirt. Or perhaps you do?' he added.

Chapter Twenty-Three. June 1st 1934

TONIGHT, AT DINNER with Mark, saw Helen, for the first time since my return from America.

Consider the meaning of a face. A face can be a symbol, signifying matter which would require volumes for its exposition in successive detail. A vast sum, for the person on whom it acts as a symbol, of feelings and thoughts, of remembered sensations, impressions, judgements, experiences — all rendered synthetically and simultaneously, at a single glance. As she came into the restaurant, it was like the drowning man's instantaneous vision of life. A futile, bad, unsatisfactory life; and a vision charged with regret. All those wrong choices, those opportunities irrevocably missed! And that sad face was not only a symbol, indirectly expressive of my history; it was also a directly expressive emblem of hers. A history for whose saddening and embittering quality I was at least in part responsible. If I had accepted the love she wanted to give me, if I had consented to love (for I could have loved) in return . . . But I preferred to be free, for the sake of my work — in other words, to remain enslaved in a world where there could be no question of freedom, for the sake of my amusements. I insisted on irresponsible sensuality, rather than love. Insisted, in other words, on her becoming a means to the end of my detached, physical satisfaction and, conversely, of course, on my becoming a means to hers.

Curious how irrelevant appears the fact of having been, technically, 'lovers'! It doesn't qualify her indifference or my feeling. There's a maxim of La Rochefoucauld's about women forgetting the favours they have accorded to past lovers. I used to like it for being cynical; but really it's just a bald statement of the fact that something that's meant to be irrelevant, i.e. sensuality, is irrelevant. Into my present complex of thoughts, feelings, and memories, physical desire, I find, enters hardly at all. In spite of

the fact that my memories are of intense and complete satisfactions. Surprising, the extent to which eroticism is a matter of choice and focus. I don't think much in erotic terms now; but very easily could, if I wished to. Choose to consider individuals in their capacity as potential givers and receivers of pleasure, focus attention on sensual satisfactions: eroticism will become immensely important and great quantities of energy will be directed along erotic channels. Choose a different conception of the individual, another focal range: energy will flow elsewhere and eroticism seem relatively unimportant.

Spent a good part of the evening arguing about peace and social justice. Mark, as sarcastically disagreeable as he knew how to be about Miller and what he called my neo-Jesus avatar. 'If the swine want to rip one another's guts out, let them; anyhow, you can't prevent them. Swine will be swine.' But may become human, I insisted. *Homo non nascitur, fit.* Or rather makes himself out of the ready-made elements and potentialities of man with which he's born.

Helen's was the usual communist argument — no peace or social justice without a preliminary 'liquidation' of capitalists, liberals, and so forth. As though you could use violent, unjust means and achieve peace and justice! Means determine ends; and must be like the ends proposed. Means intrinsically different from the ends proposed achieve ends like themselves, not like those they were meant to achieve. Violence and war will produce a peace and a social organization having the potentialities of more violence and war. The war to end war resulted, as usual, in a peace essentially like war; the revolution to achieve communism, in a hierarchical state where a minority rules by police methods à la Metternich-Hitler-Mussolini, and where the power to oppress in virtue of being rich is replaced by the power to oppress in virtue of being a member of the oligarchy. Peace and social justice, only obtainable by means that are just and pacific. And people will behave justly and pacifically only if they have trained themselves as individuals to do so, even in circumstances where it would be easier to behave violently and unjustly. And the training must be simultaneously physical and mental. Knowledge of how to use the self and of what the self should be used for. Neo-Ignatius and neo-Sandow was Mark's verdict.

Put Mark into a cab and walked, as the night was beautiful, all the way from Soho to Chelsea. Theatres were closing. Helen brightened suddenly to a mood of malevolent high spirits. Commenting in a ringing voice on passers-by. As though we were at the Zoo. Embarrassing, but funny and acute, as when she pointed to the rich young men in top-hats trying to look like the De Reszke Aristocrat, or opening and shutting cigarette-cases in the style of Gerald du Maurier; to the women trying to look like Vogue, or expensive advertisements (for winter cruises or fur coats), head in air, eyelids dropped superciliously — or slouching like screen vamps, with their stomachs stuck out, as though expecting twins. The pitiable models on which people form themselves! Once it was the Imitation of Christ — now of Hollywood.

Were silent when we had left the crowds. Then Helen asked if I were happy. I said, yes — though didn't know if happiness was the right word. More substantial, more complete, more interested, more aware. If not happy exactly, at any rate having greater potentialities for happiness. Another silence. Then, 'I thought I could never see you again, because of that dog. Then Ekki came, and the dog was quite irrelevant. And now he's gone, it's still irrelevant. For another reason. Everything's irrelevant, for that matter. Except communism.' But that was an afterthought — an expression of piety, uttered by force of habit. I said our ends were the same, the means adopted, different. For her, end justified means; for me, means the end. Perhaps, I said, one day she would see the importance of the means.

June 3rd 1934

At today's lesson with Miller found myself suddenly a step forward in my grasp of the theory and practice of the technique. To learn proper use one must first inhibit all improper uses of the self. Refuse to be hurried into gaining ends by the equivalent (in personal, psycho-physiological terms) of violent revolution; inhibit this tendency, concentrate on the means whereby the end is to be achieved; then act. This process entails knowing good and bad use — knowing them apart. By the 'feel'. Increased awareness and increased power of control result. Awareness and control: trivialities take on new significance. Indeed, nothing is trivial any more or negligible. Cleaning teeth, putting on shoes — such processes are reduced by habits of bad use to a kind of tiresome non-existence. Become conscious, inhibit, cease to be a

greedy end-gainer, concentrate on means: tiresome non-existence turns into absorbingly interesting reality. In Evans-Wentz's last book on Tibet I find among 'The Precepts of the Gurus' the injunction: 'Constantly retain alertness of consciousness in walking, in sitting, in eating, in sleeping.' An injunction, like most injunctions, unaccompanied by instructions as to the right way of carrying it out. Here, practical instructions accompany injunctions; one is taught how to become aware. And not only that. Also how to perform rightly, instead of wrongly, the activities of which there is awareness. Nor is this all. Awareness and power of control are transferable. Skill acquired in getting to know the muscular aspect of mind-body can be carried over into the exploration of other aspects. There is increasing ability to detect one's motives for any given piece of behaviour, to assess correctly the quality of a feeling, the real significance of a thought. Also, one becomes more clearly and consistently conscious of what's going on in the outside world, and the judgement associated with that heightened consciousness is improved. Control also is transferred. Acquire the art of inhibiting muscular bad use and you acquire thereby the art of inhibiting more complicated trains of behaviour. Not only this: there is prevention as well as cure. Given proper correlation, many occasions for behaving undesirably just don't arise. There is an end, for example, of neurotic anxieties and depressions — whatever the previous history. For note; most infantile and adolescent histories are disastrous: yet only some individuals develop serious neurosis. Those, precisely, in whom use of the self is particularly bad. They succumb because resistance is poor. In practice, neurosis is always associated with some kind of wrong use. (Note the typically bad physical posture of neurotics and lunatics. The stooping back, the muscular tension, the sunken head.) Re-educate. Give back correct physical use. You remove a keystone of the arch constituting the neurotic personality. The neurotic personality collapses. And in its place is built up a personality in which all the habits of physical use are correct. But correct use entails — since body-mind is indivisible except in thought — correct mental use. Most of us are slightly neurotic. Even slight neurosis provides endless occasions for bad behaviour. Teaching of right use gets rid of neurosis — therefore of many occasions for bad behaviour. Hitherto preventive ethics has been thought of as external to individuals. Social and economic reforms carried out with a view to eliminating occasions for bad behaviour. This is important. But not nearly enough. Belief that it is enough makes the social-reform conception of progress nonsensical. The knowledge that it is nonsensical has always given me pleasure. Sticking pins in large, highly inflated balloons — one of the most delightful of amusements. But a bit childish; and after a time it palls. So how satisfactory to find that there seems to be a way of making sense of the nonsense. A method of achieving progress from within as well as from without. Progress, not only as a citizen, a machine-minder and machine-user, but also as a human being.

Prevention is good; but can't eliminate the necessity for cure. The power to cure bad behaviour seems essentially similar to the power to cure bad coordination. One learns this last when learning the proper use of self. There is a transference. The power to inhibit and control. It becomes easier to inhibit undesirable impulses. Easier to follow as well as see and approve the better. Easier to put good intentions into practice and be patient, good-tempered, kind, unrapacious, chaste.

Chapter Twenty-Four. June 23rd and July 5th 1927

SHE COULDN'T AFFORD it; but that didn't matter. Mrs Amberley was used to doing things she couldn't afford. It was really so simple; you just sold a little War Loan, and there you were. There you were with your motor tour in Italy, your nudes by Pascin, your account at Fortnum and Mason. And there, finally, you were in Berkshire, in the most adorable little old house, smelling of pot-pourri, with towering lime trees on the lawn and the downs at your back door, stretching away mile after mile in smooth green nakedness under the sky. She couldn't afford it; but it was so beautiful, so perfect. And after all, what were a hundred and fifty pounds of War Loan? How much did they bring in? About five pounds a year, when the taxes had been paid. And what were five pounds a year? Nothing. Absolutely

nothing. And besides, Gerry was going to re-invest her money for her. Her capital might have shrunk; but her income would soon start growing. Next year she would be able to afford it; and so, in anticipation of that happy time, here she was, sitting under the lime trees on the lawn with her guests around her.

Propped up on one elbow, Helen was lying on a rug behind her mother's chair. She was paying no attention to what was being said. The country was so exquisitely beautiful that one really couldn't listen to old Anthony holding forth about the place of machines in history; no, the only thing one could do in such heavenly circumstances was to play with the kitten. What the kitten liked best, she found, was the rug game. You pushed a twig under the corner of the rug, very slowly, till the end reappeared again on the other side, like the head of an animal cautiously peeping out from its burrow. A little way, very suspiciously; and then with a jerk you withdrew it. The animal had taken fright and scuttled back to cover. Then, plucking up its courage, out it came once more, went nosing to the right and left between the grass stems, then retired to finish its meal safely under the rug. Long seconds passed; and suddenly out it popped like a jack-in-the-box, as though it were trying to catch any impending danger unaware, and was back again in a flash. Then once more, very doubtfully and reluctantly — impelled only by brute necessity and against its better judgement — it emerged into the open, conscious, you felt, of being the predestined victim, foreknowing its dreadful fate. And all this time the tabby kitten was following its comings and goings with a bright expressionless ferocity. Each time the twig retired under the rug, he came creeping, with an infinity of precautions, a few inches nearer. Nearer, nearer, and now the moment had come for him to crouch for the final, decisive spring. The green eyes stared with an absurd balefulness; the tiny body was so heavily overcharged with a tigerish intensity of purpose that, not the tail only, but the whole hindquarters shook under the emotional pressure. Overhead, meanwhile, the lime trees rustled in a faint wind, the round dapplings of golden light moved noiselessly back and forth across the grass. On the other side of the lawn the herbaceous borders blazed in the sunshine as though they were on fire, and beyond them lay the downs like huge animals, fast asleep, with the indigo shadows of clouds creeping across their flanks. It was all so beautiful, so heavenly, that every now and then Helen simply couldn't stand it any longer, but had to drop the twig and catch up the kitten, and rub her cheek against the silky fur, and whisper meaningless words to him in baby language, and hold him up with ridiculously dangling paws in front of her face, so that their noses almost touched, and stare into those blankly bright green eyes, till at last the helpless little beast began to mew so pathetically that she had to let him go again. 'Poor darling!' she murmured repentantly. 'Did I torture him?' But the torturing had served its purpose; the painful excess of her happiness had overflowed, as it were, and left her at ease, the heavenly beauty was once more supportable. She picked up the twig. Forgivingly, for he had already forgotten everything, the kitten started the game all over again.

The ringing of a bicycle bell made her look up. It was the postman riding up the drive with the afternoon delivery. Helen scrambled to her feet and, taking the kitten with her, walked quickly but, she hoped, inconspicuously towards the house. At the door she met the parlour-maid coming out with the letters. There were two for her. The first she opened was from Joyce, from Aldershot. (She had to smile as she read the address at the head of the paper. 'Joyce is now living at A-aldershot,' her mother would say, lingering over the first syllable of the name with a kind of hollow emphasis and in a tone of slightly shocked incredulity, as though it were really inconceivable that any daughter of hers should find herself at such a place. 'At A-aldershot, my dear.' And she managed to endow that military suburb with the fabulous strangeness of Tibet, the horror and remoteness of darkest Liberia. 'Living at A-a-aldershot — as a mem-sahib.')

Just a line [Helen read, still smiling] to thank you for your sweet letter. I am rather worried by what you say about Mother's taking so many sleeping draughts. They can't be good for her. Colin thinks she ought to take more healthy exercise. Perhaps you might suggest riding. I have been having riding lessons lately, and it is really lovely once you are used to it. We are now quite settled in, and you have no idea how adorable our little house looks now. Colin and I worked like niggers to get things straight, and I must say the results are worth all the trouble. I had to pay a lot of nerve-racking calls; but everybody has been very nice to me and I feel quite at home now. Colin sends his love. — Yours,

Joyce

The other letter — and that was why she had gone to meet the postman — was from Hugh Ledwidge. If the letters had been brought to Mrs Amberley on the lawn; if she had sorted them out, in public . . . Helen flushed with imagined shame and anger at the thought of what her mother might have said about that letter from Hugh. In spite of all the people sitting round; or rather because of them. When they were alone, Helen generally got off with a teasing word. But when other people were there, Mrs Amberley would feel inspired by her audience to launch out into elaborate descriptions and commentaries. ‘Hugh and Helen,’ she would explain, ‘they’re a mixture between Socrates and Alcibiades and Don Quixote and Dulcinea.’ There were moments when she hated her mother. ‘It’s a case,’ said the remembered voice, ‘a case of: I could not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not ethnology more.’ Helen had had to suffer a great deal on account of those letters.

She tore open the envelope.

Midsummer Day, Helen. But you’re too young, I expect, to think much about the significance of special days. You’ve only been in the world for about seven thousand days altogether; and one has got to have lived through at least ten thousand before one begins to realize that there aren’t an indefinite number of them and that you can’t do exactly what you want with them. I’ve been here more than thirteen thousand days, and the end’s visible, the boundless possibilities have narrowed down. One must cut according to one’s cloth; and one’s cloth is not only exiguous; it’s also of one special kind — and generally of poor quality at that. When one’s young, one thinks one can tailor one’s time into all sorts of splendid and fantastic garments — shakoes and chasubles and Ph.D. gowns; Nijinsky’s tights and Rimbaud’s slate-blue trousers and Garibaldi’s red shirt. But by the time you’ve lived ten thousand days, you begin to realize that you’ll be lucky if you succeed in cutting one decent workaday suit out of the time at your disposal. It’s a depressing realization; and Midsummer is one of the days that brings it home. The longest day. One of the sixty or seventy longest days of one’s five and twenty thousand. And what have I done with this longest day — longest of so few, of so uniform, of so shoddy? The catalogue of my occupations would be humiliatingly absurd and pointless. The only creditable and, in any profound sense of the word, reasonable thing I’ve done is to think a little about you, Helen, and write this letter. . . .

‘Any interesting letters?’ asked Mrs Amberley when her daughter came out again from the house.

‘Only a note from Joyce.’

‘From our mem-sahib?’

Helen nodded.

‘She’s living at A-aldershot, you know,’ said Mary Amberley to the assembled company. ‘At A-aldershot,’ she insisted, dragging out the first syllable, till the place became ludicrously unreal and the fact that Joyce lived there, a fantastic and slightly indecent myth.

‘You can thank your stars that you aren’t living at Aldershot,’ said Anthony. ‘After all, you ought to be. A general’s daughter.’

For the first moment Mary was put out by his interruption; she had looked forward to developing her fantastic variations on the theme of Aldershot. But her good humour returned as she perceived the richer opportunity with which he had provided her. ‘Yes, I know,’ she cried eagerly. ‘A general’s daughter. And do you realize that, but for the grace of God, I might at this moment be a colonel’s wife? I was within an ace of marrying a soldier. Within an ace, I tell you. The most ravishingly beautiful creature. But ivory,’ she rapped her forehead, ‘solid ivory. It was lucky he was such a crashing bore. If he’d been the tiniest bit brighter, I’d have gone out to India with him. And then what? It’s unimaginable.’

‘Unimaginable!’ Beppo repeated, with a little squirt of laughter.

‘On the contrary,’ said Anthony, ‘perfectly imaginable. The club every evening between six and eight; parties at government house; adultery in the hot weather, polo in the cold; incessant bother with the Indian servants; permanent money difficulties and domestic scenes; occasional touches of malaria and dysentery; the monthly parcel of second-hand novels from The Times Book Club; and all the time the

inexorable advance of age — twice as fast as in England. If you've ever been to India, nothing's more easy to imagine.'

'And you think all that would have happened to me?' asked Mary.

'What else could have happened? You don't imagine you'd have gone about buying Pascins in Quetta?'

Mary laughed.

'Or reading Max Jacob in Rawalpindi? You'd have been a mem-sahib like all the other mem-sahibs. A bit more bored and discontented than most of them, perhaps. But still a mem-sahib.'

'I suppose so,' she agreed. 'But is one so hopelessly at the mercy of circumstances?'

He nodded.

'You don't think I'd have escaped?'

'I can't see why.'

'But that means there isn't really any such thing as me. Me,' she repeated, laying a hand on her breast. 'I don't really exist.'

'No, of course you don't. Not in that absolute sense. You're a chemical compound, not an element.'

'But if one doesn't really exist, one wonders why . . .' she hesitated.

'Why one makes such a fuss about things,' Anthony suggested. 'All that howling and hurraing and gnashing of teeth. About the adventures of a self that isn't really a self — just the result of a lot of accidents. And of course,' he went on, 'once you start wondering, you see at once that there is no reason for making such a fuss. And then you don't make a fuss — that is, if you're sensible. Like me,' he added, smiling.

There was a silence. 'You don't make a fuss,' Mrs Amberley repeated to herself, and thought of Gerry Watchett. 'You don't make a fuss.' But how was it possible not to make a fuss, when he was so stupid, so selfish, so brutal, and at the same time so excruciatingly desirable — like water in the desert, like sleep after insomnia? She hated him; but the thought that in a few days he would be there, staying in the house, sent a prickling sensation of warmth through her body. She shut her eyes and drew a deep breath.

Still carrying the kitten, like a furry baby, in her arms, Helen had walked away across the lawn. She wanted to be alone, out of ear-shot of that laughter, those jarringly irrelevant voices. 'Seven thousand days,' she repeated again and again. And it was not only the declining sun that made everything seem so solemnly and richly beautiful; it was also the thought of the passing days, of human limitations, of the final unescapable dissolution. 'Seven thousand days,' she said aloud, 'seven thousand days.' The tears came into her eyes; she pressed the sleeping kitten more closely to her breast.

* * *

Savernake, the White Horse, Oxford; and in between whiles the roar and screech of Gerry's Bugatti, the rush of the wind, the swerves and bumps, the sickening but at the same time delicious terrors of excessive speed. And now they were back again. After an age, it seemed; and at the same time it was as though they had never been away. The car came to a halt; but Helen made no move to alight.

'What's the matter?' Gerry asked. 'Why don't you get out?'

'It seems so terribly final,' she said with a sigh. 'Like breaking a spell. Like stepping out of the magic circle.'

'Magic?' he repeated questioningly. 'What kind? White or black?'

Helen laughed. 'Piebald. Absolutely heavenly and absolutely awful. You know, Gerry, you ought to be put in jail, the way you drive. Or in a lunatic asylum. Crazy and criminal. But I adored it,' she added, as she opened the door and stepped out.

'Good!' was all he answered, while he gave her a smile that was as studiously unamorous as he could make it. He threw the car into gear and, in a stink of burnt castor oil, shot off round the house, towards the garage.

Charming! he was thinking. And how wise he had been to take that jolly, honest-to-God, big-brother line with her! Ground bait. Getting the game accustomed to you. She'd soon be eating out of his hand.

The real trouble, of course, was Mary. Tiresome bitch! he thought, with a sudden passion of loathing. Jealous, suspicious, interfering. Behaving as though he were her private property. And greedy, insatiable. Perpetually thrusting herself upon him — thrusting that ageing body of hers. His face, as he manoeuvred the car into the garage, was puckered into the folds of distaste. But thank God, he went on to reflect, she'd got this chill on the liver, or whatever it was. That ought to keep her quiet for a bit, keep her out of the way.

Without troubling to take off her coat, and completely forgetting her mother's illness and for the moment her very existence, Helen crossed the hall and, almost running, burst into the kitchen.

'Where's Tompy, Mrs Weeks?' she demanded of the cook. The effect of the sunshine and the country and Gerry's Bugatti had been such that it was now absolutely essential to her that she should take the kitten in her arms. Immediately. 'I must have Tompy,' she insisted. And by the way of excuse and explanation, 'I didn't have time to see him this morning,' she added; 'we started in such a hurry.'

'Tompy doesn't seem to be well, Miss Helen.' Mrs Weeks put away her sewing.

'Not well?'

'I put him in here,' Mrs Weeks went on, getting up from her Windsor chair and leading the way to the scullery. 'It's cooler. He seemed to feel the heat so. As though he was feverish like. I'm sure I don't know what's the matter with him,' she concluded in a tone half of complaint, half of sympathy. She was sorry for Tompy. But she was also sorry for herself because Tompy had given her all this trouble.

The kitten was lying in the shadow, under the sink. Crouching down beside the basket, Helen stretched out her hand to take him; then, with a little exclamation of horror, withdrew it, as though from the contact of something repellent.

'But what has happened to him?' she cried.

The little cat's tabby coat had lost all its smoothness, all its silky lustre, and was matted into damp uneven tufts. The eyes were shut and gummy with a yellow discharge. A running at the nose had slimed the beautifully patterned fur of the face. The absurd lovely little Tompy she had played with only yesterday, the comic and exquisite Tompy she had held up, pathetically helpless, in one hand, had rubbed her face against, had stared into the eyes of, was gone, and in his place lay a limp unclean little rag of living refuse. Like those kidneys, it suddenly occurred to her with a qualm of disgust; and at once she felt ashamed of herself for having had the thought, for having, in that first gesture of recoil, automatically acted upon the thought even before she had consciously had it.

'How beastly I am!' she thought. 'Absolutely beastly!'

Tompy was sick, miserable, dying perhaps. And she had been too squeamish even to touch him. Making an effort to overcome her distaste, she reached out once more, picked up the little cat, and with the fingers of her free hand caressed (with what a sickening reluctance!) the dank bedraggled fur. The tears came into her eyes, overflowed, ran down her cheeks.

'It's too awful, it's too awful,' she repeated in a breaking voice. Poor little Tompy! Beautiful, adorable, funny little Tompy! Murdered — no; worse than murdered: reduced to a squalid little lump of dirt; for no reason, just senselessly; and on this day of all days, this heavenly day with the clouds over the White Horse, the sunshine between the leaves in Savernake forest. And now, to make it worse, she was disgusted by the poor little beast, couldn't bear to touch him, as though he were one of those filthy kidneys — she, who had pretended to love him, who did love him, she insisted to herself. But it was no good her holding him like this and stroking him; it made no difference to what she was really feeling. She might perform the gesture of overcoming her disgust; but the disgust was still there. In spite of the love.

She lifted a streaming face to Mrs Weeks. 'What shall we do?'

Mrs Weeks shook her head. 'I never found there was much you could do,' she said. 'Not for cats.'

'But there must be something.'

'Nothing except leave them alone,' insisted Mrs Weeks, with a pessimism evidently reinforced by her determination not to be bothered. Then, touched by the spectacle of Helen's misery, 'He'll be all right, dear,' she added consolingly. 'There's no need to cry. Just let him sleep it off.'

Footsteps sounded on the flagstones of the stable yard, and through the open window came the notes of 'Yes, sir, she's my baby,' whistled slightly out of tune. Helen straightened herself up from her crouching position and, leaning out, 'Gerry!' she called; then added, in response to his expression of surprised commiseration, 'Something awful has happened.'

In his large powerful hands Tompy seemed more miserably tiny than ever. But how gentle he was, and how efficient! Watching him, as he swabbed the little cat's eyes, as he wiped away the slime from the nostrils, Helen was amazed by the delicate precision of his movements. She herself, she reflected with a heightened sense of her own shameful ineptitude, had been incapable of doing anything except stroke Tompy's fur and feel disgusted. Hopeless, quite hopeless! And when he asked for her help in getting Tompy to swallow half an aspirin tablet crushed in milk, she bungled everything and spilt the medicine.

'Perhaps I can do it better by myself,' he said, and took the spoon from her. The cup of her humiliation was full. . . .

* * *

Mary Amberley was indignant. Here she was, feverish and in pain, worrying herself, what was more, into higher fever, worse pain, with the thought of Gerry's dangerous driving. And here was Helen, casually strolling into her room after having been in the house for more than two hours — more than two hours without having had the common decency to come and see how she was, more than two hours while her mother — her mother, mind you! — had lain there, in an agony of distress, thinking that they must have had an accident.

'But Tompy was dying,' Helen explained. 'He's dead now.' Her face was very pale, her eyes red with tears.

'Well, if you prefer a wretched cat to your mother . . .'

'Besides, you were asleep. If you hadn't been asleep, you'd have heard the car coming back.'

'Now you're begrudging me my sleep,' said Mrs Amberley bitterly. 'Aren't I to be allowed a moment's respite from pain? Besides,' she added, 'I wasn't asleep. I was delirious. I've been delirious several times today. Of course I didn't hear the car.' Her eyes fell on the bottle of Somnifaine standing on the table by her bed, and the suspicion that Helen might also have noticed it made her still more angry. 'I always knew you were selfish,' she went on. 'But I must say I didn't think you'd be quite as bad as this.'

At another time Helen would have flared up in angry self-defence, or else, convicted of guilt, would have burst out crying. But today she was feeling too miserable to be able to shed any more tears, too much subdued by shame and unhappiness to resent even the most flagrant injustice. Her silence exasperated Mrs Amberley still further.

'I always used to think,' she resumed, 'that you were only selfish from thoughtlessness. But now I see that it's heartlessness. Plain heartlessness. Here am I — having sacrificed the best years of my life to you; and what do I get in return?' Her voice trembled as she asked the question. She was convinced of the reality of that sacrifice, profoundly moved by the thought of its extent, its martyr-like enormity. 'The most cynical indifference. I might die in a ditch; but you wouldn't care. You'd be much more upset about your cat. And now go away,' she almost shouted, 'go away! I know my temperature's gone up. Go away.'

* * *

After a lonely dinner — for Helen was keeping her room on the plea of a headache — Gerry went up to sit with Mrs Amberley. He was particularly charming that evening, and so affectionately solicitous that Mary forgot all her accumulated grounds of complaint and fell in love with him all over again, and for another set of reasons — not because he was so handsome, so easily and insolently dominating, such a ruthless and accomplished lover, but because he was kind, thoughtful, and affectionate, was everything, in a word, she had previously known he wasn't.

Half past ten struck. He rose from his chair. 'Time for your spot of shut-eye.'

Mary protested; he was firm — for her own good.

Thirty drops were the normal dose of Somnifaine; but he measured out forty-five, so as to make quite sure of her sleeping, made her drink, then tucked her up ('like an old Nanny,' she cried laughing

with pleasure, as he busied himself round the bed) and, after kissing her good night with an almost material tenderness, turned out the light and left her.

The clock of the village church sounded eleven — how sadly, Helen thought as she listened to the strokes of the distant bell, how lonely! It was as though she were listening to the voice of her own spirit, reverberated in some mysterious way from the walls of the enclosing night. One, two, three, four . . . Each sweet, cracked note seemed more hopelessly mournful, seemed to rise from the depths of a more extreme solitude, than the last. Tompy had died, and she hadn't even been capable of giving him a spoonful of milk and crushed aspirin, hadn't had the strength to overcome her disgust.

Selfish and heartless: her mother was quite right. But lonely as well as selfish, all alone among the senseless malignities that had murdered poor little Tompy; and her heartlessness spoke with the despairing voice of that bell; night was empty and enormous all around.

'Helen!'

She started and turned her head. The room was impenetrably black.

'It's me,' Gerry's voice continued. 'I was so worried about you. Are you feeling better?'

Her first surprise and alarm had given place to a feeling of resentment that he should intrude upon the privacy of her unhappiness. 'You needn't have bothered,' she said coldly. 'I'm quite all right.'

Enclosed in his faint aura of Turkish tobacco, of peppermint-flavoured tooth-paste and bay rum, he approached invisibly. Through the blanket, a groping hand touched her shin; then the springs creaked and tilted under his weight as he sat down on the edge of the bed.

'Felt a bit responsible,' he went on. 'All that looping the loop!' The tone of his voice implied the unseen smile, suggested a whimsical and affectionate twinkling of hidden eyes.

She made no comment; there was a long silence. A bad start, Gerry thought, and frowned to himself in the darkness; then began again on another tack.

'I can't help thinking of that miserable little Tompy,' he said in a different voice. 'Extraordinary how upsetting it is when an animal gets ill like that. It seems frightfully unfair.'

In a few minutes she was crying, and he had an excuse to console her.

Gently, as he had handled Tompy, and with all the tenderness that had so much touched Mrs Amberley, he stroked her hair, and later, when the sobs began to subside, drew the fingers of his other hand along her bare arm. Again and again, with the patient regularity of a nurse lulling her charge to sleep; again and again . . . Three hundred times at least, he was thinking, before he risked any gesture that could possibly be interpreted as amorous. Three hundred times; and even then the caresses would have to deviate by insensible degrees, as though by a series of accidents, till gradually, unintentionally, the hand that was now on her arm would come at last to be brushing, with the same maternal persistence, against her breast, while the fingers that came and went methodically among the curls would have strayed to the ear, and from the ear across the cheek to the lips, and would linger there lightly, chastely, but charged with the stuff of kisses, proxies, and forerunners of the mouth that would ultimately come down on hers, through the darkness, for the reward of its long patience.

Chapter Twenty-Five. May 20th 1931

IT WAS ANOTHER 'knock'. Fitzimmons, Jefferies, Jack Johnson, Carpentier, Dempsey, Gene Tunney — the champions came and went; but the metaphor in which Mr Beavis described his successive bereavements remained unaltered.

Yes, a hard knock. And yet, it seemed to Anthony, there was a note almost of triumph in his father's reminiscences, over the luncheon table, of Uncle James as a schoolboy.

'Poor James . . . such curly hair he had then . . . nos et mutamur.' The commiseration and regret were mingled with a certain satisfaction — the satisfaction of an old man who finds himself still alive, still able to attend the funerals of his contemporaries, his juniors.

‘Two years,’ he insisted. ‘There was the best part of two years between James and me. I was Beavis major at school.’

He shook his head mournfully; but the old, tired eyes had brightened with an irrepressible light. ‘Poor James!’ He sighed. ‘We hadn’t seen one another much these last years. Not since his conversion. How did he do it? It beats me. A Catholic — he of all people . . .’

Anthony said nothing. But after all, he was thinking, it wasn’t so surprising. The poor old thing had grown up as a Bradlaugh atheist. Ought to have been blissfully happy, parading his cosmic defiance, his unyielding despair. But he had had the bad luck to be a homosexual at a time when one couldn’t avow it even to oneself. Ingrowing pederasty — it had poisoned his whole life. Had turned that metaphysical and delightfully Pickwickian despair into real, common or garden misery. Misery and neurasthenia; the old man had been half mad, really. (Which hadn’t prevented him from being a first-rate actuary.) Then, during the war, the clouds had lifted. One could be kind to wounded soldiers — be kind pro patria and with a blameless conscience. Anthony remembered Uncle James’s visits to him in hospital. He had come almost every day. Loaded with gifts for a dozen adopted nephews as well as for the real one. On his thin, melancholy face there had been, in those days, a perpetual smile. But happiness never lasts. The armistice had come; and, after those four years in paradise, hell had seemed blacker than ever. In 1923 he had turned papist. It was only to be expected.

But Mr Beavis simply couldn’t understand. The idea of James surrounded by Jesuits, James bobbing up and down at Mass, James going to Lourdes with his inoperable tumour, James dying with all the consolations of religion — it filled him with horrified amazement.

‘And yet,’ said Anthony, ‘I admire the way they usher you out of life. Dying — it’s apt to be an animal process. More exclusively animal even than sea-sickness.’ He was silent for a moment, thinking of poor Uncle James’s last and most physiological hour. The heavy, snoring breath, the mouth cavernously gaping, the scrabbling of the hands.

‘How wise the Church has been to turn it into a ceremonial!’

‘Charades,’ said Mr Beavis contemptuously.

‘But good charades,’ Anthony insisted. ‘A work of art. In itself, the event’s like a rough channel crossing — only rather worse. But they manage to turn it into something rather fine and significant. Chiefly for the spectator, of course. But perhaps also significant for the actor.’

There was a silence. The maid changed the plates and brought in the sweet. ‘Some apple tart?’ Pauline questioned, as she cut the crust.

‘Apple pie, my dear.’ Mr Beavis’s tone was severe. ‘When will you learn that a tart’s uncovered? A thing with a roof is a pie.’

They helped themselves to cream and sugar.

‘By the way,’ said Pauline suddenly, ‘had you heard about Mrs Foxe?’ Anthony and Mr Beavis shook their heads. ‘Maggie Clark told me yesterday. She’s had a stroke.’

‘Dear, dear,’ said Mr Beavis. Then, reflectively, ‘Curious the way people pass out of one’s life,’ he added. ‘After being very much in it. I don’t believe I’ve seen Mrs Foxe half a dozen times in the last twenty years. And yet before that . . .’

‘She had no sense of humour,’ said Pauline, by the way of explanation.

Mr Beavis turned to Anthony. ‘I don’t suppose you’ve . . . well, “kept up” with her very closely, not since that poor boy of hers died.’

Anthony shook his head, without speaking. It was not agreeable to be reminded of all that he had done to avoid keeping up with Mrs Foxe. Those long affectionate letters she had written to him during the first year of the war — letters which he had answered more and more briefly, perfunctorily, conventionally; and at last hadn’t answered at all; hadn’t even read. Hadn’t even read, and yet — moved by some superstitious compunction — had never thrown away. At least a dozen of the blue envelopes, addressed in the large, clear, flowing writing, were still lying unopened in one of the drawers of his desk. Their presence there was, in some obscure, inexplicable way, a salve to his conscience. Not an

entirely effective salve. His father's question had made him feel uncomfortable; he hastened to change the subject.

'And what have you been delving into recently?' he asked, in the sort of playfully archaic language that his father himself might have used.

Mr Beavis chuckled and begun to describe his researches into modern American slang. Such savoury locutions! Such an Elizabethan wealth of new coinages and original metaphors! Horse feathers, dish the dope, button up your face — delicious! 'And how would you like to be called a fever frau?' he asked his younger daughter, Diana, who had sat in silence, severely aloof, throughout the meal. 'Or worse, a cinch pushover, my dear? Or I might say that you had a dame complex, Anthony. Or refer regretfully to your habit of smooching the sex jobs.' He twinkled with pleasure.

'It's like so much Chinese,' said Pauline from the other end of the table. Across her round placid face mirth radiated out in concentric waves of soft pink flesh; the succession of her chins shook like jelly. 'He thinks he's the cat's pyjamas, your father does.' She reached out, helped herself to a couple of chocolate creams from the silver bowl on the table in front of her and popped one of them into her mouth. 'The cat's pyjamas,' she repeated indistinctly and heaved with renewed laughter.

Mr Beavis, who had been working himself up to the necessary pitch of naughtiness, leaned forward and asked Anthony, in a confidential whisper, 'What would you do if the fever frau had the misfortune to be storked?'

They were darlings, Diana was thinking; that went without saying. But how silly they could be, how inexpressibly silly! All the same, Anthony had no right to criticize them; and under that excessive politeness of his he obviously was criticizing them, the wretch! She felt quite indignant. Nobody had a right to criticize them except herself and possibly her sister. She tried to think of something unpleasant to say to Anthony; but he had given her no opening and she had no gift for epigram. She had to be content with silently frowning. And anyhow it was time to go back to the lab.

Getting up, 'I must go,' she said in her curt, abrupt way. 'I absolutely forbid you to eat all those sweets,' she added, as she bent down to kiss her mother. 'Doctor's orders.'

'You're not a doctor yet, darling.'

'No, but I shall be next year.'

Tranquilly Pauline poked the second chocolate cream into her mouth. 'And next year, perhaps, I'll stop eating sweets,' she said.

Anthony left a few minutes later. Walking through South Kensington, he found his thoughts harking back to Mrs Foxe. Had the stroke, he wondered, been a bad one? Was she paralysed? He had been so anxious to prevent his father from talking about her, that there had been no time for Pauline to say. He pictured her lying helpless, half dead, and was horrified to find himself feeling, along with sympathy, a certain satisfaction, a certain sense of relief. For, after all, she was the chief witness for the prosecution, the person who could testify most damningly against him. Dead, or only half dead, she was out of court; and, in her absence, there was no longer any case against him. With part of his being he was glad of Pauline's news. Shamefully glad. He tried to think of something else, and, meanwhile, boarded a bus so as to reach more quickly the haven of the London Library.

He spent nearly three hours there, looking up references to the history of the Anabaptists, then walked home to his rooms in Bloomsbury. He was expecting Gladys that evening before dinner. The girl had been a bit tiresome recently; but still . . . He smiled to himself with anticipatory pleasure.

She was due at six; but at a quarter past she had not yet come. Nor yet at half past. Nor yet at seven. Nor yet at half past seven. At eight, he was looking at those blue envelopes, postmarked in 1914 and 1915 and addressed in Mrs Foxe's writing — looking at them and wondering, in self-questioning despondency that had succeeded his first impatience and rage, whether he should open them. He was still wondering, when the telephone bell rang, and there was Mark Staithes asking him if by any chance he was free for dinner. A little party had formed itself at the last moment. Pitchley would be there, and his wife, the psychologist, and that Indian politician, Sen, and Helen Ledwidge . . . Anthony put the letters back in their drawer and hurried out of the house.

Chapter Twenty-Six. September 5th 1933

IT WAS AFTER two o'clock. Anthony lay on his back staring up into the darkness. Sleep, it seemed, deliberately refused to come, was being withheld by someone else, some malignant alien inhabiting his own body. Outside, in the pine trees the cicadas harped incessantly on the theme of their existence; and at long intervals a sound of cock-crowing would swell up out of the darkness, louder and nearer, until all the birds in the surrounding gardens were shouting defiance back and forth, peal answering peal. And then for no reason, first one, then another fell silent and the outburst died away fainter and fainter into the increasing distance — right across France, he fancied as he strained his ears after the receding sound, in a hurrying wave of ragged crowing. Hundreds of miles, perhaps. And then somewhere, the wave would turn and roll back again as swiftly as it had come. Back from the North Sea, perhaps; over the battlefields; round the fringes of Paris and from bird to distant bird through the forests; then across the plains of Beauce; up and down the hills of Burgundy and, like another aerial river of sound, headlong down the valley of the Rhone; past Valence, past Orange and Avignon, past Arles and Aix and across the bare hills of Provence; until here it was again, an hour after its previous passage, flowing tumultuously shrill across the cicadas' loud, unremitting equivalent of silence.

He was reminded suddenly of a passage in Lawrence's *The Man who Died*, and, thankful of an excuse to interrupt for a little his vain pursuit of sleep, he turned on the light and went downstairs to look for the book. Yes, here it was. 'As he came out, the young cock crowed. It was a diminished, pinched cry, but there was that in the voice of the bird stronger than chagrin. It was the necessity to live and even to cry out the triumph of life. The man who had died stood and watched the cock who had escaped and been caught, ruffling himself up, rising forward on his toes, throwing up his head, and parting his beak in another challenge from life to death. The brave sounds rang out, and though they were diminished by the cord round the bird's leg, they were not cut off. The man who had died looked nakedly on life, and saw a vast resoluteness everywhere flinging itself up in the stormy or subtle wave crests, foam-tips emerging out of the blue invisible, a black orange cock or the green flame-tongues out of the extremes of the fig tree. They came forth, these things and creatures of spring, glowing with desire and assertion. They came like crests of foam, out of the blue flood of the invisible desire, out of the vast invisible sea of strength, and they came coloured and tangible, evanescent, yet deathless in their coming. The man who had died looked on the great swing into existence of things that had not died, but he saw no longer their tremulous desire to exist and to be. He heard instead their ringing, ringing, defiant challenge to all other things existing. . . .'

Anthony read on till he had finished the story of the man who had died and come to life again, the man who was himself the escaped cock; then put away the book and went back to bed. The foam on the waves of that invisible sea of desire and strength. But life, life as such, he protested inwardly — it was not enough. How could one be content with the namelessness of mere energy, with the less than individuality of a power, that for all its mysterious divineness, was yet unconscious, beneath good and evil? The cicadas sounded incessantly, and again, at about four, the tide of cock-crowing came sweeping across the land and passed on out of hearing, towards Italy.

Life irrepressibly living itself out. But there were emblems, he reflected, more vividly impressive than the crowing cock or the young leaves breaking out from the winter fig tree's bone-white skeleton. He remembered that film he had seen of the fertilization of a rabbit's ovum. Spermatozoa, a span long on the screen, ferociously struggling towards their goal — the moonlike sphere of the egg. Countless, aimed from every side, their flagella in frantic vibration. And now the foremost had reached their objective, were burrowing into it, thrusting through the outer wall of living matter, tearing away in their violent haste whole cells that floated off and were lost. And at last one of the invaders had penetrated to the quick of the nucleus, the act of fertilization was consummated; and suddenly the hitherto passive sphere stirred into movement. There was a violent spasm of contraction; its smooth rounded surface became corrugated and in some way resistant to the other sperms that vainly threw themselves upon it. And

then the egg began to divide, bending in its walls upon itself till they met in the centre, and there were two cells instead of one; then, as the two cells repeated the process, four cells; then eight, then sixteen. And within the cells the granules of protoplasm were in continuous motion, like peas in a boiling pot, but self-activated, moving by their own energy.

In comparison with these minute fragments of living matter, the crowing cock, the cicadas endlessly repeating the proclamation of their existence, were only feebly alive. Life under the microscope seemed far more vehement and irrepressible than in the larger world. Consolingly and at the same time appallingly irrepressible. For, yes, it was also appalling, the awful unconsciousness of that unconquerable, crawling desire! And, oh, the horror of that display of sub-mental passion, of violent and impersonal egotism! Intolerable, unless one could think of it only as raw material and available energy.

Yes, raw material and a stream of energy. Impressive for their quantity, their duration. But qualitatively they were only potentially valuable: would become valuable only when made up into something else, only when used to serve an ulterior purpose. For Lawrence, the animal purpose had seemed sufficient and satisfactory. The cock, crowing, fighting, mating — anonymously; and man anonymous like the cock. Better such mindless anonymity, he had insisted, than the squalid relationships of human beings advanced half-way to consciousness, still only partially civilized.

But Lawrence had never looked through a microscope, never seen biological energy in its basic undifferentiated state. He hadn't wanted to look, had disapproved on principle of microscopes, fearing what they might reveal; and had been right to fear. Those depths beneath depths of namelessness, crawling irrepressibly — they would have horrified him. He had insisted that the raw material should be worked up — but worked only to a certain pitch and no further; the primal crawling energy should be used for the relatively higher purposes of animal existence, but for no existence beyond the animal. Arbitrarily, illogically. For the other, ulterior purposes and organizations existed and were not to be ignored. Moving through space and time, the human animal discovered them on his path, unequivocally present and real.

Thinking and the pursuit of knowledge — these were purposes for which he himself had used the energy that crawled under the microscope, that crowed defiantly in the darkness. Thought as an end, knowledge as an end. And now it had become suddenly manifest that they were only means — as definitely raw material as life itself. Raw material — and he divined, he knew, what the finished product would have to be; and with part of his being he revolted against the knowledge. What, set about trying to turn his raw material of life, thought, knowledge into that — at his time of life, and he a civilized human being! The mere idea was ridiculous. One of those absurd hang overs from Christianity — like his father's terror of the more disreputable realities of existence, like the hymn-singing of workmen during the General Strike. The headaches, the hiccups of yesterday's religion. But with another part of his mind he was miserably thinking that he would never succeed in bringing about the transformation of his raw material into the finished product; that he didn't know how or where to begin; that he was afraid of making a fool of himself; that he lacked the necessary courage, patience, strength of mind.

At about seven, when behind the shutters the sun was already high above the horizon, he dropped off into a heavy sleep, and woke with a start three hours later to see Mark Staithes standing besides his bed and peering at him, smiling, an amused and inquisitive gargoyle, through the mosquito net.

'Mark?' he questioned in astonishment. 'What on earth . . . ?'

'Bridal!' said Mark, poking the muslin net. 'Positively première communion! I've been watching you sleeping.'

'For long?'

'Oh, don't worry,' he said, replying not to the spoken, but to the unspoken question implied by Anthony's tone of annoyance. 'You don't give yourself away in your sleep. On the contrary, you take other people in. I've never seen anyone look so innocent as you did under that veil. Like the infant Samuel. Too sweet!'

Reminded of Helen's use of the same word on the morning of the catastrophe, Anthony frowned. Then, after a silence, 'What have you come for?' he asked.

'To stay with you.'

'You weren't asked.'

'That remains to be seen,' said Mark.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, you may discover it after the event.'

'Discover what?'

'That you wanted to ask me. Without knowing that you wanted it.'

'What makes you think that?'

Mark drew up a chair and sat down before answering. 'I saw Helen the night she got back to London.'

'Did you?' Anthony's tone was as blankly inexpressive as he could make it. 'Where?' he added.

'At Hugh's. Hugh was giving a party. There were some uncomfortable moments.'

'Why?'

'Well, because she wanted them to be uncomfortable. She was in a queer state, you know.'

'Did she tell you why?'

Mark nodded. 'She even made me read your letter. The beginning of it, at least. I wouldn't go on.'

'Helen made you read my letter?'

'Aloud. She insisted. But, as I say, she was in a very queer state.' There was a long silence. 'That's why I came here,' he added at last.

'Thinking that I'd be glad to see you?' the other asked in an ironical tone.

'Thinking that you'd be glad to see me,' Mark answered gravely.

After another silence, 'Well, perhaps you're not altogether wrong,' said Anthony. 'In a way, of course, I simply hate the sight of you.' He smiled at Mark. 'Nothing personal intended, mind you. I should hate the sight of anyone just as much. But in another way I'm glad you've come. And this is personal. Because I think you're likely — well, likely to have some notion of what's what,' he concluded with a non-committal vagueness. 'If there's anybody who can . . .' He was going to say 'help': but the idea of being helped was so repugnant to him, seemed so grotesquely associated with the parson's well-chosen words after a death in the family, with the housemaster's frank, friendly talk about sexual temptations, that he broke off uncomfortably. 'If anybody can make a sensible remark about it all,' he began again, on a different level of expression, 'I think it's you.'

The other nodded without speaking, and thought how typical it was of the man to go on talking about sensible remarks — even now!

'I have a feeling,' Anthony went on slowly, overcoming inward resistances in order to speak, 'a feeling that I'd like to get it over, get things settled. On another basis,' he brought out as though under torture. 'The present one . . .' He shook his head. 'I'm a bit bored with it.' Then, perceiving with a sense of shame the ludicrous inappropriateness and the worse than ludicrous falsity of the understatement, 'It won't do,' he added resolutely. 'It's a basis that can't carry more than the weight of a ghost. And in order to use it, I've turned myself into a ghost.' After a pause, 'These last few days,' he went on slowly, 'I've had a queer feeling that I'm really not there, that I haven't been there for years past. Ever since . . . well, I don't exactly know when. Since before the war, I suppose.' He could not bring himself to speak of Brian. 'Not there,' he repeated.

'A great many people aren't there,' said Mark. 'Not as people, at any rate. Only as animals and incarnate functions.'

'Animals and incarnate functions,' the other repeated. 'You've said it exactly. But in most cases they have no choice; nonentity is forced on them by circumstance. Whereas I was free to choose — at any rate, so far as anybody is free to choose. If I wasn't there, it was on purpose.'

'And do you mean to say that you've only just discovered the fact that you've never been there?'

Anthony shook his head. 'No, no, I've known it, of course. All the time. But theoretically. In the same way as one knows . . . well, for example, that there are birds that live symbiotically with wasps. A curious and interesting fact, but no more. I didn't let it be more. And then I had my justifications. Work: too much personal life would interfere with my work. And the need for freedom: freedom to think,

freedom to indulge my passion for knowing about the world. And freedom for its own sake. I wanted to be free, because it was intolerable not to be free.'

'I can understand that,' said Mark, 'provided that there's someone there who can enjoy the freedom. And provided,' he added, 'that that someone makes himself conscious of being free by overcoming the obstacles that stand in the way of freedom. But how can you be free, if there's no "you"?''

'I've always put it the other way round,' said Anthony. 'How can you be free — or rather (for one must think of it impersonally) how can there be freedom — so long as the "you" persists? A "you" has got to be consistent and responsible, has got to make choices and commit itself. But if one gets rid of the "you", one gets rid of responsibility and the need for consistency. One's free as a succession of unconditioned, uncommitted states without past or future, except in so far as one can't voluntarily get rid of one's memories and anticipations.' After a silence, 'The staggering imbecility of old Socrates!' he went on. 'Imagining that one had only to know the correct line of conduct in order to follow it. One practically always knows it — and more often than not one doesn't follow it. Or perhaps you're not like that,' he added in another tone, looking at Mark through the mosquito net. 'One's inclined to attribute one's own defects to everyone else. Weakness, in my case. Not to mention timidity,' he added with a laugh, that uttered itself automatically, so deeply ingrained was the habit of half withdrawing, as soon as it was spoken, anything in the nature of a personal confidence, of evoking in the listener's mind a doubt as to the seriousness of his intention in speaking; 'timidity, and downright cowardice, and indolence in regard to anything that isn't my work.' He laughed again as though it were all absurd, not worth mentioning. 'One forgets that other people may be different. Tough-minded, firm of purpose. I dare say you always do what you know is right.'

'I always do it,' Mark answered. 'Whether it's right or wrong.' He demonstrated the anatomy of a smile.

Anthony lay back on his pillows, his hands clasped behind his head, his eyes half shut. Then, after a long silence, he turned to Staithes and said abruptly: 'Don't you ever feel that you simply can't be bothered to do what you've decided on? Just now, for example, I found myself wondering all of a sudden why on earth I'd been talking to you like this — why I'd been thinking these things before you came — why I'd been trying to make up my mind to do something. Wondering and feeling that I simply couldn't be bothered. Thinking it would be better just to evade it all and go back to the familiar routine. The quiet life. Even though the quiet life would be fatal. Fatal, mortal, but all the same anything for it.' He shook his head. 'Probably if you hadn't come to shame me into some sort of resolution, that's what I would have done — escaped from it all and gone back to the quiet life.' He laughed. 'And perhaps,' he added, 'I shall do it even now. In spite of you.' He sat up, lifted the mosquito net and stepped out of bed. 'I'm going to have my bath.'

Chapter Twenty-Seven. May 27th 1914

ANTHONY CAME DOWN to breakfast to find his father explaining to the children the etymology of what they were eating. '. . . merely another form of "pottage". You say "porridge" just as you say — or rather' (he twinkled at them) 'I hope you don't say— "shurrup" for "shut up".'

The two little girls went on stolidly eating.

'Ah, Anthony!' Mr Beavis went on. 'Better late than never. What, no pottage this morning? But you'll have an Aberdeen cutlet, I hope.'

Anthony helped himself to the haddock and sat down in his place.

'Here's a letter for you,' said Mr Beavis, and handed it over. 'Don't I recognize Brian's writing?' Anthony nodded. 'Does he still enjoy his work at Manchester?'

'I think so,' Anthony answered. 'Except, of course, that he does too much. He's at the newspaper till one or two in the morning. And then from lunch to dinner he works at his thesis.'

‘Well, it’s good to see a young man who has the energy of his ambitions,’ said Mr Beavis. ‘Because, of course, he needn’t work so hard. It’s not as if his mother hadn’t got the wherewithal.’

The wherewithal so exasperated Anthony that, though he found Brian’s action absurd, it was with a cutting severity that he answered his father. ‘He won’t accept his mother’s money,’ he said very coldly. ‘It’s a matter of principle.’

There was a diversion while the children put away their porridge plates and were helped to Aberdeen cutlets. Anthony took the opportunity to start reading his letter.

No news of you for a long time. Here all goes on as usual, or would do, if I were feeling a bit sprightlier. But sleep has been none too good and internal workings not all they might be. Am slowing down, in consequence, on the thesis, as I can’t slow down on the paper. All this makes me look forward longingly to our projected fortnight in Langdale. Don’t let me down, for heaven’s sake. What a bore one’s carcass is when it goes in the least wrong! Even when it goes right, for that matter. Such a lot of unmodern inconveniences. I sometimes bitterly resent this physical predestination to scatology and obscenity. Write soon and let me know how you are, what you’ve been reading, whether you’ve met anybody of interest. And will you do me a kindness? Joan’s in town now, staying with her aunt and working for the Charity Organization people. Her father didn’t want her to go, of course — preferred to have her at home, so that he could tyrannize her. There was a long battle, which he finally lost; she has been in town nearly a month now. For which I’m exceedingly thankful — but at the same time, for various reasons, feel a bit worried. If I could get away for the week-ends, I’d come myself; but I can’t. And perhaps, in a certain sense, it’s all for the best. In my present mouldy condition I should be rather a skeleton at the feast; and besides, there are certain complications. I can’t explain them in a letter; but when you come north in July I’ll try. I ought to have asked your advice before this. You’re harder in the head than I am. Which is ultimately the reason why I didn’t talk to you about the matter — for fear of being thought a fool by you! Such is one’s imbecility. But, there, we’ll discuss it all later. Meanwhile, will you get in touch with her, take her out to a meal, get her to talk, then write and tell me how you think she’s reacting to London, what she feels about life in general, and so forth. It’s been a violent transition — from remote country life to London, from cramping poverty to a rich house, from subjection to her father’s bad-tempered tyranny to independence. A violent transition; and, though I’m glad of it, I’m a bit nervous as to its effects. But you’ll see. — Yours,

B.

Anthony did see that same day. The old shyness, he noticed, as they shook hands in the lobby of the restaurant, was still there — the same embarrassed smile, the same swaying movement of recoil. In face and body she was more of a woman than when he had seen her last, a year before, seemed prettier too — chiefly, no doubt, because she was better dressed.

They passed into the restaurant and sat down. Anthony ordered the food and a bottle of Vouvray, then began to explore the ground.

London — how did she like London?

Adored it.

Even the work?

Not the office part, perhaps. But three times a week she helped at a crèche. ‘I love babies.’

‘Even those horrible little smelly ones?’

Joan was indignant. ‘They’re adorable. I love the work with them. Besides, it allows me to enjoy all the rest of London with a clear conscience. I feel I’ve paid for my theatres and dances.’

Shyness broke up her talk, plunged it, as it were, into alternate light and shade. At one moment she would be speaking with difficulty, hardly opening her lips, her voice low and indistinct, her face averted; the next, her timidity was swept aside by an uprush of strong feeling — delight, or some distress, or irrepressible mirth, and she was looking at him with eyes grown suddenly and surprisingly bold; from almost inaudible, her voice had become clear; the strong white teeth flashed between lips parted in a frank expression of feeling. Then suddenly she was as though appalled by her own daring; she became conscious of him as a possible critic. What was he thinking? Had she made a fool of herself? Her voice

faltered, the blood rose to her cheeks, she looked down at her plate; and for the next few minutes he would get nothing but short mumbled answers to his questions, nothing but the most perfunctory of nervous laughs in response to his best efforts to amuse her. The food, however, and the wine did their work, and as the meal advanced, she found herself more at ease with him. They began to talk about Brian.

‘You ought to prevent him from working so hard,’ he said.

‘Do you think I don’t try?’ Then, with something almost like anger in her voice, ‘It’s his nature,’ she went on. ‘He’s so terribly conscientious.’

‘It’s your business to make him unconscientious.’ He smiled at her, expecting a return in kind. But, instead of that, she frowned; her face took on an expression of resentful misery. ‘It’s easy for you to talk,’ she muttered. There was a silence, while she sat with downcast eyes, sipping her wine.

They could have married, it occurred to him for the first time, if Brian had consented to live on his mother. Why on earth, then, seeing how much he was in love with the girl . . . ?

With the peach-melba it all came out. ‘It’s difficult to talk, about,’ she said. ‘I’ve hardly mentioned it to anyone. But with you it’s different. You’ve known Brian such a long time; you’re his oldest friend. You’ll understand. I feel I can tell you about it.’

Curious, but at the same time a little disquieted, he murmured something vaguely polite.

She failed to notice the signs of his embarrassment; for her, at the moment, Anthony was only the heaven-sent opportunity for at last releasing in speech a flood of distressing feelings too long debarred from expression.

‘It’s that conscientiousness of his. If you only knew . . . ! Why has he got the idea that there’s something wrong about love? The ordinary, happy kind of love, I mean. He thinks it isn’t right; he thinks he oughtn’t to have those feelings.’

She pushed away her plate, and, leaning forward, her elbows on the table, began to speak in a lower, more intimate tone of the kisses that Brian had given and been ashamed of, and those other kisses that, by way of atonement, he had refused to give.

Anthony listened in astonishment. ‘Certain complications’ was what Brian had written in his letter; it was putting it mildly. This was just craziness. Tragic — but also grotesque, absurd. It occurred to him that Mary would find the story particularly ludicrous.

‘He said he wanted to be worthy of me,’ she went on. ‘Worthy of love. But all that happened was that it made me feel unworthy. Unworthy of everything, in every way. Guilty — feeling I’d done something wrong. And dirty too, if you understand what I mean, as though I’d fallen in the mud. But, Anthony, it isn’t wrong, is it?’ she questioned. ‘I mean, we’d never done anything that wasn’t . . . well, you know: quite innocent. Why does he say he’s unworthy, and make me feel unworthy at the same time? Why does he?’ she insisted. There were tears in her eyes.

‘He was always rather like that,’ said Anthony. ‘Perhaps his upbringing . . . His mother’s a wonderful person,’ he added, dropping, as he suddenly realized, while the words were being spoken, into Mrs Foxe’s own idiom. ‘But perhaps a bit oppressive, just for that reason.’

Joan nodded emphatically, but did not speak.

‘It may be she’s made him aim a bit too high,’ he went on. ‘Too high all along the line, if you see what I mean — even when he’s not directly following her example. That business of not wanting to take her money, for instance . . .’

Joan caught up the subject with passionate eagerness, ‘Yes, why does he want to be different from everyone else? After all, there are other good people in the world and they don’t feel it necessary to do it. Mind you,’ she added, looking up sharply into Anthony’s face, as if trying to catch and quell any expression of disapproval there, or, worse, of patronizing amusement, ‘mind you, I think it’s wonderful of him to do it. Wonderful!’ she repeated with a kind of defiance. Then, resuming the critical tone which she would not allow Anthony to use, but to which it seemed to her that her own feelings for Brian gave her a right, ‘All the same,’ she went on, ‘I can’t see how it would hurt him to take that money. I believe it was mostly his mother’s doing.’

Surprised, 'But he told me that Mrs Foxe had tried to insist on his taking it.'

'Oh, she made it seem as though she wanted him to take it. We were there for a week-end in May to talk it over. She kept telling him that it wasn't wrong to take the money, and that he ought to think about me and getting married. But then, when Brian and I told her that I'd agreed to his not taking it, she . . .'

Anthony interrupted her. 'But had you agreed?'

Joan dropped her eyes. 'In a way,' she said sullenly. Then looking up again with sudden anger, 'How could I help agreeing with him? Seeing that that was what he wanted to do, and would have done, what's more, even if I hadn't agreed. And besides, I've told you, there was something rather splendid and wonderful about it. Of course, I had agreed. But agreeing didn't mean that I really wanted him to refuse the money. And that's where her falseness came in — pretending to think that I wanted him to refuse it, and congratulating me and him on what we'd done. Saying we were heroic and all that. And so encouraging him to go on with the idea. It is her doing, I tell you. Much more than you think.'

She was silent, and Anthony thought it best to allow the subject to drop. Heaven only knew what she'd say if he allowed her to go on talking about Mrs Foxe. 'Poor Brian,' he said aloud, and added, taking refuge in platitude, 'The best is the enemy of the good.'

'Yes, that's just it!' she cried. 'The enemy of the good. He wants to be perfect — but look at the result! He tortures himself and hurts me. Why should I be made to feel dirty and criminal? Because that's what he's doing. When I've done nothing wrong. Nor has he, for that matter. And yet he wants me to feel the same about him. Dirty and criminal. Why does he make it so difficult for me? As difficult as he possibly can.' Her voice trembled, the tears overflowed. She pulled out her handkerchief and quickly wiped her eyes. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I'm making a fool of myself. But if you knew how hard it's been for me! I've loved him so much, I want to go on loving him. But he doesn't seem to want to allow me to. It ought to be so beautiful; but he does his best to make it all seem ugly and horrible.' Then, after a pause, and in a voice that had sunk almost to a whisper, 'I sometimes wonder if I can go on much longer.'

Did it mean, he wondered, that she had already decided to break it off — had already met someone else who was prepared to love her and be loved less tragically, more normally than Brian? No; probably not, he decided. But there was every likelihood that she soon would. In her way (it didn't happen to be exactly the way he liked) she was attractive. There would be no shortage of candidates; and if a satisfactory candidate presented himself, would she be able — whatever she might consciously wish — to refuse?

Joan broke the silence. 'I dream so often of the house we're going to live in,' she said. 'Going from room to room; and it all looks so nice. Such pretty curtains and chair covers. And vases full of flowers.' She sighed; then, after a pause, 'Do you understand his not wanting to take his mother's money?'

Anthony hesitated a moment; then replied noncommittally; 'I understand it; but I don't think I should do it myself.'

She sighed once more. 'That's how I feel too.' She looked at her watch; then gathered up her gloves. 'I shall have to go.' With this return from intimacy to the prosaic world of time and people and appointments, she suddenly woke up again to painful self-consciousness. Had it bored him? Did he think her a fool? She looked into his face, trying to divine his thoughts; then dropped her eyes. 'I'm afraid I've been talking a lot about myself,' she mumbled. 'I don't know why I should burden you . . .'

He protested. 'I only wish I could be of some help.'

Joan raised her face again and gave him a quick smile of gratitude. 'You've done a lot by just listening.'

They left the restaurant and, when he had seen her to her bus, he set off on foot towards the British Museum, wondering, as he went, what sort of letter he ought to write to Brian. Should he wash his hands of the whole business and merely scribble a note to the effect that Joan seemed well and happy? Or should he let out that she had told him everything, and then proceed to expostulate, warn, advise? He passed between the huge columns of the portico into the dim coolness within. A regular

sermon, he thought with distaste. If only one could approach the problem as it ought to be approached — as a Rabelaisian joke. But then poor Brian could hardly be expected to see it in that light. Even though it would do him a world of good to think for a change in Rabelaisian terms. Anthony showed his card to the attendant and walked down the corridor to the Reading Room. That was always the trouble, he reflected; you could never influence anybody to be anything except himself, or influence him by any means that he didn't already accept the validity of. He pushed open the door and was under the dome, breathing the faint acrid smell of books. Millions of books. And all those hundreds of thousands of authors, century after century — each convinced he was right, convinced that he knew the essential secret, convinced that he could convince the rest of the world by putting it down in black and white. When in fact, of course, the only people anyone ever convinced were the ones that nature and circumstances had actually or potentially convinced already. And even those weren't wholly to be relied on. Circumstances changed. What convinced in January wouldn't necessarily convince in August. The attendant handed him the book that had been reserved for him, and he walked off to his seat. Mountains of the spirit in interminable birth-pangs; and the result was — what? Well, *si ridiculum murem requiris, circumspice*. Pleased with his invention, he looked about him at his fellow readers — the men like walruses, the dim females, the Indians, emaciated or overblown, the whiskered patriarchs, the youths in spectacles. Heirs to all the ages. Depressing, if you took it seriously; but also irresistibly comic. He sat down and opened his book — De Lancre's *Tableau de l'Inconstance des mauvais anges* — at the place where he had stopped reading the day before. 'Le Diable estoit en forme de bouc, ayant une queue et au dessous un visage d'homme noir, où elle fut contrainte le baiser. . . .' He laughed noiselessly to himself. Another one for Mary, he thought.

At five he rose, left his books at the desk and, from Holborn, took the tube to Gloucester Road. A few minutes later he was at Mary Amberley's front door. The maid opened; he smiled at her familiarly and, assuming the privilege of an intimate of the house, ran upstairs to the drawing-room, unannounced.

'I have a story for you,' he proclaimed, as he crossed the room.

'A coarse story, I hope,' said Mary Amberley from the sofa.

Anthony kissed the hand in that affected style he had recently adopted, and sat down. 'To the coarse,' he said, 'all things are coarse.'

'Yes, how lucky that is!' And with that crooked little smile of hers, that dark glitter between narrowed lids, 'A filthy mind,' she added, 'is a perpetual feast.' The joke was old and not her own; but Anthony's laughter pleased her none the less for that. It was whole-hearted laughter, loud and prolonged — louder and longer than the joke itself warranted. But then it wasn't at the joke that he was really laughing. The joke was hardly more than an excuse; that laughter was his response, not to a single stimulus, but to the whole extraordinary and exciting situation. To be able to talk freely about anything (anything, mind you) with a woman, a lady, a genuine 'loaf-kneader', as Mr Beavis, in his moments of etymological waggery, had been known to say, a true-blue English loaf-kneader who was also one's mistress, had also read Mallarmé, was also a friend of Guillaume Apollinaire; and to listen to the loaf-kneader preaching what she practised and casually mentioning beds, water-closets, the physiology of what (for the Saxon words still remained unpronounceable) they were constrained to call *l'amour* — for Anthony, the experience was still, after two years and in spite of Mary's occasional infidelities, an intoxicating mixture of liberation and forbidden fruit, of relief and titillation. In his father's universe, in the world of Pauline and the Aunts, such things were simply not there — but not there with a painfully, glaringly conspicuous absence. Like the hypnotized patient who has been commanded to see the five of clubs as a piece of virgin pasteboard, they deliberately failed to perceive the undesirable things, they were conspiratorially silent about all they had been blind to. The natural functions even of the lower animals had to be ignored; there were silences even about quadrupeds. That goat incident, for example — it was the theme, now, of one of Anthony's choicest anecdotes. Exquisitely comic — but how much more comic now than at the time, nearly two years before he first met Mary, when it had actually happened! Picnicking on that horrible Scheideck Pass, with the Weisshorn hanging over them like an obsession, and a clump of gentians, carefully sought out by Mr Beavis, in the grass at

their feet, the family had been visited by a half-grown kid, greedy for the salt of their hard-boiled eggs. Shrinking and a little disgusted under their delight, his two small half-sisters had held out their hands to be licked, while Pauline took a snapshot, and Mr Beavis, whose interest in goats was mainly philological, quoted Theocritus. Pastoral scene! But suddenly the little creature had straddled its legs and, still expressionlessly gazing at the Beavis family through the oblong pupils of its large yellow eyes, had proceeded to make water on the gentians.

'They're not very generous with their butter,' and 'How jolly the dear old Weissshorn is looking today,' Pauline and Mr Beavis brought out almost simultaneously — the one, as she peered into her sandwich, in a tone of complaint, the other, gazing away far-focused, with a note in his voice of a rapture none the less genuinely Wordsworthian for being expressed in terms of a gentlemanly and thoroughly English facetiousness.

In haste and guiltily, the two children swallowed their incipient shriek of startled mirth and averted frozen faces from one another and the outrageous goat. Momentarily compromised the world of Mr Beavis and Pauline and the Aunts had settled down again to respectability.

'And what about your story?' Mrs Amberley inquired, as his laughter subsided.

'You shall hear,' said Anthony, and was silent for a little, lighting a cigarette, while he thought of what he was about to say and the way he meant to say it. He was ambitious about his story, wanted to make it a good one, at once amusing and psychologically profound; a smoking-room story that should also be a library story, a laboratory story. Mary must be made to pay a double tribute of laughter and admiration.

'You know Brian Foxe?' he began.

'Of course.'

'Poor old Brian!' By his tone, by the use of the patronizing adjective, Anthony established his position of superiority, asserted his right, the right of the enlightened and scientific vivisector, to anatomize and examine. Yes, poor old Brian! That maniacal preoccupation of his with chastity! Chastity — the most unnatural of all the sexual perversions, he added parenthetically, out of Rémy de Gourmont. Mary's appreciative smile acted on him like a spur to fresh efforts. Fresh efforts, of course, at Brian's expense. But at the moment, that didn't occur to him.

'But what can you expect,' Mrs Amberley put in, 'with a mother like that? One of those spiritual vampires. A regular St Monica.'

'St Monica by Ary Scheffer,' he found himself over-bidding. Not that there was a trace in Mrs Foxe of that sickly insincerity of Scheffer's saint. But the end of his story-telling, which was to provoke Mary's laughter and admiration, was sufficient justification for any means whatever. Scheffer was an excellent joke, too good a joke to be neglected, even if he were beside the point. And when Mary brought out what was at the moment her favourite phrase and talked of Mrs Foxe's 'uterine reactions', he eagerly seized upon the words and began applying them, not merely to Mrs Foxe, but also to Joan and even (making another joke out of the physical absurdity of the thing) to Brian. Brian's uterine reactions towards chastity in conflict with his own and Joan's uterine reactions towards the common desires — it was a drama. A drama, he explained, whose existence hitherto he had only suspected and inferred. Now there was no more need to guess; he knew. Straight from the horse's mouth. Or rather, straight from the mare's. Poor Joan! The vivisector laid another specimen on the operating table.

'Like early Christians,' was Mrs Amberley's comment, when he had finished.

The virulent contempt in her voice made him suddenly remember, for the first time since he had begun his story, that Brian was his friend, that Joan had been genuinely unhappy. Too late, he wanted to explain that, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, there was nobody he liked and admired and respected more than Brian. 'You mustn't misunderstand me,' he said to Mary retrospectively and in imagination. 'I'm absolutely devoted to him.' Inside his head, he became eloquent on the subject. But no amount of this interior eloquence could alter the fact that he had betrayed confidences and been malicious without apology or qualifying explanation. At the time, of course, this malice had seemed to

him the manifestation of his own psychological acuteness; these betrayed confidences, the indispensable facts without which the acuteness could not have been exercised. But now . . .

He found himself all at once confused and tongue-tied with self-reproach.

'I felt awfully sorry for Joan,' he stammered, trying to make amends. 'Promised I'd do all I could to help the poor girl. But what? That's the question. What?' He exaggerated the note of perplexity. Perplexed, he was justified in betraying Joan's confidences; he had told the story (he now began to assure himself) solely for the sake of asking Mary's advice — the advice of an experienced woman of the world.

But the experienced woman of the world was looking at him in the most disquieting way. Mrs Amberley's eyelids had narrowed over a mocking brilliance; the left-hand corner of her mouth was drawn up ironically. 'The nicest thing about you,' she said judicially, 'is your innocence.'

Her words were so wounding that he forgot in an instant Joan, Brian, his own discreditable behaviour, and could think only of his punctured vanity.

'Thank you,' he said, trying to give her a smile of frank amusement. Innocent — she thought him innocent? After their time in Paris. After those jokes about uterine reactions?

'So deliciously youthful, so touching.'

'I'm glad you think so.' The smile had gone all awry; he felt the blood mounting to his cheeks.

'A girl comes to you,' Mrs Amberley went on, 'and complains because she hasn't been kissed enough. And here you are, solemnly asking what you ought to do to help her! And now you're blushing like a beetroot. Darling, I absolutely adore you!' Laying her hand on his arm, 'Kneel down on the floor here,' she commanded. Rather sheepishly, he obeyed. Mary Amberley looked at him for a little in silence, with the same bright mocking expression in her eyes. Then, softly, 'Shall I show you what you can do to help her?' she asked. 'Shall I show you?'

He nodded without speaking; but still, at arm's length, she smiled inquiringly into his face.

'Or am I a fool to show you?' she asked. 'Won't you learn the lesson too well? Perhaps I shall be jealous?' She shook her head and smiled — a gay and 'civilized' smile. 'No, I don't believe in being jealous.' She took his face between her two hands and, whispering, 'This is how you can help her,' drew him towards her.

Anthony had felt humiliated by her almost contemptuous assumption of the dominant role; but no shame, no resentment could annul his body's consciousness of the familiar creepings of pleasure and desire. He abandoned himself to her kisses.

A clock struck, and immediately, from an upper floor, came the approaching sound of shrill childish voices. Mrs Amberley drew back and, laying a hand over his mouth, pushed him away from her. 'You've got to be domestic,' she said, laughing. 'It's six. I do the fond mother at six.'

Anthony scrambled to his feet and, with the idea of fabricating a little favourable evidence, walked over to the fire and stood there with his elbows on the mantelpiece, looking at a Conder water-colour.

The door burst open, and with a yell like the whistle of an express train a small round child of about five came rushing into the room and fairly hurled herself upon her mother. Another little girl, three or four years older than the first, came hurrying after.

'Helen!' she kept calling, and her face, with its expression of anxious disapproval, was the absurd parody of a governess's face. 'Helen! You mustn't. Tell her she mustn't shout like that, Mummy,' she appealed to Mrs Amberley.

But Mrs Amberley only laughed and ran her fingers through the little one's thick yellow hair. 'Joyce believes in the Ten Commandments,' she said, turning to Anthony. 'Was born believing in them. Weren't you, darling?' She put an arm round Joyce's shoulder and kissed her. 'Whereas Helen and I . . .' She shook her head, 'Stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears.'

'Nanny says it's the draught that gives her a stiff neck,' Joyce volunteered, and was indignant when her mother and Anthony, and even, by uncomprehending contagion, little Helen, burst out laughing. 'But it's true!' she cried; and tears of outraged virtue were in her eyes. 'Nanny said so.'

Chapter Twenty-Eight. June 25th 1934

THE FACILITY WITH which one could become a Stiggins in modern dress! A much subtler, and therefore more detestable, more dangerous Stiggins. For of course Stiggins himself was too stupid to be either intrinsically very bad or capable of doing much harm to other people. Whereas if I set my mind to it, heaven knows what I mightn't achieve in the way of lies in the soul. Even with not setting my mind to it, I could go far — as I perceived, to my horror, today, when I found myself talking to Purchas and three or four of his young people. Talking about Miller's 'anthropological approach'; talking about peace as a way of life as well as an international policy — the way of life being the condition of any policy that had the least hope of being permanently successful. Talking so clearly, so profoundly, so convincingly. (The poor devils were listening with their tongues hanging out.) Much more convincingly than Purchas himself could have done; that muscular-jocular-Christian style starts by being effective, but soon makes hearers feel that they're being talked down to. What they like is that the speaker should be thoroughly serious, but comprehensible. Which is a trick I happen to possess. There I was, discoursing in a really masterly way about the spiritual life, and taking intense pleasure in that mastery, secretly congratulating myself on being not only so clever, but also so good — when all at once I realized who I was: Stiggins. Talking about the theory of courage, self-sacrifice, patience, without any knowledge of the practice. Talking, moreover, in the presence of people who had practised what I was preaching — preaching so effectively that the proper rules were reversed: they were listening to me, not I to them. The discovery of what I was doing came suddenly. I was overcome with shame. And yet — more shameful — went on talking. Not for long, however. A minute or two, and I simply had to stop, apologize, insist that it wasn't my business to talk.

This shows how easy it is to be Stiggins by mistake and unconsciously. But also that unconsciousness is no excuse, and that one's responsible for the mistake, which arises, of course, from the pleasure one takes in being more talented than other people and in dominating them by means of those talents. Why is one unconscious? Because one hasn't ever taken the trouble to examine one's motives; and one doesn't examine one's motives, because one's motives are mostly discreditable. Alternatively, of course, one examines one's motives, but tells oneself lies about them until one comes to believing that they're good. Which is the conviction of the self-conscious Stiggins. I've always condemned showing off and the desire to dominate as vulgar, and imagined myself pretty free of these vulgarities. But in so far as free at all, free, I now perceive, only thanks to the indifference which has kept me away from other people, thanks to the external-economic and internal-intellectual circumstances which made me a sociologist rather than a banker, administrator, engineer, working in direct contact with my fellows. Not to make contacts, I have realized, is wrong; but the moment I make them, I catch myself showing off and trying to dominate. Showing off, to make it worse, as Stiggins would have done, trying to dominate by a purely verbal display of virtues which I don't put into practice. Humiliating to find that one's supposed good qualities are mainly due to circumstances and the bad habit of indifference, which made me shirk occasions for behaving badly — or well, for that matter, seeing that it's very difficult to behave either well or badly except towards other people. More humiliating still to find that when, with an effort of goodwill, one creates the necessary opportunities, one immediately responds to them by behaving badly. Note: meditate on the virtues that are the contraries of vanity, lust for power, hypocrisy.

Chapter Twenty-Nine. May 24th 1931

THE BLINDS WERE up; the sunlight lay bright across the dressing-table. Helen, as usual, was still in bed. The days were so long. Lying in the soft, stupefying warmth of her own body under the quilt, she shortened them with sleep, with vague inconsequent thoughts, with drowsy reading. The book, this

morning, was Shelley's poems. 'Warm fragrance,' she read, articulating the words in an audible whisper, 'seemed to fall from her light dress . . .' (She saw a long-legged figure in white muslin, with sloping shoulders and breasts high set.)

. . . from her light dress

And her loose hair; and where some heavy tress

The air of her own speed has disentwined. . . .

(The figure was running now, in square-toed pumps cross-gartered with black ribbon over the white cotton stockings.)

The sweetness seems to satiate the faint wind;

And in the soul a wild odour is felt

Beyond the sense, like fiery dews that melt

Into the bosom of a frozen bud. . . .

The half-opened rose gave place to Mark Staithes's strangely twisted face. Those things he had told her the other night about perfumes. Musk, ambergris . . . And Henri Quatre with his bromidrosis of the feet. *Bien vous en prend d'être roi; sans cela on ne vous pourrait souffrir. Vous puez comme charogne.* She made a grimace. Hugh's smell was like sour milk.

A clock struck. Nine, ten, eleven, twelve. Twelve! She felt guilty; then defiantly decided that she would stay in bed for lunch. A remembered voice — it was Cynthia's — sounded reproachfully in her memory. 'You ought to go out more, see more people.' But people, Cynthia's people, were such bores. Behind closed eyelids, she saw her mother rapping the top of her skull: 'Solid ivory, my dear!' Hopelessly stupid, ignorant, tasteless, slow. 'I was brought up above my mental station,' was what she had said to Anthony the other night. 'So that now, if ever I have to be with people as silly and uneducated as myself, it's torture, absolute torture!'

Cynthia was sweet, of course; always had been, ever since they were at school together. But Cynthia's husband — that retriever! And her young men, and the young men's young women! 'My boy friend. My girl friend.' How she loathed the words and, still more, the awful way they spoke them! So coy, such saucy implications of sleeping together! When, in fact, most of them were utterly respectable. In the few cases where they weren't respectable, it seemed even worse — a double hypocrisy. Really sleeping together, and pretending to be only archly pretending to do it. The dreary, upper-class Englishness of it all! And then they were always playing games. 'Ga-ames,' Mrs Amberley drawled out of a pre-morphia past. 'A Dear Old School in every home.' See more of those people, do more of the things they did . . . She shook her head.

Spouse! Sister! Angel! Pilot of the Fate

Whose course has been so starless . . .

Was it all nonsense? Or did it mean something — something marvellous she had never experienced? But, yes, she had experienced it.

For in the fields of Immortality

My spirit should at first have worshipped thine,

A divine presence in a place divine. . . .

It was humiliating, now, to admit it; but the fact remained that, with Gerry, she had known exactly what those lines signified. A divine presence in a place divine. And it had been the presence in bed of a swindler who was also a virtuoso in the art of love-making. She found a perverse pleasure in insisting, as brutally as she could, upon the grotesque disparity between the facts and what had then been her feelings.

I love thee; yes, I feel

That on the fountain of my heart a seal

Is set, to keep its waters pure and bright

For thee . . .

Noiselessly, Helen laughed. The sound of the clock chiming the quarter made her think again of Cynthia's advice. There were also the other people — the people they met when Hugh and she dined

with the Museum or the University. ‘Those god-fearing people’ (her mother spoke again), ‘who still go on fearing God even though they’ve pitched him overboard.’ Fearing God on committees. Fearing him in W.E.A. lecture-rooms. Fearing him through interminable discussions of the Planned Society. But Gerry’s good looks, Gerry’s technique as a lover — how could those be planned out of existence? Or the foetus irrepressibly growing and growing in the womb? ‘A coordinated housing scheme for the whole country.’ She remembered Frank Ditchling’s eager, persuasive voice. He had a turned-up nose, and the large nostrils stared at one like a second pair of eyes, insistently. ‘Redistribution of the population Satellite towns Green belts Lifts even in working-class flats’ She had listened, she had succumbed to the spell of his hypnotic nostrils, and at a time it had seemed splendid, worth dying for. But afterwards . . . Well, lifts were very convenient — she wished there were one to her own flat. Parks were nice to walk in. But how would Frank Ditchling’s crusade affect any of the serious issues? Coordinated housing wouldn’t make her mother any less dirty, any less hopelessly at the mercy of an intoxicated body. And Hugh — would Hugh be any different in a satellite town and with a lift from what he was now, when he walked up four flights of stairs in London? Hugh! She thought, derisively, of his letters — all the delicate, beautiful things he had written — and then of the man as he had been in everyday reality, as a husband. ‘Show me how I can help you, Hugh.’ Arranging his papers, typing his notes, looking up references for him in the library. But always, his eyes glassy behind glass, he had shaken his head: either he didn’t need help, or else she wasn’t capable of giving it. ‘I want to be a good wife, Hugh.’ With her mother’s laughter loud in her imagination, it had been difficult to pronounce those words. But she had meant them; she did want to be a good wife. Darning socks, making hot milk for him before he went to bed, reading up his subject, being sérieuse, in a word, for the first time and profoundly. But Hugh didn’t want her to be a good wife, didn’t want her, so far as she could see, to be anything. A divine presence in a place divine. But the place was his letters; she was present, so far as he was concerned, only at the other end of the postal system. He didn’t even want her in bed — or at any rate not much, not in any ordinary way. Green belts, indeed!

It was all beside the point. For the point was those silences in which Hugh enclosed himself at meals. The point was that martyred expression he put on if ever she came into his study while he was working. The point was the furtive squalor of those approaches in the darkness, the revolting detachment and gentleness of a sensuality, in which the part assigned to her was purely ideal. The point was that expression of dismay, almost of horror and disgust, which she had detected that time, within the first few weeks of their marriage, when she was laid up with the flu. He had shown himself solicitous; and at first she had been touched, had felt grateful. But when she discovered how heroic an effort it cost him to attend upon her sick body, the gratitude had evaporated. In itself, no doubt, the effort was admirable. What she resented, what she couldn’t forgive was the fact that an effort had had to be made. She wanted to be accepted as she was, even in fever, even vomiting bile. In that book on mysticism she had read, there was an account of Mme Guyon picking up from the floor a horrible gob of phlegm and spittle and putting it in her mouth — as a test of will. Sick, she had been Hugh’s test of will; and, since then, each month had renewed his secret horror of her body. It was an intolerable insult — and would be no less intolerable in one of Ditchling’s satellite towns in the planned world those god-fearing atheists were always talking about.

But there was also Fanny Carling. ‘The mouse’ was Helen’s name for her — she was so small, so grey, so silently quick. But a mystical mouse. A mouse with enormous blue eyes that seemed perpetually astonished by what they saw behind the appearances of things. Astonished, but bright at the same time with an inexplicable happiness — a happiness that to Helen seemed almost indecent, but which she envied. ‘How does one believe in the things that are obviously false?’ she had asked, half in malice, half genuinely desirous of learning a valuable secret. ‘By living,’ the mouse answered. ‘If you live in the right way, all these things turn out to be obviously true.’ And she went on to talk incomprehensible stuff about the love of God and the love of things and people for the sake of God. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’ ‘Only because you don’t want to, Helen.’ Stupid, maddening answer! ‘How do you know what I want?’ Sighing, Helen returned to her book.

I never was attached to that sect,
Whose doctrine is, that each one should select
Out of the crowd a mistress or a friend,
(‘One of my boy friends . . .’)
And all the rest, though fair and wise, commend
To cold oblivion, though it is the code
Of modern morals, and the beaten road
Which those poor slaves with weary footsteps tread,
Who travel to their home among the dead
By the broad highway of the world, and so
With one chained friend, perhaps a jealous foe,
The dreariest and the longest journey go.

The dreariest and the longest, she repeated to herself. But it could be as long, she thought, and as dreary with several as with only one — with Bob and Cecil and Quentin as with Hugh.

True Love in this differs from gold and clay,
That to divide is not to take away.

‘I don’t believe it,’ she said aloud; and anyhow there hadn’t been much love to divide. For poor little Cecil she had never pretended to be more than sorry. And with Quentin it was just — well, just hygiene. As for Bob, he had genuinely cared for her and she, on her side, had done her best to care for him. But under those charming manners of his, under those heroic good looks there was really nothing. And as a lover, how hopelessly clumsy he had been, how barbarous and uncomprehending! She had broken with him after only a few weeks. And perhaps, she went on to think, that was her fate — to lose her heart only to men like Gerry, to be loved only by men like Hugh, and Bob and Cecil. To worship cruelty and meanness, be adored by deficiency.

The telephone bell rang; Helen picked up the receiver.

‘Hullo.’

It was the voice of Anthony Beavis that answered. He wanted her to dine with him tomorrow.

‘I’d love to,’ she said, though she had promised the evening to Quentin.

There was a smile on her face, as she leaned back again on the pillows. An intelligent man, she was thinking. Worth fifty of these wretched little Cecils and Quentins. And amusing, charming, even rather good-looking. How nice he had been to her the other night at Mark’s dinner! Had gone out of his way to be nice. Whereas that pretentious ass Pitchley had gone out of his way to be rude and snubbing. She had wondered at the time whether Anthony wasn’t rather attracted by her. Had wondered and rather hoped so. Now this invitation gave her reasons, not only for hoping, but for thinking so as well. She hummed to herself; then suddenly energetic, threw back the bed-clothes. She had decided that she would get up for lunch.

Chapter Thirty. July 2nd 1914

SO FAR AS Mary Amberley was concerned, that spring and early summer had been extremely dull. Anthony was a charming boy, no doubt. But two years were a long time; he had lost his novelty. And then he was really too much in love. It was pleasant having people in love with you, of course, but not too violently, not if it went on too long. They became a nuisance in that case; they began to imagine that they had rights and that you had duties. Which was intolerable. All the fuss that Anthony had made last winter about that art critic in Paris! Flattering, in a certain sense. Mary had rarely seen anyone so desperately upset. And seeing that the art critic had turned out, on a nearer acquaintance, to be a bit of a bore, she had quite enjoyed the process of letting herself be blackmailed by Anthony’s dumb miseries and tears. But the principle was wrong. She didn’t want to be loved in that blackmailing

way. Particularly if it was a long-drawn blackmail. She liked things to be short and sharp and exciting. Another time, and with anyone who wasn't the art critic, she wouldn't allow Anthony to blackmail her. But the trouble was that, except for Sidney Gattick — and she wasn't really sure if she could tolerate Sidney's voice and manner — there was nobody else in sight. The world was a place where all amusing and exciting things seemed, all of a sudden, to have stopped happening. There was nothing for it but to make them happen. That was why she went on at Anthony about what she called 'Joan's treatment', went on and on with a persistence quite out of proportion to any interest she felt in Joan, or in Brian Foxe, or even in Anthony — went on simply in the hope of creating a little fun out of the boring nothingness of the time.

'How's the treatment advancing?' she asked yet again that afternoon in July.

Anthony replied with a long story, elaborately rehearsed, about his position as Heavy Uncle; and how he was gradually establishing himself, on a more intimate footing, as Big Brother; how from Big Brother, he proposed to develop, almost imperceptibly, into Sentimental Cousin; and from Sentimental Cousin into . . .

'The truth being,' said Mrs Amberley, interrupting him, 'that you're doing nothing at all.'

Anthony protested. 'I'm going slow. Using strategy.'

'Strategy!' she echoed contemptuously. 'It's just funk.'

He denied it, but with an irrepressible blush. For of course she was half right. The funk was there. In spite of the two years he had spent as Mary's lover, he still suffered from shyness, still lacked self-confidence in the presence of women. But his timidity was not the only inhibiting force at work. There was also compunction, also affection and loyalty. But of these it would be all but impossible to talk to Mary. She would say that he was only disguising his fear in a variety of creditable fancy dresses, would simply refuse to believe in the genuineness of these other feelings of his. And the trouble was that she would have some justification for the refusal. For, after all, there hadn't been much sign of that compunction, that affection and loyalty, when he originally told her the story. How often since then, in futile outbursts of retrospective anger, he had cursed himself for having done it! And, trying to persuade himself that the responsibility was not exclusively his, had also cursed Mary. Blaming her for not having told him that he was betraying confidences out of mere wantonness and vanity; for not having refused to listen to him.

'The fact of the matter,' Mary went on, implacably, 'is that you haven't got the guts to kiss a woman. You can only put on one of those irresistibly tender and melancholy faces of yours and silently beg to be seduced.'

'What nonsense!' But he was blushing more hotly than ever.

Ignoring the interruption, 'She won't seduce you, of course,' Mary continued. 'She's too young. Not too young to be tempted, perhaps. Because the thing you go for is the mother instinct, and even a child of three has got that. Even a child of three would feel her little heart wrung for you. Absolutely wr-wrung.' She rolled the r derisively. 'But seduction . . .' Mrs Amberley shook her head. 'You can't expect that till a good deal later. Certainly not from a girl of twenty.'

'As a matter of fact,' said Anthony, trying to divert her from this painful dissection of his character, 'I've never found Joan particularly attractive. A bit too rustic.' He emphasized the word in Mary's own style. 'Besides, she's really rather childish,' he added, and was instantly made to regret his words; for Mary was down on him again, like a hawk.

'Childish!' she repeated. 'I like that. And what about you? Talk about pots and kettles! The feeding-bottle calling the diaper childish. Though of course,' she went on, returning to the attack at the point where she had broken through before, 'it's only natural that you should complain of her. She is too childish for you. Too childish to do the pouncing. Childish enough to expect to be pounced on. Poor girl! she's come to the wrong address. She'll get no more kisses out of you than she gets out of that benighted early Christian of hers. Even though you do profess to be civilized. . . .'

She was interrupted by the opening of the door.

'Mr Gattick,' the maid announced.

Large, florid, almost visibly luminous with the inner glow of his self-satisfaction and confidence, Sidney Gattick came striding in. His voice boomed resonantly as he spoke his greetings, inquired after her health. A deep voice, virile as only the voice of an actor-manager playing the part of a strong man can be virile. And his profile, Anthony suddenly perceived — that too was an actor's: too noble to be quite true. And after all, he went on to think, with a contempt born of jealousy and a certain envy of the other's worldly success, what were these barristers but actors? Clever actors, but clever with the cleverness of examination-passers; capable of mugging up a case and forgetting it again the moment it was finished, as one mugged up formal logic or *The Acts of the Apostles for Pass Mods* or *Divvers*. No real intelligence, no coherent thinking. Just the examinee's mind lodged in the actor's body and expressing itself in the actor's booming voice. And, for this, society paid the creature five or six thousand pounds a year. And the creature regarded itself as important, wise, a man of note; the creature felt itself in a position to be patronizing. Not that it mattered, Anthony assured himself, being patronized by this hollow, booming mountebank. One could laugh — it was so absurd! But in spite of the absurdity, and even while one laughed, the patronage seemed painfully humiliating. The way, for example, he now acted the distinguished old military man, the bluff country squire, and, patting him on the shoulder, said, 'Well, Anthony my lad!' — it was absolutely intolerable. On this occasion, however, the intolerableness, it seemed to Anthony, was worth putting up with. The man might be a tiresome and pretentious fool; but at least his coming had delivered him from the assaults of Mary. In Gattick's presence she couldn't go on at him about Joan.

But he reckoned without Mary and her boredom, her urgent need to make something amusing and exciting happen. Few things are more exciting than deliberate bad taste, more amusing than the spectacle of someone else's embarrassment. Before Gattick had had time to finish his preliminary boomings, she was back again on the old painful subject.

'When you were Anthony's age,' she began, 'did you always wait for the woman to seduce you?'

'Me?'

She nodded.

Recovering from his surprise, Gattick smiled the knowing smile of an experienced Don Juan and, in his most virile jeune premier's voice, said, 'Of course not.' He laughed complacently. 'On the contrary, I'm afraid I used to rush in where angels fear to tread. Got my face slapped sometimes. But more often, not.' He twinkled scabrously.

'Anthony prefers to sit still,' said Mrs Amberley; 'to sit still and wait for the woman to make the advances.'

'Oh, that's bad, Anthony, that's very bad,' said Gattick; and his voice once more implied the military moustaches, the country gentleman's Harris tweeds.

'Here's a poor girl who wants to be kissed,' Mrs Amberley went on, 'and he simply hasn't got the courage to put an arm round her waist and do it.'

'Nothing to say in your own defence, Anthony?' Gattick asked.

Trying, rather unsuccessfully, to pretend that he didn't care, Anthony shrugged his shoulders. 'Only that it isn't true.'

'What isn't true?' asked Mary.

'That I haven't the courage.'

'But it is true that you haven't done the kissing. Isn't it?' she insisted. 'Isn't it?' And when he had to admit that it was true, 'I'm only drawing the obvious inference from the facts,' she said. 'You're a lawyer, Sidney. Tell me if it's a justifiable inference.'

'Absolutely justifiable,' said Gattick, and the Lord Chancellor himself could not have spoken more weightily. An aura of robes and full-bottomed wigs hung round him. He was justice incarnate.

Anthony opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again. In front of Gattick, and with Mary obstinately determined to be only 'civilized', how could he say what he really felt? And if that were what he really felt, why (the question propounded itself once more), why had he told her the story? And told it in that particular style — as though he were a vivisectioning comedian? Vanity, wantonness; and then,

of course, the fact that he was in love with her and anxious to please, at any cost, even at the cost of what he really felt. (And at the moment of telling, he was forced to admit he hadn't really felt anything but the desire to be amusing.) But, again, that couldn't be put into words. Gattick didn't know about their affair, mustn't know. And even if Gattick hadn't been there, it would have been difficult, almost impossible, to explain it to Mary. She would laugh at him for being romantic — romantic about Brian, about Joan, even about herself; would think him absurd and ridiculous for making tragic mountains out of a simple amorous mole-hill.

'People will insist,' she used to say, 'on treating the mons Veneris as though it were Mount Everest. Too silly!'

When at last he spoke, 'I don't do it,' he confined himself to saying, 'because I don't want to do it.'

'Because you don't dare,' cried Mary.

'I do.'

'You don't!' Her dark eyes shone. She was thoroughly enjoying herself.

Booming, but with a hint of laughter in his ponderousness, the Lord Chancellor let fly once more. 'It's an overwhelming case against you,' he said.

'I'm ready to bet on it,' said Mary. 'Five to one. If you do it within a month, I'll give you five pounds.'

'But I tell you I don't want to,' he persisted.

'No, you can't get out of it like that. A bet's a bet. Five pounds to you if you bring it off within a month from today. And if you don't, you pay me a pound.'

'You're too generous,' said Gattick.

'Only a pound,' she repeated. 'But I shall never speak to you again.'

For a few seconds they looked at one another in silence. Anthony had gone very pale. Close-lipped and crookedly, Mary was smiling; between the half-closed lids, her eyes were bright with malicious laughter.

Why did she have to be so horrible to him, he wondered, so absolutely beastly? He hated her, hated her all the more because of his desire for her, because of the memory of the anticipation of those pleasures, because of her liberating wit and knowledge, because of everything, in a word, that made it inevitable for him to do exactly what she wanted. Even though he knew it was stupid and wrong.

Watching him, Mary saw the rebellious hatred in his eyes, and when at last he dropped them, the sign of her own triumph.

'Never again,' she repeated. 'I mean it.'

* * *

At home, as Anthony was hanging up his hat in the hall, his father called to him.

'Come and look here, dear boy.'

'Damn!' Anthony said to himself resentfully; it was with an aggrieved expression, which Mr Beavis was much too busy to notice, that he entered his father's study.

'Just having a little fun with the map,' said Mr Beavis, who was sitting at his desk with a sheet of the Swiss ordnance survey spread out before him. He had a passion for maps, a passion due in part to his love of walking, in part to his professional interest in place names. 'Comballas,' he murmured to himself, without looking up from the map. 'Chamossaire. Charming, charming!' Then, turning to Anthony, 'It's a thousand pities,' he said, 'that your conscience won't allow you to take a holiday and come along with us.'

Anthony, who had made his work for the research fellowship an excuse for staying in England with Mary, gravely nodded. 'One really can't do any serious reading at high altitudes,' he said.

'So far as I can see,' said Mr Beavis, who had turned back to his map, 'we ought to have the jolliest walks and scrambles all round les Diablerets. And what a delicious name that is!' he added parenthetically. 'Up the Col du Pillon, for example.' He ran his finger sinuously along the windings of a road. 'Can you see, by the way!' Perfunctorily, Anthony bent a little closer. 'No, you can't,' Mr Beavis went on. 'I cover it all up with my hand.' He straightened himself up and dipped first into one pocket,

then into another. 'Where on earth,' he said, frowning; then suddenly, as his most daring philological joke came to his mind, he changed the frown into a sly smile. 'Where on earth is my teeny weeny penis. Or, to be accurate, my teeny weeny weeny . . .'

Anthony was so taken aback that he could only return a blank embarrassed stare to the knowing twinkle his father gaily shot at him.

'My pencil,' Mr Beavis was forced to explain. 'Penecillus: diminutive of peniculus: double diminutive of penis; which as you know,' he went on, at last producing the teeny weeny weeny from his inside left breast pocket, 'originally meant a tail. And now let's attack the Pillon again.' Lowering the point of the pencil to the map, he traced out the zigzags. 'And when we're at the top of the Col,' he continued, 'we bear north-north-west round the flank of Mont Fornettaz until . . .'

It was the first time, Anthony was thinking that his father had ever, in his presence, made any allusion to the physiology of sex.

Chapter Thirty-One. September 6th 1933

'DEATH,' SAID MARK Staithes. 'It's the only thing we haven't succeeded in completely vulgarizing. Not from any lack of the desire to do so, of course. We're like dogs on an acropolis. Trotting round with inexhaustible bladders and only too anxious to lift a leg against every statue. And mostly we succeed. Art, religion, heroism, love — we've left our visiting-card on all of them. But death — death remains out of reach. We haven't been able to defile that statue. Not yet, at any rate. But progress is still progressing.' He demonstrated the anatomy of a smile. 'The larger hopes, the proliferating futures . . .'

The bony hands went out in a lavish gesture. 'One day, no doubt, some genius of the kennel will manage to climb up and deposit a well-aimed tribute bang in the middle of the statue's face. But luckily progress hasn't yet got so far. Death still remains.'

'It remains,' Anthony repeated. 'But the smoke-screen is pretty thick. We manage to forget it most of the time.'

'But not all the time. It remains, unexorcizably. Intact. Indeed,' Mark qualified, 'more than intact. We have bigger and better smoke-screens than our fathers had. But behind the smoke the enemy is more formidable. Death's grown, I should say, now that that the consolations and hopes have been taken away. Grown to be almost as large as it was when people seriously believed in hell. Because, if you're a busy film-going, newspaper-reading, football-watching, chocolate-eating modern, then death is hell. Every time the smoke-screen thins out a bit, people catch a glimpse and are terrified. I find that a very consoling thought.' He smiled again. 'It makes up for a great deal. Even for those busy little dogs on the acropolis.' There was a silence. Then, in another tone, 'It's a comfort,' he resumed, 'to think that death remains faithful. Everything else may have gone; but death remains faithful,' he repeated. 'If we choose to risk our lives, we can risk them as completely as ever we did.' He rose, took a turn or two about the room; then, coming to a halt in front of Anthony's chair, 'That's what I really came to see you about,' he said.

'What?'

'About this business of risking one's life. I've been feeling as though I were stuck. Bugged to the neck in civilized humanity.' He made the grimace of one who encounters a foul smell. 'There seemed to be only one way out. Taking risks again. It would be like a whiff of fresh air. I thought perhaps that you too . . .'

He left the sentence unfinished.

'I've never taken a risk,' said Anthony, after a pause. 'Only had one taken for me once,' he added, remembering the bumpkin with the hand-grenade.

'Isn't that a reason for beginning?'

'The trouble,' said Anthony, frowning to himself, 'the trouble is that I've always been a coward. A moral one, certainly. Perhaps also a physical one — I don't know. I've never really had an opportunity of finding out.'

'I should have thought that that was a still more cogent reason.'

'Perhaps.'

'If it's a case of changing the basis of one's life, wouldn't it be best to change it with a bang?'

'Bang into a corpse?'

'No, no. Just a risk; not suicide. It's merely dangerous, the business I'm thinking of. No more.' He sat down again. 'I had a letter the other day,' he began. 'From an old friend of mine in Mexico. A man I worked with on the coffee finca. Jorge Fuentes, by name. A remarkable creature, in his way.'

He outlined Don Jorge's history. Besieged by the revolutionaries on his estate in the valley of Oaxaca. Most of the other landowners had fled. He was one of the only men who put up a resistance. At first he had had his two brothers to help him. But they were killed, one at long range, the other by machetes in an ambush among the cactuses. He had carried on the fight single-handed. Then, one day when he was out riding round the fields, a dozen of them managed to break into the house. He had come home to find the bodies of his wife and their two little boys lying mangled in the courtyard. After that, the place seemed no longer worth defending. He stayed long enough to shoot three of the murderers, then abandoned his patrimony and went to work for other men. It was during this period that Mark had known him. Now he possessed his own house again and some land; acted as agent for most of the planters on the Pacific coast of Oaxaca state; recruited their labour for them in the mountain villages, and was the only man the Indians trusted, the only one who didn't try to swindle them. Recently, however, there had been trouble. Don Jorge had gone into politics, become the leader of a party, made enemies and hardly less dangerous friends. He was in opposition now; the state governor was persecuting him and his allies. A bad man, according to Don Jorge; corrupt, unjust — unpopular too. It shouldn't be difficult to get rid of him. Some of the troops would certainly come over. But before he started, Don Jorge wanted to know if there was any prospect of Mark's being in the neighbourhood of Oaxaca in the immediate future.

'Poor old Jorge! He has a most touching belief in the soundness of my judgement.' Mark laughed. Thus to understate Don Jorge's faith in him, thus to withhold the reasons of that faith, sent a glow of satisfaction running through his body. He might have told Anthony of that occasion when the old ass had gone and let himself be caught by bandits, and of the way he had been rescued. A good story, and creditable to himself. But not to tell it gave him more pleasure than telling it would have done. 'True, it's better than his judgement,' Mark went on. 'But that isn't saying much. Don Jorge's brave — brave as a lion; but foolhardy. No sense of reality. He'll make a mess of his coup d'état.'

'Unless you are there to help him, I take it. And do you propose to be there?'

Mark nodded. 'I've written him that I'll start as soon as I can settle my affairs in England. It occurred to me that you . . .'

 Again he left the sentence unfinished and looked inquiringly at Anthony.

'Do you think it's a good cause?' Anthony asked at last.

The other laughed. 'As good as any other Mexican politician's cause,' he answered.

'Is that good enough?'

'For my purpose. And anyhow, what is a good cause? Tyranny under commissars, tyranny under Gauleiters — it doesn't seem to make much difference. A drill-sergeant is always a drill-sergeant, whatever the colour of his shirt.'

'Revolution for revolution's sake, then?'

'No, for mine. For the sake of every man who takes part in the thing. For every man can get as much fun out of it as I can.'

'I expect it would be good for me,' Anthony brought out after a pause.

'I'm sure it would be.'

'Though I'm devilishly frightened — even at this distance.'

'That'll make it all the more interesting.'

Anthony drew a deep breath. 'All right,' he said at last. 'I'll come with you.' Then vehemently, 'It's the most stupid, senseless idea I've ever heard of,' he concluded. 'So, as I've always been so clever and sensible . . .' He broke off and, laughing, reached for his pipe and the tin of tobacco.

Chapter Thirty-Two. July 29th 1934

WITH HELEN TODAY to hear Miller speaking at Tower Hill, during the dinner hour. A big crowd. He spoke well — the right mixture of arguments, jokes, emotional appeal. The theme, peace. Peace everywhere or no peace at all. International peace not achievable unless a translation into policy of inter-individual relations. Militarists at home, in factory, and office, towards inferiors and rivals, cannot logically expect governments which represent them to behave as pacifists. Hypocrisy and stupidity of those who advocate peace between states, while conducting private wars in business or the family. Meanwhile, there was much heckling by communists in the crowd. How can anything be achieved without revolution? Without liquidating the individuals and classes standing in the way of social progress? And so on. Answer (always with extraordinary good humour and wit): means determine ends. Violence and coercion produce a post-revolutionary society, not communistic but (like the Russian) hierarchical, ruled by an oligarchy using secret police methods. And all the rest.

After about a quarter of an hour, an angry young heckler climbed on to the little wall, where Miller was standing, and threatened to knock him off if he didn't stop. 'Come on then, Archibald.' The crowd laughed; the young man grew still angrier, advanced, clenched, squared up. 'Get down, you old bastard, or else . . .' Miller stood quite still, smiling, hands by side, saying, All right; he had no objection to being knocked off. The attacker made sparring movements, brought a fist to within an inch of Miller's nose. The old man didn't budge, showed no sign of fear or anger. The other drew back the hand, but instead of bringing it into Miller's face, hit him on the chest. Pretty hard. Miller staggered, lost his balance and fell off the wall into the crowd. Apologized to the people he'd fallen on, laughed, got up again on to the wall. Repetition of the performance. Again the young man threatened the face, but again, when Miller didn't lift his hands, or show either fear or anger, hit him on the chest. Miller went down and again climbed up. Got another blow. Came up once more. This time the man screwed himself up to hitting the face, but only with the flat of his hand. Miller straightened his head and went on smiling. 'Three shots a penny, Archibald.' The man let out at the body and knocked him off the wall. Up again. Miller looked at his watch. 'Another ten minutes before you need go back to work, Archibald. Come on.' But this time the man could only bring himself to shake his fist and call Miller a bloodsucking old reactionary. Then turned and walked off along the wall, pursued by derisive laughter, jokes, and whistlings from the crowd. Miller went on with his speech.

Helen's reaction was curious. Distress at the spectacle of the young man's brutality towards the old. But at the same time anger with Miller for allowing himself to be knocked about without resistance. The reason for this anger? Obscure; but I think she resented Miller's success. Resented the fact that the young man had been reduced, psychologically, to impotence. Resented the demonstration that there was an alternative to terrorism and a non-violent means of combating it. 'It's only a trick,' she said. Not a very easy trick, I insisted; and that I certainly couldn't perform it. 'Anyone could learn it, if he tried.' 'Possibly; wouldn't it be a good thing if we all tried?' 'No. I think it's stupid.' Why? She found it hard to answer. 'Because it's unnatural,' was the reason she managed to formulate at last — and proceeded to develop it in terms of a kind of egalitarian philosophy. 'I want to be like other people. To have the same feelings and interests. I don't want to make myself different. Just an ordinary person; not somebody who's proud of having learnt a difficult trick. Like that old Miller of yours.' I point out that we'd all learnt such difficult tricks as driving cars, working in offices, reading and writing, crossing the street. Why shouldn't we all learn this other difficult trick? A trick, potentially, so much more useful. If all were to learn it, then one could afford to be like other people, one could share all their feelings

in safety, with the certainty that one would be sharing something good, not bad. But Helen wasn't to be persuaded. And when I suggested that we should join the old man for a late lunch, she refused. Said she didn't want to know him. That the young man had been quite right; Miller was a reactionary. Disguising himself in a shroud of talk about economic justice; but underneath just a tory agent. His insistence that changes in social organization weren't enough, but that they must be accompanied by, must spring from a change in personal relations — what was that but a plea for conservatism? 'I think he's pernicious,' she said. 'And I think you're pernicious.' But she consented to have lunch with me. Which showed how little stock she set on my powers to shake her convictions! Arguments — I might have lots of good arguments; to those she was impervious. But Miller's action had got between the joints of her armour. He acted his doctrine, didn't rest content with talking it. Her confidence that I couldn't get between the joints, as he had done, was extremely insulting. The more so as I knew it was justified.

Perseverance, courage, endurance. All, fruits of love. Love goodness enough, and indifference and slackness are inconceivable. Courage comes as to the mother defending her child; and at the same time there is no fear of the opponent, who is loved, whatever he may do, because of the potentialities for goodness in him. As for pain, fatigue, disapproval — they are borne cheerfully, because they seem of no consequence by comparison with the goodness loved and pursued. Enormous gulf separating me from this state! The fact that Helen was not afraid of my perniciousness (as being only theoretical), while dreading Miller's (because his life was the same as his argument), was a painful reminder of the existence of this gulf.

Chapter Thirty-Three. July 18th 1914

THE CURTAIN ROSE, and before them was Venice, green in the moonlight, with Iago and Roderigo talking together in the deserted street.

'Light, I say! Light!' Brabantio called from his window. And in an instant the street was thronged, there was a clanking of weapons and armour, torches and lanterns burned yellow in the green darkness.

...

'Horribly vulgar scenery, I'm afraid,' said Anthony as the curtain fell after the first scene.

Joan looked at him in surprise. 'Was it?' Then: 'Yes, I suppose it was,' she added, hypocritically paying the tribute of philistinism to taste. In reality, she had thought it too lovely. 'You know,' she confessed, 'this is only the fifth time I've ever been in a theatre.'

'Only the fifth time?' he repeated incredulously.

But here was another street and more armed men and Iago again bluff and hearty, and Othello himself, dignified like a king, commanding in every word and gesture; and when Brabantio came in with all his men, and the torchlight glittering on the spears and halberds, how heroically serene! 'Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.' A kind of anguish ran up and down her spine as she listened, as she saw the dark hand lifted, as the sword-points dropped, under his irresistible compulsion, towards the ground.

'He speaks the lines all right,' Anthony admitted.

The council chamber was rich with tapestry; the red-robed senators came and went. And here was Othello again. Still kingly, but with a kingliness that expressed itself, not in commands, this time, not in the lifting of a hand, but on a higher plane than that of the real world — in the calm, majestic music of the record of his wooing.

Wherein of antres vast and deserts idle,
Rough quarries, rocks and hills whose heads touch heaven,
It was my hint to speak. . . .

Her lips moved as she repeated the familiar words after him — familiar but transfigured by the voice, the bearing of the speaker, the setting, so that, though she knew them by heart, they seemed completely new. And here was Desdemona, so young, so beautiful, with her neck and her bare shoulders rising frail and slender out of the heavy magnificence of her dress. Sumptuous brocade, and beneath it, the lovely irrelevance of a girl's body; beneath the splendid words, a girl's voice.

You are the Lord of duty,

I am hitherto your daughter; but here's my husband.

She felt again that creeping anguish along her spine. And now they were all gone, Othello, Desdemona, senators, soldiers, all the beauty, all the nobleness — leaving only Iago and Roderigo whispering together in the empty room. 'When she is sated of his body, she will find the error of her choice.' And then that fearful soliloquy. Evil, deliberate, and conscious of itself. . . .

The applause, the lights of the entr'acte were a sacrilegious irrelevance; and when Anthony offered to buy her a box of chocolates she refused almost indignantly.

'Do you think there really are people like Iago?' she asked.

He shook his head. 'Men don't tell themselves that the wrong they're doing is wrong. Either they do it without thinking. Or else they invent reasons for believing it's right. Iago's a bad man who passes other people's judgements of him upon himself.'

The lights went down again. They were in Cyprus. Under a blazing sun, Desdemona's arrival; then Othello's — and oh, the protective tenderness of his love!

The sun had set. In cavernous twilight, between stone walls, the drinking, the quarrel, the rasping of sword on sword, and Othello again, kingly and commanding, imposing silence, calling them all to obedience. Kingly and commanding for the last time. For in the scenes that followed, how terrible it was to watch the great soldier, the holder of high office, the civilized Venetian, breaking down, under Iago's disintegrating touches, breaking down into the African, into the savage, into the uncontrolled and primordial beast! 'Handkerchief — confessions — handkerchief! . . . Noses, ears, and lips! Is it possible?' And then the determination to kill. 'Do it not with poison, strangle her in bed, even the bed she hath contaminated.' And afterwards the horrible outburst of his anger against Desdemona, the blow delivered in public; and in the humiliating privacy of the locked room, that colloquy between the kneeling girl and an Othello, momentarily sane again, but sane with the base, ignoble sanity of Iago, cynically knowing only the worst, believing in the possibility only of what was basest.

I cry you mercy then;

I took you for that cunning whore of Venice

That married with Othello.

There was a hideous note of derision in his voice, an undertone of horrible obscene laughter. Irrepressibly, she began to tremble.

'I can't bear it,' she whispered to Anthony between the scenes. 'Knowing what's going to happen. It's too awful. I simply can't bear it.'

Her face was pale, she spoke with a violent intensity of feeling.

'Well, let's go,' he suggested. 'At once.'

She shook her head. 'No, no. I must see it to the end. Must.'

'But if you can't bear it . . . ?'

'You mustn't ask me to explain. Not now.'

The curtain rose again.

My mother had a maid call'd Barbara;

She was in love, and he she lov'd prov'd mad

And did forsake her; she had a song of 'willow'.

Her heart was beating heavily; she felt sick with anticipation. In an almost childish voice, sweet, but thin and untrained, Desdemona began to sing.

The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree,

Sing all a green willow.

The vision wavered before Joan's eyes, became indistinct; the tears rolled down her cheeks. It was over at last; they were out in the street again.

Joan drew a deep breath. 'I feel I'd like to go for a long walk,' she said. 'Miles and miles without stopping.'

'Well, you can't,' he said shortly 'Not in those clothes.'

Joan looked at him with an expression of pained astonishment. 'You're angry with me,' she said.

Blushing, he did his best to smile it off. 'Angry? Why on earth should I be angry?' But she was right, of course. He was angry — angry with everyone and everything that entered into the present insufferable situation: with Mary for having pushed him into it; with himself for having allowed her to push him in; with Joan for being the subject of that monstrous bet; with Brian because he was ultimately responsible for the whole thing; with Shakespeare, even, and the actors and this jostling crowd. . . .

'Don't be cross,' she pleaded. 'It's been such a lovely evening. If you knew how marvellous it's made me feel! But I have to be so careful with the marvellousness. Like carrying a cup that's full to the brim. The slightest jolt — and down it goes. Let me carry it safely home.'

Her words made him feel very embarrassed, almost guilty. He laughed nervously. 'Don't you think you can carry it home safely in a hansom?' he asked.

Her face lit up with pleasure at the suggestion. He waved his hand; the cab drew up in front of them. They climbed in and closed the door upon themselves. The driver jerked his reins. The old horse walked a few steps, then, at the crack of the whip, broke reluctantly into a very slow trot. Along Coventry Street, through the glare of the Circus, into Piccadilly. Above the spire of St James's the dilute blackness of the sky was flushed with a coppery glow. Reflected in the polished darkness of the roadway, the long recession of the lamps seemed inexpressibly mournful, like a reminder of death. But here were the trees of the Green Park — bright wherever the lamplight struck upwards into the leaves with an earthly, a more than spring-like freshness. There was life as well as death.

Joan sat in silence, holding firm within herself the fragile cup of that strange happiness that was also and at the same time intensest sadness. Desdemona was dead, Othello was dead, and the lamps retreating for ever down their narrowing vistas were symbols of the same destiny. And yet the melancholy joy of these converging parallels and the pain of the tragedy were as essential constituents of her present joy as her delight in the splendour of the poetry, as her pleasure in the significant and almost allegorical beauty of those illumined leaves. For this joy of hers was not one particular emotion exclusive of all others; it was all emotions — a state, so to speak, of general and undifferentiated movedness. The overtones and aftertones of horror, of delight, of pity and laughter — all lingered harmoniously in her mind. She sat there, behind the slowly trotting horse, serene, but with a serenity that contained the potentiality of every passion. Sadness, delight, fear, mirth — they were all there at once, impossibly conjoined within her mind. She cherished the precarious miracle.

A hansom, he was thinking — it was the classical opportunity. They were already at Hyde Park Corner; by this time he ought at least to have been holding her hand. But she sat there like a statue, staring at nothing in another world. She would feel outraged if he were to call her roughly back to reality.

'I shall have to invent a story for Mary,' he decided. But it wouldn't be easy; Mary had an extraordinary talent for detecting lies.

Reined in, the old horse gingerly checked itself, came to a halt. They had arrived. Oh, too soon, Joan thought, too soon. She would have liked to drive on like this for ever, nursing in silence her incommunicable joy. It was with a sigh that she stepped on to the pavement.

'Aunt Fanny said you were to come and say good night to her if she was still up.'

That meant that the last chance of doing it had gone, he reflected, as he followed her up the steps and into the dimly lighted hall.

'Aunt Fanny,' Joan called softly as she opened the drawing-room door. But there was no answer; the room was dark.

'Gone to bed?'

She turned back towards him and nodded affirmatively. They stood there for a moment in silence. 'I shall have to go,' he said at last.

'It was a wonderful evening, Anthony. Simply wonderful.'

'I'm glad you enjoyed it.' Behind his smile, he was thinking with apprehension that that last chance had not yet disappeared.

'It was more than enjoying,' she said. 'It was . . . I don't know how to say what it was.' She smiled at him, added 'Good night,' and held out her hand.

Anthony took it, said good night in his turn; then, suddenly deciding that it was now or never, stepped closer, laid an arm round her shoulder and kissed her.

The suddenness of his decision and his embarrassment imparted to his movements a clumsy abruptness indistinguishable from that which would have been the result of a violent impulse irrepressibly breaking through restraints. His lips touched her cheek first of all, then found her mouth. She made as if to withdraw, to avert her face; but the movement was checked almost before it was begun. Her mouth came back to his, drawn irresistibly. All the diffuse and indefinite emotion that had accumulated within her during the evening suddenly crystallized, as it were, round her surprise and the evidence of his desire and this almost excruciating pleasure that, from her lips, invaded her whole body and took possession of her mind. The astonishment and anger of the first second were swallowed up in an apocalypse of new sensations. It was as though a quiet darkness were violently illuminated, as though the relaxed dumb strings of an instrument had been wound up and were vibrating ever more shrilly and piercingly, until at last the brightness and the tension annihilated themselves in their own excess. She felt herself becoming empty; enormous spaces opened up within her, gulfs of darkness.

Anthony felt her body droop limp and heavy in his arms. So heavy indeed, and with so unexpected a weight, that he almost lost his balance. He staggered, then braced himself and held her up more closely.

'What is it, Joan?'

She did not answer, but leaned her forehead against his shoulder. He could feel that if he were now to let her go, she would fall. Perhaps she was ill. He would have to call for help — wake up the aunt — explain what had happened. . . . Wondering desperately what to do, he looked about him. The lamp in the hall projected through the open door of the drawing-room a strip of light that revealed the end of a sofa covered with yellow chintz. Still holding her up with one arm about her shoulders, he bent down and slid the other behind her knees; then, with an effort (for she was heavier than he had imagined), lifted her off her feet, carried her along the narrow path of illumination that led into the darkness, and lowered her as gently as her weight would allow him on to the sofa.

Kneeling on the floor beside her, 'Are you feeling better now?' he asked.

Joan drew a deep breath, passed a hand across her forehead, then opened her eyes and looked at him, but only for a moment; overcome by an access of timidity and shame, she covered her face with her hands. 'I'm so sorry,' she whispered. 'I don't know what happened. I felt so faint all of a sudden.' She was silent for a little; the lamps were alight again, the stretched wires were vibrating — but tolerably, not to excess. She parted her hands once more and turned towards him, shyly smiling.

With eyes that had grown accustomed to the faint light, he looked anxiously into her face. Thank God, she seemed to be all right. He wouldn't have to call the aunt. His feeling of relief was so profound that he took her hand and pressed it tenderly.

'You're not cross with me, Anthony?'

'Why should I be?'

'Well, you have every right. Fainting like that . . .' Her face felt naked and exposed; withdrawing her hand from his grasp, she once more hid her shame. Fainting like that . . . The recollection humiliated her. Thinking of that sudden, silent, violent gesture of his, 'He loves me,' she said to herself. And Brian? But Brian's absence seemed to have been raised to a higher power. He was not there with an unprecedented intensity, not there to the point of never having been there. All that was really there was this living presence beside her — the presence of desire, the presence of hands and mouth, the presence, potential but waiting, waiting to actualize itself again, of those kisses. She felt her breasts lift, though she was

unaware of having taken a deep breath; it was as though someone else had drawn it.' He loves me,' she repeated; it was a justification. She dropped her hands from her face, looked at him for a moment, then reached out and, whispering his name, drew his head down towards her.

* * *

'Well, what's the result?' Mary called from the sofa as he entered. By the gloomy expression on Anthony's face she judged that it was she who had won the bet; and this annoyed her. She felt suddenly very angry with him — doubly and trebly angry; because he was so spiritless; because he hadn't cared enough for her to win his bet in spite of the spiritlessness; because he was forcing upon her a gesture which she didn't in the least want to make. After a day's motoring with him in the country she had come to the conclusion that Sidney Gattick was absolutely insufferable. By contrast, Anthony seemed the most charming of men. She didn't want to banish him, even temporarily. But her threat had been solemn and explicit; if she didn't carry it out, at least in part, all her authority was gone. And now the wretch was forcing her to keep her word. In a tone of angry reproach, 'You've been a coward and lost,' she said. 'I can see it.'

He shook his head. 'No, I've won.'

Mary regarded him doubtfully. 'I believe you're lying.'

'I'm not.' He sat down beside her on the sofa.

'Well, then, why do you look so glum? It's not very flattering to me.'

'Why on earth did you make me do it?' he burst out. 'It was idiotic.' It had also been wrong; but Mary would only laugh if he said that. 'I always knew it was idiotic. But you insisted.' His voice was shrill with a complaining resentment. 'And now God knows where I've landed myself.' Where he'd landed Joan and Brian, for that matter. 'God knows.'

'But explain,' cried Mary Amberley, 'explain! Don't talk like a minor prophet.' Her eyes were bright with laughing curiosity. She divined some delightfully involved and fantastic situation. 'Explain,' she repeated.

'Well, I did what you told me,' he answered sullenly.

'Hero!'

'There's nothing funny about it.'

'What! did you get your face slapped?'

Anthony frowned angrily and shook his head.

'Then how did she take it?'

'That's just the trouble: she took it seriously.'

'Seriously?'' Mary questioned. 'You mean, she threatened to tell papa?'

'I mean, she thought I was in love with her. She wants to break it off with Brian.'

Mrs Amberley threw back her head and gave utterance to a peal of her clear, richly vibrant laughter.

Anthony felt outraged. 'It's not a joke.'

'That's where you make your mistake.' Mary wiped her eyes and took a deep breath. 'It's one of the best jokes I ever heard. But what do you propose to do?'

'I shall have to tell her it's all a mistake.'

'That'll be an admirable scene!'

He shook his head. 'I shall write a letter.'

'Courageous, as usual!' She patted his knee. 'But now I want to hear the details. How was it that you let her go as far as she did? To the point of thinking you were in love with her. To the point of wanting to break it off with Brian. Couldn't you nip it in the bud?'

'It was difficult,' he muttered, avoiding her inquisitive eye. 'The situation . . . well, it got a bit out of control.'

'You mean, you lost your head?'

'If you like to put it that way,' he admitted reluctantly, thinking what a fool he had been, what an utter fool. He ought, of course, to have retreated when she turned towards him in the darkness; he ought to have refused her kisses, to have made it quite clear that his own had been light-hearted and

without significance. But instead of that he had accepted them: out of laziness and cowardice, because it had been too much of an effort to make the necessary and necessarily difficult explanation; out of a certain weak and misplaced kindness of heart, because it would have hurt and humiliated her if he had said no — and to inflict a suffering he could actually witness was profoundly distasteful to him. And having accepted, he had enjoyed her kisses, had returned them with a fervour which he knew to be the result only of a detached, a momentary sensuality, but which Joan, it was obvious now (and he had known it even at the time), would inevitably regard as being roused specifically by herself, as having her for its special and irreplaceable object. An impartial observer would say that he had done his best, had gone out of his way, to create the greatest possible amount of misunderstanding in the shortest possible time.

‘How do you propose to get out of it?’ Mary asked.

He hated her for putting the question that was tormenting him. ‘I shall write her a letter,’ he said. As though that were an answer!

‘And what will Brian say about it?’

‘I’m going to stay with him tomorrow,’ he replied irrelevantly. ‘In the Lakes.’

‘Like Wö-ödsworth,’ said Mary. ‘What fun that’ll be! And what exactly do you propose to tell him about Joan?’ she went on inexorably.

‘Oh, I shall explain.’

‘But suppose Joan explains first — in a different way?’

He shook his head. ‘I told her I didn’t want her to write to Brian before I’d talked to him.’

‘And you think she’ll do what you ask?’

‘Why shouldn’t she?’

Mary shrugged her shoulders and looked at him, smiling crookedly, her eyes bright between narrowed eyelids. ‘Why should she, if it comes to that?’

Chapter Thirty-Four. March 3rd 1928

REORGANIZATION . . . ‘Readjustment . . .’ ‘Writing down of capital values in the light of existing trade conditions . . .’ Anthony lifted his eyes from the printed page. Propped up on her pillows, Mary Amberley was staring at him, he found, with an embarrassing intentness.

‘Well?’ she asked, leaning forward. Hennaed to an impossible orange, a lock of tousled hair fell drunkenly across her forehead. Her bed-jacket opened as she moved; under soiled lace, the breasts swung heavily towards him. ‘What does it mean?’

‘It means that they’re politely going bankrupt on you.’

‘Going bankrupt?’

‘Paying you six and eightpence in the pound.’

‘But Gerry told me they were doing so well,’ she protested in a tone of angry complaint.

‘Gerry doesn’t know everything,’ he charitably explained.

But, of course, the ruffian had known only too well; had known, had acted on his knowledge, had been duly paid by the people who wanted to unload their shares before the crash came. ‘Why don’t you ask him about it?’ he said aloud, and in a tone that implied some of the resentment he felt at having been dragged, this very evening of his return from New York, into the entanglements of Mary’s squalid tragedy. Everyone else, he supposed, had fled from her since she’d started taking that morphia; alone of all the friends, having been out of England for half a year, he had had as yet no opportunity and been given no reason to flee. Absence had preserved their friendship, as though in cold storage, in the state it was in before he left. When she had asked him urgently to come and see her, he had no excuse to refuse. Besides, people exaggerated; she couldn’t be as bad as they made out.

‘Why don’t you ask him?’ he repeated irritably.

‘He’s gone to Canada.’

‘Oh, he’s gone to Canada.’

There was a silence. He laid the paper down on the coverlet. Mrs Amberley picked it up and re-read it — for the hundredth time, in the absurd and desperate hope that there might, this hundredth time, be something new in it, something different.

Anthony looked at her. The lamp on the bed-table lit up the profile she presented to him with a ruthlessly revealing brilliance. How hollow the cheeks were! And those lines round the mouth, those discoloured pouches of skin beneath the eyes! Remembering how she looked when he had seen her last, that time in Berkshire, only the previous summer, Anthony was appalled. The drug had aged her twenty years in half as many months. And it was not only her body that had been ravaged; the morphia had also changed her character, transformed her into someone else, someone (there had been no exaggeration at all) much worse. That engaging absence of mind, for example, that vagueness, of which, as of yet another feminine allurements, she always used to be so irritatingly vain, had now degenerated into almost an idiot’s indifference. She forgot, she wasn’t aware; above all, she didn’t care, she couldn’t any longer be bothered. Grotesquely dyed (in the hope, he supposed, of regaining some of the attractiveness which she could not help noticing that she had lost), the hair was greasy and uncombed. A smear of red paint, clumsily laid on, enlarged her lower lip into an asymmetrical shapelessness. A cigarette-end had burned a round hole in the eiderdown, and the feathers fluttered up like snowflakes each time she moved. The pillows were smudged with rouge and yolk of egg. There was a brown stain of coffee on the turned-back sheet. Between her body and the wall, the tray on which her dinner had been brought up stood precariously tilted. Still stained with gravy, a knife had slipped on to the counterpane.

With a sudden movement, Mrs Amberley crumpled up the paper and threw it from her. ‘That beast!’ she cried, in a voice that trembled with rage. ‘That beast! He absolutely forced me to put my money into this. And now look what’s happened!’ The tears overflowed, carrying the black of her painted eyelashes in long sooty trickles down her cheeks.

‘He did it on purpose,’ she went on through her angry sobbing. ‘Just in order to harm me. He’s a sadist, really. He likes hurting people. He does it for pleasure.’

‘For profit,’ Anthony almost said; but checked himself. She seemed to derive some consolation from the thought that she had been swindled, not from vulgarly commercial motives, but gratuitously, because of a fiendishness allied to and springing from the passion of love. It would be unkind to deprive her of that illusion. Let the poor woman think the thoughts she found least painfully humiliating. Besides, the less she was contradicted and diverted, the sooner, it might be hoped, would she stop. Prudently as well as considerately, he contented himself with a non-committal nod.

‘When I think of all I did for that man!’ Mrs Amberley burst out. But while she recited her incoherent catalogue of generosity and kindnesses, Anthony could not help thinking of what the man had done for her; above all, of the terms in which Gerry was accustomed to describe what he had done. Gross, extravagantly cynical terms. Terms of an incredible blackguardism. One was startled, one was set free into sudden laughter; and one was ashamed that such inadmissible brutalities should contain any element of liberating truth. And yet they were true.

‘All the most intelligent people in London,’ Mrs Amberley was sobbing. ‘He met them all at my house.’

‘These old hags!’ Gerry Watchett’s voice sounded clearly in Anthony’s memory. ‘They’ll do anything to get it, absolutely anything.’

‘Not that he ever appreciated them,’ she went on. ‘He was too stupid for that, too barbarous.’

‘Not a bad old bitch really, if she gets enough of it to keep her quiet. The problem is to give her enough. It’s uphill work, I can tell you.’

The tone changed from anger to self-pity. ‘But what shall I do?’ she wailed. ‘What can I do? Without a penny. Living on charity.’

He tried to reassure her. There was still something. Quite a decent little sum, really. She would never starve. If she lived carefully, if she economized . . .

‘But I shall have to give up this house,’ she interrupted, and, when he agreed that of course she would have to give up, broke out into new and louder lamentations. Giving up the house was worse than being penniless and living on charity — worse, because more conceivable, a contingency nearer to the realities of her actual life. Without her pictures, without her furniture, how could she live? She was made physically ill by ugliness. And then small rooms — she developed claustrophobia in small rooms. And how could she possibly manage without her books? How did he expect her to work, when she was poor? For of course she was going to work; had already planned to write a critical study of the modern French novel. Yes, how did he expect her to do that, if he deprived her of her books?

Anthony stirred impatiently in his chair. ‘I don’t expect you to do anything,’ he said. ‘I’m simply telling you what you’ll find you’ve got to do.’

There was a long silence. Then, with a little smile that she tried to make ingratiating and appealing, ‘Now you’re angry with me,’ she said.

‘Not in the least. I’m merely asking you to face the facts.’ He rose, and feeling himself in danger of being inextricably entangled in Mary’s misfortune, symbolically asserted his right to be free by walking restlessly up and down the room. ‘I ought to talk to her about the morphia,’ he was thinking; ‘try to persuade her to go into a home and get cured. For her own sake. For the sake of poor Helen.’ But he knew Mary. She’d start to protest, she’d scream, she’d fly into a rage. It would be like a public-house brawl. Or worse, much worse, he thought with a shudder, she’d repent, she’d make promises, she’d melt into tears. He would find himself her only friend, her moral support for life. In the end, he said nothing. ‘It wouldn’t do any good,’ he assured himself. ‘It never does do any good with these morphia cases.’ ‘One’s got to come to terms with reality,’ he said aloud. Meaningless platitude — but what else was there to say?

Unexpectedly, with a submissive alacrity that he found positively disquieting, she agreed with him. Oh, absolutely agreed! It was no use crying over spilt milk. No use building castles in the air. What was needed was a plan — lots of plans — serious, practical, sensible plans for the new life. She smiled at him with an air of connivance, as though they were a pair of conspirators.

Reluctantly, and with mistrust, he accepted her invitation to sit on the edge of the bed. The plans unfolded themselves — serious to a degree. A little flat in Hampstead. Or else a tiny house in one of those slummy streets off the King’s Road, Chelsea. She could still give an occasional party, very cheaply. The real friends would come, in spite of the cheapness — wouldn’t they? she insisted with rather a pathetic anxiety to be reassured.

‘Of course,’ he had to say; though it wasn’t the cheapness that would put them off; it was the dirt, the squalor, the morphia, this sickening smell of ether on the breath.

‘One can have bottle parties,’ she was saying. ‘It’ll be fun!’ Her face brightened. ‘What sort of bottle will you bring, Anthony?’ And before he could answer, ‘We shall get infinitely tight with all those mixed drinks,’ she went on. ‘Infinitely . . .’ A moment later she had begun to tell him about the advances that George Wyvern had taken it into his head to make to her these days. Rather embarrassing, in the circumstances — seeing that Sally Wyvern was also . . . well! She smiled that enigmatic smile of hers, close-lipped and between half-shut eyelids. And what was really too extraordinary, even old Hugh Ledwidge had recently shown signs . . .

Anthony listened in astonishment. Those pathetically few real friends had been transformed, as though by magic, into positively a host of eager lovers. Did she seriously believe in her own inventions? But anyhow, he went on to think, it didn’t seem to matter whether she believed in them or not. Even unbelievably, these fictions evidently had power to raise her spirits, to restore her, at least for the moment, to a state of cheerful self-confidence.

‘That time in Paris,’ she was saying intimately. ‘Do you remember?’

But this was awful!

‘The Hôtel des Saints-Pères.’ Her voice deepened and vibrated with a subterranean laughter.

Anthony nodded without raising his head. She had obviously wanted him to echo her hint of significant mirth to take up the scabrous reference to that old joke of theirs about the Holy Fathers and

their own amusements under that high ecclesiastical patronage. In their private language, 'doing a slight Holy Father', or, yet more idiomatically, 'doing Holiers', had signified 'making love'. He frowned, feeling suddenly very angry. How did she dare . . . ?

The seconds passed. Making a desperate effort to fill the icy gulf of his silence. 'We had a lot of fun,' said Mary in a tone of sentimental reminiscence.

'A lot,' he repeated, as unemphatically as possible.

Suddenly she took his hand. 'Dear Anthony!'

'Oh, God,' he thought, and tried, as politely as might be, to withdraw. But the clasp of those hot dry fingers never relaxed.

'We were fools to quarrel,' she went on. 'Or rather, I was a fool.'

'Not at all,' he said politely.

'That stupid bet,' she shook her head. 'And Sidney . . .'

'You did what you wanted to do.'

'I did what I didn't want to do,' she answered quickly. 'One's always doing things one doesn't want — stupidly, out of sheer perversity. One chooses the worse just because it is the worse. Hyperion to a satyr — and therefore the satyr.'

'But for certain purposes,' he couldn't resist saying, 'the satyr may be more satisfactory.'

Ignoring his words, Mary sighed and shut her eyes.

'Doing what one doesn't want,' she repeated, as though to herself. 'Always doing what one doesn't want.' She released his hand, and, clasping her own behind her head, leaned back against the pillows in the attitude, the known and familiar attitude, that in the Hôtel des Saints-Pères had been so delicious in its graceful indolence, so wildly exciting because of that white round throat stretched back like a victim's, those proffered breasts, lifted and taut beneath the lace. But today the lace was soiled and torn, the breasts hung tired under their own weight, the victim throat was no more a smooth column of white flesh, but a withered, wrinkled, hollow between starting tendons.

She opened her eyes, and, with a start, he recognized the look she gave him as the same, identically the same look, at once swooning and cynical, humorous and languidly abandoned, as had invited him, irresistibly then, in Paris, fifteen years ago. It was the look of 1913 in the face of 1928 — painfully out of its context. He stared at her for a second or two, appalled; then managed to break the silence.

'I shall have to go.'

But before he could rise, Mrs Amberley had quickly leaned forward and laid her hands on his shoulders.

'No, don't go. You mustn't go.' She tried to repeat that laughingly voluptuous invitation, but could not prevent a profound anxiety from showing in her eyes.

Anthony shook his head and, in spite of that sickening smell of ether, did his best to smile as he lied about the supper-party he had promised to join at eleven. Gently, but with a firm and decided movement, he lifted her confining hands and stood up by the side of the bed.

'Good night, dear Mary!' The tone of his voice was warm; he could afford to be affectionate, now. 'Bon courage!' he squeezed her hands; then, bending down, kissed first one, then the other. Now that he was on his feet, and with the road to freedom clear before him, he felt at liberty to plunge into almost any emotional extravagance. But, instead of taking the cue, Mary Amberley returned him a look that had now become fixed and as though stony with unwavering misery. The mask he had adjusted to be so radiant with whimsical affectionateness seemed all of a sudden horribly out of keeping with the real situation. He could feel its irrelevance, physically, in the muscles of his face. Fool, hypocrite, coward! But it was almost at a run that he made towards the door and hurried down the stairs.

'If a woman,' Helen was reading in the Encyclopedia, 'administers to herself any poison or other noxious thing, or unlawfully uses any instrument or other means to procure her own miscarriage, she is guilty of . . .' The sound of Anthony's feet on the stairs caught her ear. She rose, and quickly walked to the door and out on to the landing.

‘Well?’ She smiled no greeting in answer to his, simulated no pleasure at seeing him. The face she lifted was as tragically naked of all the conventional grimaces as her mother’s had been.

‘But what’s the matter, Helen?’ he was startled into exclaiming. She looked at him for a few seconds in silence, then shook her head and began to ask him about those shares, the whole financial position.

Obviously, he was thinking as he answered her questions, one would expect her to find it all very upsetting. But upsetting to this point — he looked at her again: no — one wouldn’t have expected that. It wasn’t as if the girl had ever had a wild devotion for her mother. In the teeth of Mary’s ferocious egotism, how could she? And after all, it was nearly a year since the wretched woman had started on her morphia. One would think that by this time the horror would have lost some of its intensity. And yet he had never seen an unhappier face. Such youth, such freshness — it wasn’t right that they should be associated with an expression of so intense a despair. The sight of her made him feel somehow guilty — guiltily responsible. But when he made another gesture of inquiring sympathy, she only shook her head again and turned away.

‘You’d better go,’ she said.

Anthony hesitated a moment, then went. After all, she wanted him to go. Still feeling guilty, but with a sense of profound relief, he closed the front door behind him, and, drawing a deep breath, set off towards the Underground station.

Helen went back to her volume of the Encyclopedia ‘. . . to procure her own miscarriage, she is guilty of felony. The punishment for this offence is penal servitude for life, or not less than three years, or imprisonment for not more than two years. If the child is born alive . . .’ But they didn’t say which the proper poisons were, nor what sort of instruments you had to use, and how. Only this stupid nonsense about penal servitude. Yet another loophole of escape had closed against her. It was as though the whole world had conspired to shut her in with her own impossibly appalling secret.

Melodiously, the clock in the back drawing-room struck eleven. Helen rose, put the heavy volume back in its place, and went upstairs to her mother’s room.

With an unwontedly careful precision of movement, Mrs Amberley was engaged, when her daughter entered, in filling a hypodermic syringe from a little glass ampoule. She started as the door opened, looked up, made a movement as if to hide syringe and ampoule under the bedclothes, then, fearful of spilling any of the precious liquor, checked herself in the midst of her gesture.

‘Go away!’ she called angrily. ‘Why do you come in without knocking? I won’t have you coming in my room without knocking,’ she repeated more shrilly, glad of the excuse she had discovered for her fury.

Helen stood for a second or two in the doorway, quite still, as if incredulous of the evidence of her own eyes; then hurried across the room.

‘Give those things to me,’ she said, holding out her hand.

Mrs Amberley shrank back towards the wall. ‘Go away!’ she shouted.

‘But you promised . . .’

‘I didn’t.’

‘You did, Mummy.’

‘I did not. And, anyhow, I shall do what I like.’

Without speaking, Helen reached out and caught her mother by the wrist. Mrs Amberley screamed so loudly that, fearful lest the servants should come down to see what was the matter, Helen relaxed her grip.

Mrs Amberley stopped screaming; but the look she turned on Helen was terrifying in its malevolence. ‘If you make me spill any of this,’ she said in a voice that trembled with rage, ‘I shall kill you. Kill you,’ she repeated.

They looked at one another for a moment without speaking. It was Helen who broke the silence. ‘You’d like to kill me,’ she said slowly, ‘because I don’t let you kill yourself.’ She shrugged her shoulders. ‘Well, I suppose if you really want to kill yourself . . .’ She left the sentence unfinished.

Mrs Amberley stared at her in silence. 'If you really want . . .' She remembered the words she had spoken to Anthony only a few minutes since, and suddenly the tears ran down her cheeks. She was overwhelmed with self-pity. 'Do you think I want to do this?' she said brokenly. 'I hate it. I absolutely hate it. But I can't help it.'

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, Helen put her arm round her mother's shoulders. 'Mummy darling!' she implored. 'Don't cry. It'll be all right.' She was profoundly moved.

'It's all Gerry's fault,' Mrs Amberley cried; and without noticing the little shuddering start Helen gave, 'everything's his fault,' she went on. 'Everything. I always knew he was a beast. Even when I cared for him most.'

As though her mother had suddenly become a stranger whom it was not right to be touching so intimately, Helen withdrew her encircling arm. 'You cared for him?' she whispered incredulously. 'In that way?'

Answering quite a different question, parrying a reproach that had never been made. 'I couldn't help it,' Mrs Amberley replied. 'It was like this.' She made a little movement with the hand that held the hypodermic syringe.

'You mean,' said Helen, speaking very slowly, and as though overcoming an almost invisible reluctance, 'you mean he was . . . he was your lover?'

The strangeness of the tone aroused Mrs Amberley, for the first time since their conversation had begun, to something like a consciousness of her daughter's real personal existence. Turning, she looked at Helen with an expression of astonishment. 'You didn't know?' Confronted by that extraordinary pallor, those uncontrollably trembling lips, the older woman was seized with a sudden compunction. 'But, darling, I'm sorry. I didn't imagine . . . You're still so young; you don't understand. You can't . . . But where are you going? Come back! Helen!'

The door slammed. Mrs Amberley made a move to follow her daughter, then thought better of it, and, instead, resumed the interrupted task of filling her hypodermic syringe.

Chapter Thirty-Five. August 4th 1934

RETURNED DEPRESSED FROM an evening with Helen and half a dozen of her young political friends. Such a passion for 'liquidating' the people who don't agree with them! And such a sincere conviction that liquidation is necessary!

Revolted — but only to be expected. Regard the problem of reform exclusively as a matter of politics and economics, and you must approve and practise liquidation.

Consider recent history. Industrialism has grown *pari passu* with population. Now, where markets are expanding, the two besetting problems of all industrial societies solve themselves. New inventions may create technological unemployment; but expanding markets cure it as it's made. Each individual may possess inadequate purchasing power; but the total number of individuals is steadily rising. Many small purchasing powers do as much as fewer big ones.

Our population is now stationary, will soon decline. Shrinkage instead of expansion of markets. Therefore, no more automatic solution of the economic problems. Birth control necessitates the use of coordinating political intelligence. There must be a large-scale plan. Otherwise the machine won't work. In other words, politicians will have to be about twenty times as intelligent as heretofore. Will the supply of intelligence be equal to the demand?

And of course, intelligence, as Miller's always insisting, isn't isolated. The act of intelligently planning modifies the emotions of the planners. Consider English politics. We've made plenty of reforms — without ever accepting the principles underlying them. (Compare the king's titles with his present position. Compare our protestations that we'll never have anything to do with socialism with the realities of state control.) There are no large-scale plans in English politics, and hardly any thinking

in terms of first principles. With what results? Among others, that English politics have been on the whole very good-natured. The reason is simple. Deal with practical problems as they arise and without reference to first principles; politics are a matter of higgling. Now higglers lose tempers, but don't normally regard one another as fiends in human form. But this is precisely what men of principle and systematic planners can't help doing. A principle is, by definition, right; a plan for the good of the people. Axioms from which it logically follows that those who disagree with you and won't help to realize your plan are enemies of goodness and humanity. No longer men and women, but personifications of evil, fiends incarnate. Killing men and women is wrong; but killing fiends is a duty. Hence the Holy Office, hence Robespierre and the Ogpu. Men with strong religious and revolutionary faith, men with well-thought-out plans for improving the lot of their fellows, whether in this world or the next, have been more systematically and cold-bloodedly cruel than any others. Thinking in terms of first principles entails acting with machine-guns. A government with a comprehensive plan for the betterment of society is a government that uses torture. Per contra, if you never consider principles and have no plan, but deal with situations as they arise, piecemeal, you can afford to have unarmed policemen, liberty of speech, and habeas corpus. Admirable. But what happens when an industrial society learns (a) how to make technological advances at a constantly accelerating speed, and (b) to prevent conception? Answer: it must either plan itself in accordance with general political and economic principles, or else break down. But governments with principles and plans have generally been tyrannies making use of police spies and terrorism. Must we resign ourselves to slavery and torture for the sake of coordination?

Breakdown on the one hand, Inquisition and Ogpu rule on the other. A real dilemma, if the plan is mainly economic and political. But think in terms of individual men, women, and children, not of States, Religions, Economic Systems, and suchlike abstractions: there is then a hope of passing between the horns. For if you begin by considering concrete people, you see at once that freedom from coercion is a necessary condition of their developing into full-grown human beings; that the form of economic prosperity which consists in possessing unnecessary objects doesn't make for individual well-being; that a leisure filled with passive amusements is not a blessing; that the conveniences of urban life are bought at a high physiological and mental price; that an education which allows you to use yourself wrongly is almost valueless; that a social organization resulting in individuals being forced, every few years, to go out and murder another must be wrong. And so on. Whereas if you start from the State, the Faith, the Economic System, there is a complete transvaluation of values. Individuals must murder one another, because the interests of the Nation demand it; must be educated to think of ends and disregard means, because the schoolmasters are there and don't know of any other method; must live in towns, must have leisure to read the newspapers and go to the movies, must be encouraged to buy things they don't need, because the industrial system exists and has to be kept going; must be coerced and enslaved, because otherwise they might think for themselves and give trouble to their rulers.

The sabbath was made for man. But man now behaves like the Pharisees and insists that he is made for all the things — science, industry, nation, money, religion, schools — which were really made for him. Why? Because he is so little aware of his own interests as a human being that he feels irresistibly tempted to sacrifice himself to these idols. There is no remedy except to become aware of one's interests as a human being, and, having become aware, to learn to act on that awareness. Which means learning to use the self and learning to direct the mind. It's almost wearisome, the way one always comes back to the same point. Wouldn't it be nice, for a change, if there were another way out of our difficulties! A short cut. A method requiring no greater personal effort than recording a vote or ordering some 'enemy of society' to be shot. A salvation from outside, like a dose of calomel.

Chapter Thirty-Six. July 19th 1914

IN THE TRAIN going north, Anthony thought of what was in store for him. Within the next two days, or at the outside three, Brian would have to be told about what had happened, and a letter would have to be written to Joan. In what words? And what excuses should he make for himself? Should he tell the whole truth about his bet with Mary? For himself, the truth had certain advantages; if he told it, he could throw most of the blame for what had happened on Mary — but at the risk, he went on to think, of seeming miserably feeble. And that was not the only disadvantage; for Joan, the truth would be intolerably humiliating. However much blame he threw on Mary, the insult to Joan would remain. If only he could tell the truth to Brian and something else to Joan!

But that wasn't possible. They would have to be told the same story, and, for Joan's sake, a story that wasn't true. But what story? Which explanation of the facts would throw least discredit upon himself and inflict the least humiliation on Joan? On the whole, he decided the best thing to say would be that he had lost his head — been carried away by a sudden impulse, an impulse that he had subsequently seen the madness of and regretted. It was somebody else who had kissed her: that was what he would write to Joan. Somebody else — but not too else. She wouldn't like it if she were made to feel that it was a mere momentary baboon who had behaved like that in the unlighted drawing-room. The person who had kissed her would have to be partially himself. Enough himself to have been all the time very fond of her, profoundly sorry for her; but someone else to the extent of allowing the circumstances of the evening to transform the affection and sympathy into — what? Love? Desire? No, he would have to avoid saying anything so specific; would have to talk about confusions, temporary insanities spoiling a relationship which had been so fine, and so forth. Meanwhile he could only say that he was sorry and ashamed; that he felt, more strongly than ever now, that Brian was the only man who was worthy of her, that the difficulties that had arisen between herself and Brian were only temporary and would soon . . . And all the rest.

Yes, the letter ought to be fairly easy. The trouble was that he would be expected to follow it by interviews and explanations; that he would have to bear reproaches, listen to confidences, perhaps defend himself against declarations of passion. And in the interval there would be Brian to talk to — and with Brian the thing would begin with those interviews; and the more he thought about those interviews, the harder did he find it to foresee the part that Brian would play in them. Anthony imagined himself trying to make it clear that he wasn't in love, that Joan had only momentarily lost her head as he had lost his, that nothing had changed, and that all Brian had to do was to go and kiss her himself. But would he succeed in making Brian believe him? The man being what he was, it seemed to him probable — seemed more probable the more he thought about it — that he would fail. Brian was the sort of man who would imagine that one couldn't kiss a woman under any compulsion less urgent than the deepest, most heart-felt love. He would be told that Joan had been kissed and had returned the kisses; and no amount of talk about lost heads would persuade him that it wasn't a serious matter of love at its intensest pitch. And then, Anthony speculated, what would the man do then? He'd be hurt, of course, he'd feel betrayed: but the chances were that there'd be no recriminations. No, something much worse might happen. Brian would probably take all the blame on himself; would renounce all his rights, would refuse to believe it when Anthony swore that he wasn't in love and that it had all been a kind of bad joke; would insist, just because it would be so agonizing a sacrifice, that Joan should go to the man she really loved and who really loved her. And then, suppose that, on her side, Joan agreed! And it was probable, Anthony thought with dismay as he remembered her response to his kisses, it was almost certain even, that she would do so. Appalling prospect! He couldn't face it. And why should he face it, after all? He could borrow on his securities — enough to get out of the country and stay away; for six months, for a year if necessary. And while the midlands streamed past the window, he leaned back with closed eyes, picturing himself in Italy or, if Italy wasn't far enough from England, in Greece, in Egypt, even in India, Malaya, Java. With Mary; for of course Mary would have to come too, at least for part

of the time. She could dump the children with some relation; and Egypt, he reflected, practical in his day-dreaming, Egypt in the off-season was quite cheap, and this war scare of course was nothing. Was Luxor as impressive as it looked in the photographs? And the Parthenon? And Paestum? And what of the tropics? In imagination he sailed from island to island in the Aegean; smoked hashish in the slums of Cairo, ate bhang in Benares; did a slight Joseph Conrad in the East Indies, a slight Loti even, in spite of the chromolithograph style, among the copper-coloured girls and the gardenias, and, though he still found it impossible to like the man as much as Mary did, a slight Gauguin in the South Seas. These future and hypothetical escapes were escapes also here and now, so that for a long time in his corner of the compartment he quite forgot the reason for his projected flight into the exotic. The memory of what had happened, the apprehensive anticipation of what was going to happen, returned only with the realization that the train was crossing Shap Fell, and that in less than an hour he would be talking to Brian on the platform at Ambleside. All the old questions propounded themselves with more desperate urgency. What should he say? How? On what occasion? And what would be Brian's response? What Joan's when she got his letter? Horrible questions! But why had he put himself in the position of having to provide or receive the answers to them? What a fool he had been not to take flight at once! By this time he could have been at Venice, in Calabria, on a ship in the Mediterranean. Beyond the reach of letters. Secure and happy in complete ignorance of the results of his actions. And free. Instead of which he had stupidly stayed where he was and consented to be made the slave of the circumstances his folly had created. But even now, at the eleventh hour, it wasn't too late. He could get out at the next station, make his way back to London, raise a little money and be off within twenty-four hours. But when the train stopped at Kendal, he made no move. The taking of so sudden and momentous a decision was something from which he shrank. He hated suffering, and looked forward with dread to what the next few days and weeks held in store for him. But his fear of suffering was less than his fear of action. He found it easier to accept passively what came than to make a decisive choice and act upon it.

As the train rolled on again, he thought of all the reasons why it had been right for him not to take that decision. Brian was counting on him, would be so disturbed by his non-arrival that he might easily rush down to London to find out what had happened, see Joan and learn everything, at once. And how should he explain things to his father? Besides, there was no reason to think that Mary would come with him; she had made her arrangements for the summer and wouldn't, perhaps couldn't, alter them. And while he was away, heaven only knew what rivals would present themselves. Besides flight would be cowardly, he went on to assure himself, and immediately afterwards was reflecting that he could probably escape from his difficulties just as effectively if he stayed in England. A little tact, a bit of passive resistance . . .

Brian was waiting on the platform when the train drew in, and at the sight of him Anthony felt a sudden pang of pitying distress. For between the man and his clothes there was a startling and painful incongruousness. The rough homespun jacket and breeches, the stockings, the nailed boots, the bulging rucksack were emblems of energy and rustic good health. But the Brian who wore these emblems was the living denial of their significance. The long face was emaciated and sallow. The nose seemed larger than in the past, the eye-sockets deeper, the cheek-bones more prominent. And when he spoke, he stammered more uncontrollably than ever.

'But what is the matter with you?' cried Anthony, laying a hand on his friend's shoulder. 'You look wretched.'

Half touched by this display of a genuine solicitude (it was extraordinary, he reflected, how charming Anthony could unexpectedly be), half annoyed by having been, as he felt, found out, Brian shook his head and mumbled something about being a bit tired and in need of a rest.

But his idea of a rest, it turned out, was to walk twenty miles a day up and down the steepest hills he could find.

Anthony looked at him disapprovingly. 'You ought to be out in a deck-chair,' he said, but could see, as he spoke, that his advice was unwelcome. With Brian it was a kind of dogma that taking violent

exercise in mountain scenery was intrinsically good. Good, because of Wordsworth; because, in his mother's version of Christianity, landscape took the place of revelation.

'I I-like w-walking,' Brian insisted. 'S-saw a d-dipper yesterday. The p-place is f-full of nice b-birds.'

In his distress at finding his friend so ill, Anthony had forgotten all about Joan and the events of the last days; but those birds (those bö-öds, those piddle-warblers) reminded him violently of what had happened. Feeling suddenly ashamed, as though he had been caught in some unwordly display of hypocrisy, Anthony withdrew his hand from Brian's shoulder. They made their way in silence along the platform and out into the street. There they halted for a discussion. Brian wanted to send the luggage by the carrier and walk to their cottage in Langdale. Anthony proposed that they should take a car.

'You've no business to walk a step further today,' he said; then, when the other protested that he hadn't taken enough exercise, changed ground and insisted that it was he who was tired after the journey, and that anyhow he couldn't walk because he was wearing unsuitable clothes and shoes. After a final plea to be allowed to walk back to Langdale by himself, Brian was overruled and submitted to the car. They drove away.

Breaking a long silence, 'Have you seen J-joan lately?' Brian asked.

The other nodded without speaking.

'How w-was she?'

'Quite well,' Anthony found himself replying in the brightly vague tone in which one answers questions about the health of those in whom one takes no particular interest. The lie — for it was a lie by omission — had come to him of its own accord. By means of it, his mind had defended itself against Brian's question as automatically and promptly as his body, by blinking, by lifting an arm, by starting back, would have defended itself against an advancing fist. But the words were no sooner spoken than he regretted their brevity and the casualness with which they had been uttered, than he felt that he ought at once to qualify them with additional information, in another and more serious tone. He ought to rush in immediately, and without further delay make a clean breast of everything. But time passed; he could not bring himself to speak; and within a few seconds he had begun already to dignify his cowardice with the name of consideration, he was already assuring himself that it would be wrong, Brian's health being what it was, to speak out at once, that the truly friendly thing was to wait and choose an occasion, tomorrow perhaps or the day after, when Brian was in a better state to receive the news.

'You d-don't think she was w-worrying?' Brian went on. 'I m-mean ab-bout all this delay in our g-getting married?'

'Well, of course,' Anthony admitted, 'she's not altogether happy about it.'

Brian shook his head. 'N-nor am I. But I th-think it's r-right; and I th-think in the l-long r-run she'll see it was r-right.' Then, after a silence, 'If only one were a-absolutely certain,' he said. 'S-sometimes I w-wonder if it isn't a k-kind of s-selfishness.'

'What is?'

'St-sticking to p-principles, reg-gardless of p-people. P-people — o-other p-people, I mean — p-perhaps they're m-more imp-portant e-even than what one kn-knows is a r-right p-principle. But if you d-don't st-stick to your p-principles . . .' he hesitated, turned a puzzled and unhappy face towards Anthony, then looked away again: 'well, where are you?' he concluded despairingly.

'The sabbath is made for man,' said Anthony; and thought resentfully what a fool Brian had been not to take whatever money he could get and marry out of hand. If Joan had been safely married, there would have been no confidences, no bet, no kiss, and none of the appalling consequences of kissing. And then, of course, there was poor Joan. He went on to feel what was almost righteous indignation against Brian for not having grasped the fundamental Christian principle that the sabbath is made for man, not man for the sabbath. But was it made for man, an intrusive voice suddenly began asking, to the extent of man's having the right, for a bet, to disturb the equilibrium of another person's feelings, to break up a long-established relationship, to betray a friend?

Brian meanwhile was thinking of the occasion, a couple of months before, when he and Joan had talked over the matter with his mother.

'You still think,' she had asked, 'that you oughtn't to take the money?' and went on, when he told her that his opinions hadn't changed, to set forth all the reasons why it wouldn't be wrong for him to take it. The system might be unjust, and it might be one's duty to alter it; but meanwhile one could use one's financial advantages to help the individual victims of the system, to forward the cause of desirable reform.

'That's what I've always felt about it,' his mother concluded.

And had been right, he insisted; and that he didn't dream of criticizing what she had done, of even thinking it criticizable. But that was because her circumstances had been so different from his. A man, he had opportunities to make his own living such as she had never had. Besides, she had been left with responsibilities; whereas he . . .

'But what about Joan?' she interrupted, laying her hand affectionately, as she spoke, on Joan's arm. 'Isn't she a responsibility?'

He dropped his eyes and, feeling that it was not for him to answer the question, said nothing.

There were long seconds of an uncomfortably expectant silence, while he wondered whether Joan would speak and what, if she didn't, he should say and do.

Then, to his relief, 'After all,' Joan brought out at last in a curiously flat and muffled voice, 'Brian was a child then. But I'm grown up, I'm responsible for myself. And I'm able to understand his reasons.'

He raised his head and looked at her with a smile of gratitude. But her face was cold and as though remote; she met his eyes for only a moment, then looked away.

'You understand his reasons?' his mother questioned.

Joan nodded.

'And you approve them?'

She hesitated for a moment, then nodded again. 'If Brian thinks it's right,' she began, and broke off.

His mother looked from one to the other. 'I think you're a pair of rather heroic young people,' she said, and the tone of her voice, so beautiful, so richly vibrant with emotion, imparted to the words a heightened significance. He felt that he had been confirmed in his judgement.

But later, he remembered with a pained perplexity, later, when Joan and he were alone together and he tried to thank her for what she had done, she turned on him with a bitterly resentful anger.

'You love your own ideas more than you love me. Much more.'

Brian sighed and, shaking himself out of his long distraction, looked at the trees by the side of the road, at the mountains so sumptuously shadowed and illumined by the late afternoon sunlight, at the marbly island of clouds in the sky — looked at them, saw that they were beautiful, and found their beauty hopelessly irrelevant.

'I wish to G-god,' he said, 'I knew what to d-do.'

So did Anthony, though he did not say so.

Chapter Thirty-Seven. Autumn 1933

IT TOOK LONGER than Mark expected to dispose of his business, and at moments, during the long weeks that preceded their departure, the temptation to throw up the whole ridiculous enterprise and scuttle back into the delicious other world of Mediterranean sunshine and abstract ideas became, for Anthony, almost irresistible.

'What are you really going for?' he asked resentfully.

'Fun,' was all the answer that Mark condescended to give.

'And your Don Jorge,' Anthony insisted. 'What does he hope to achieve by this little revolution of his?'

'His own greater glory.'

'But the peasants, the Indians?'

‘They’ll be exactly where they were before, where they always will be: underneath.’

‘And yet you think it’s worth while to go and help this Jorge of yours?’

‘Worth while for me.’ Mark smiled anatomically. ‘And worth while for you. Very much worth while for you,’ he insisted.

‘But not for the peons, I gather.’

‘It never is. What did the French peons get out of their revolution? Or our friends, the Russians, for that matter? A few years of pleasant intoxication. Then the same old treadmill. Gilded, perhaps; repainted. But in essentials the old machine.’

‘And you expect me to come along with you for fun?’ The thought of the Mediterranean and his books heightened Anthony’s indignation. ‘It’s crazy, it’s abominable.’

‘In other words,’ said Mark, ‘you’re afraid. Well, why not? But if you are, for God’s sake say so. Have the courage of your cowardice.’

How he had hated Mark for telling him the home truths he knew so well! If it hadn’t been for Mr Beavis, and that interview with Helen, and finally Beppo Bowles, perhaps he would have had the courage of his cowardice. But they made it impossible for him to withdraw. There was his father, first of all, still deep in the connubial burrow, among the petticoats and the etymologies and the smell of red-haired women — but agitated, as Anthony had never seen him before, hurt, indignant, bitterly resentful. The presidency of the Philological Society, which ought, without any question, to have come to him, had gone instead to Jenkins. Jenkins, if you please! A mere ignorant popularizer, the very antithesis of a real scholar. A charlatan, a philological confidence trickster, positively (to use an American colloquialism) a ‘crook’.

Jenkins’s election had taken Mr Beavis long strides towards death. From being a man much younger than his years, he had suddenly come to look his age. An old man; and tired into the bargain, eroded from within.

‘I’m worried,’ Pauline had confided to Anthony. ‘He’s making himself ill. And for something so childish, really. I can’t make him see that it doesn’t matter. Or rather I can’t make him feel it. Because he sees it all right, but goes on worrying all the same.’

Even in the deepest sensual burrow, Anthony reflected as he walked back to his rooms, even in the suggestion of intellectual other-worlds, fate could find one out. And suddenly he perceived that, having spent all his life trying to react away from the standards of his father’s universe, he had succeeded only in becoming precisely what his father was — a man in a burrow. With this small difference, that in his case the burrow happened to be intermittently adulterous instead of connubial all the time; and that the ideas were about societies and not words. For the moment, he was out of his burrow — had been chased out, as though by ferrets. But it would be easy and was already a temptation to return. To return and be snug, be safe. No, not safe; that was the point. At any moment a Jenkins might be elected to some presidency or other, and then, defenceless in one’s burrow of thought and sensuality, one would be at the mercy of any childish passion that might arise. Outside, perhaps, one might learn to defend oneself against such contingencies. He decided to go with Mark.

But in the succeeding days the temptation kept coming back. In spite of the spectacle of Mr Beavis’s self-destroying childishness, the quiet life seemed immensely attractive. ‘Mark’s mad,’ he kept assuring himself. ‘We’re doing something stupid and wrong. And after all, my sociology is important. It’ll help people to think clearly.’ Wasn’t it (ridiculous word!) a ‘duty’ to go on with it? But then, more than six weeks after his return to London, he saw Helen and Beppo Bowles — saw them in the course of a single afternoon. The meeting with Helen was a chance one. It was in the French Room at the National Gallery. Anthony was stooping to look closely into Cézanne’s *Mont Sainte Victoire*, when he became aware that two other visitors had halted just behind him. He shifted a little to one side, so as to let them see the picture, and continued his meticulous examination of the brushwork.

A few seconds passed; then, very slowly and with a foreign accent, a man’s voice said: ‘See now here how the nineteenth-century petit bourgeois tried to escape from industrialism. Why must he paint such

landscapes, so romantic? Because he will forget the new methods of production. Because he will not think of the proletariat. That is why.'

'Yes, I suppose that is the reason,' said another voice.

With a start, Anthony recognized it as Helen's. 'What shall I do?' he was wondering, when the voice spoke again.

'Why, it's Anthony!' A hand touched his arm.

He straightened himself up and turned towards her, making the gestures and noises appropriate to delighted astonishment. That face, which he had last seen alternately stony and bright with mockery, then in the rapt agony of pleasure, then dabbled with blood and pitifully disintegrated by a grief extreme beyond expression, finally hard as it had been at first, harder, more rigidly a stone — that face was now beautifully alive, and tender, illuminated from within by a kind of secure joy. She looked at him without the least trace of embarrassment. It was as though the past had been completely abolished, as though, for her, only the present existed and were real.

'This is Ekki Giesebrecht,' she said.

The fair-haired young man beside her bent stiffly forwards as they shook hands.

'He had to escape from Germany,' she was explaining. 'They would have killed him for his politics.'

It was not jealousy that he felt as he looked from one glad face to the other — not jealousy, but an unhappiness so acute that it was like a physical pain. A pain that endured and that was not in the least diminished by the solemn absurdity of the little lecture which Helen now delivered on art as a manifestation of class interests. Listening, he could laugh to himself, he could reflect with amusement on love's fantastic by-products in matters of taste, political opinions, religious beliefs. But behind the laughter, beneath the ironical reflections, that pain of unhappiness persisted.

He refused her invitation to have tea with them.

'I've promised to go and see Beppo,' he exclaimed.

'Give him my love,' she said, and went on to ask if, since his return, he had met Hugh.

Anthony shook his head.

'We're parting company, you know.'

Making an effort to smile, 'All good wishes for the divorce,' he said, and hurried away.

Walking through the smoky dimness of the afternoon, he thought of that softly radiant face of hers, and felt, along with the pain of unhappiness, a renewal of that other, profounder pain of dissatisfaction with himself. Since his arrival in London he had led his ordinary London life — the lunches with men of learning and affairs, the dinners where women kept the conversation more gossipy and amusing — and the easy, meaningless successes, which his talents and a certain natural charm always allowed him to score at such gatherings, had made him all but completely forget his dissatisfaction, had masked the pain of it, as a drug will mask neuralgia or toothache. This meeting with Helen had instantaneously neutralized the soothing drug and left him defenceless against a pain no whit diminished by the temporary anodyne — rather, indeed, intensified by it. For the realization that he had permitted himself to be soothed by an opiate of such poor quality was a new cause for dissatisfaction added to the old. And then to think that he had been seriously considering the idea of returning to the old quiet life! So quietly squalid, so quietly inhuman and, for all the expense of thought it entailed, so quietly mad. Mark's enterprise might be stupid and even disgraceful; but, however bad, it was still preferable to that quietude of work and occasional detached sensuality beside the Mediterranean.

Standing at the door of Beppo's flat, he heard the sound of voices — Beppo's and another man's. He rang the bell. Time passed. The door remained unopened. The voices talked on, inarticulately, but with shrill squeaks on Beppo's side and, on that of the stranger, a crescendo of gruff barks which proclaimed that they were quarrelling. He rang again. There were a few more squeaks and shouts; then the sound of hurrying feet. The door was flung open, and there stood Beppo. The face was flushed, the bald crown shiny with perspiration. Behind him, very upright and soldierly in his carriage, appeared a rather coarsely handsome young man, with a small moustache and carefully oiled wavy brown hair, dressed in a blue serge suit of extreme and somehow improbable smartness.

‘Come in,’ said Beppo rather breathlessly.

‘Am I disturbing you?’

‘No, no. My friend was just going — this is Mr Simpson, by the way — just going.’

‘Was he?’ asked the young man in a significant voice and with a Nottinghamshire accent. ‘I hadn’t known he was.’

‘Perhaps I’d better go,’ Anthony suggested.

‘No, please don’t, please don’t.’ There was a note in Beppo’s voice of almost desperate appeal.

The young man laughed. ‘He wants protection — that’s what it is. Thinks he’s going to be black-mailed. And I could if I wanted to.’ He looked at Anthony with knowing, insolent eyes. ‘But I don’t want to.’ He assumed an expression that was meant to be one of lofty moral indignation. ‘I wouldn’t do it for a thousand pounds. It’s a skunk’s game, that’s what I say.’ From being loftily general, the moral indignation came down to earth and focused itself on Beppo. ‘But a man’s got no business to be mean,’ he went on. ‘That’s a skunk’s game too.’ He pointed an accusing finger. ‘A mean, dirty swine. That’s what you are. I’ve said it before, and I say it again. And I don’t care who hears me. Because I can prove it. Yes, and you know I can. A mean dirty swine.’

‘All right, all right,’ Beppo cried, in the tone of one who makes unconditional surrender. Catching Anthony by the arm, ‘Go into the sitting-room, will you,’ he begged.

Anthony did as he was told. Outside in the hall, a few almost whispered sentences were exchanged. Then, after a silence, the front door slammed, and Beppo, pale and distracted, entered the room. With one hand he was wiping his forehead; but it was only after he had sat down that he noticed what he was holding in the other. The fat white fingers were closed round his wallet. Embarrassed, he put the compromising object away in his breast pocket. Then, fizzling explosively in misery as he fizzled in mirth, ‘It’s only money that they’re after,’ he burst out like an opened ginger-beer bottle. ‘You’ve seen it. Why should I try to hide it? Only money.’ And he rambled on, popping, squeaking, fizzling in almost incoherent denunciation of ‘them’, and commiseration for himself. Yes, he was doubly to be pitied — pitied for what he had to suffer because of ‘their’ mercenary attitude, when the thing he was looking for was love for love’s and adventure for adventure’s sake; pitied also for that growing incapacity to find the least satisfaction in any amorous experience that was not wholly new. Increasingly, repetition was becoming the enemy. Repetition killed what he called the frisson. Unspeakable tragedy. He, who so longed for tenderness, for understanding, for companionship, was debarred from ever getting what he wanted. To have an affair with somebody of one’s own class, somebody one could talk to, had come to be out of the question. But how could there be real tenderness without the sensual relationship? With ‘them’, the relationship was possible, was wildly desirable. But tenderness could no more flourish without communication than it could flourish without sensuality. And sensuality entirely divorced from communication and tenderness seemed now to be possible only under the stimulus of a constant change of object. There had to be another of ‘them’ each time. For that he was to be pitied; but the situation had its romantic side. Or at any rate might have it — used to have it. Nowadays, Beppo complained, ‘they’ had changed, were becoming mercenary, frankly rapacious, mere prostitutes.

‘You saw just now,’ he said, ‘the sordidness of it, the lowness!’ His misery bubbled over as though under an inner pressure of carbonic acid gas. In his agitation he heaved himself out of his chair and began to walk up and down the room, exposing to Anthony’s eyes, now the bulging waistcoat, the lavish tie from Sulka’s, the face with its pendant of chins, the bald and shining crown, now the broad seat of pale check trousers, the black jacket rising pear-like to narrow shoulders, and below the central baldness that fuzz of pale brown hair, like a Florentine page’s, above the collar. ‘And I’m not mean. God knows, I’ve got plenty of other faults, but not that. Why can’t they understand that it isn’t meanness, that it’s a wish to . . . to . . .’ he hesitated, ‘well, to keep the thing on a human basis? A basis at least of romance, of adventure. Instead of that, they make these awful, humiliating scenes. Refusing to understand, absolutely refusing.’

He continued to walk up and down the room in silence. Anthony made no comment, but wondered inwardly how far poor old Beppo knew the truth or whether he too refused to understand — refused to

understand that, to 'them', his ageing and unpalatable person could hardly be expected to seem romantic, that the only charm which remained to him, outside a certain good taste, and a facile intelligence which 'they' were not in a position to appreciate, was his money. Did he know all this? Yes, of course he did; it was unavoidable. He knew it quite well and refused to understand. 'Like me,' Anthony said to himself.

That evening he telephoned to Mark to tell him definitely that he could book their passages.

Chapter Thirty-Eight. August 10th 1934

TODAY HELEN TALKED again about Miller. Talked with a kind of resentful vehemence. (Certain memories, certain trains of thought are like the aching tooth one must always be touching just to make sure it still hurts.) Non-violence: this time, it was not only a mere trick, insignificant; it was also wrong. If you're convinced people are wicked, you've no right not to try to make them behave decently. Agreed: but how are you most likely to succeed? By violence? But violence may make people assume the forms of good behaviour for the moment; it won't produce the reality of genuine and permanent behaviour. She accused me of shirking real issues, taking refuge in vague idealism. It all boiled down at last to her vengeful hatred for the Nazis. Peace all round, except for Nazis and, by contagion, fascists. These should be punished, painfully exterminated — like rats. (Note that we're all ninety-nine per cent pacifists. Sermon on Mount, provided we're allowed to play Tamburlane or Napoleon in our particular one per cent of selected cases. Peace, perfect peace, so long as we can have the war that suits us. Result: everyone is the predestined victim of somebody else's exceptionally permissible war. Ninety-nine per cent pacifism is merely another name for militarism. If there's to be peace, there must be hundred per cent pacifism.)

We exchanged a lot of arguments; then, for some time, said nothing. Finally, she began to talk about Giesebrecht. Executed after God only knew what tortures. 'Can you be surprised if I feel like this about the Nazis?' Not surprised at all — any more than by the Nazis themselves. Surprising would have been tolerance on their part, forgiveness on hers. 'But the person who might have forgiven vanished when Ekki vanished. I was good while he was with me. Now I'm bad. If he were still here I might be able to forgive them for taking him away. But that's an impossible condition. I can't ever forgive.' (There were answers to that, of course. But it didn't seem to me that I had any right, being what I am, acting as I still do, to make them.) She went on to describe what he had been to her. Someone she didn't have to be ashamed of loving, as she had had to be ashamed of loving Gerry. Someone she had been able to love with her whole being — 'not just occasionally and with part of me, on a roof; or just for fun, in a studio, before dinner.' And she came back to the same point — that Ekki had made her kind, truthful, unselfish, as well as happy. 'I was somebody else while I was with him. Or perhaps I was myself — for the first time.' Then, 'Do you remember how you laughed at me that time on the roof, when I talked about my real self?' Did I not remember! I hadn't even been real enough, at that moment, to perceive my own remoteness from reality. Afterwards, when I saw her crying, when I knew that I'd been deliberately refusing to love her, I did perceive it.

After a silence, 'At the beginning I believe I could have loved you almost as much as I loved Ekki.' And I'd done my best, of course, to prevent her.

Her voice brightened with malicious derision. Like her mother's. 'Extraordinary how funny a tragedy is, when you look at it from the wrong side!' Then, still smiling, 'Do you imagine you care for me now? Lo-ove me, in a word?'

Not only imagined; did really.

She held up a hand, like a policeman. 'No film stuff here. I'd have to throw you out if you began that game. Which I don't want to do. Because, oddly enough, I really like you. In spite of everything. I never thought I should. Not after that dog. But I do.' That painful brightness came back into her

face. 'All the things I thought I should never do again! Such as eating a square meal; but I was doing it after three days. And wanting to make love. That seemed inconceivably sacrilegious. And yet within three or four months it was occurring to me. I was having dreams about it. And one of these days, I suppose, I shall actually be doing it. Doing it "without any obligation", as they say when they send you the vacuum-cleaner on approval. Exactly as I did before.' She laughed again. 'Most probably with you, Anthony. Till the next dog comes down. Would you be ready to begin again?'

Not on the old basis. I'd want to give more, receive more.

'It takes two to give and receive.' Then she switched the conversation on to another line; who was I having an affair with at the moment? and when I answered: with nobody, asked whether it wasn't difficult and disagreeable to be continent, and why I should want to imitate Mark Staithe. Tried to explain that I wasn't imitating Mark, that Mark's asceticism was undertaken for its own sake and above all for his, that he might feel himself more separate, more intensely himself, in a better position to look down on other people. Whereas what I was trying to do was to avoid occasions for emphasizing individual separateness through sensuality. Hate, anger, ambition explicitly deny human unity; lust and greed do the same indirectly and by implication — by insisting exclusively on particular individual experiences and, in the case of lust, using other people merely as a means for obtaining such experiences. Less dangerously so than malevolence and the passions for superiority, prestige, social position, lust is still incompatible with pacifism; can be made compatible only when it ceases to be an end in itself and becomes a means towards the unification through love of two separate individuals. Such particular union, a paradigm of union in general.

Chapter Thirty-Nine. March 25th 1928

WHEN HELEN KEPT her eyes closed, the red darkness behind the lids came wildly and chaotically to life. Like a railway station, it seemed, full of hurrying people, loud with voices; and the colours glowed, the forms stood sharply out, jewelled, with the more than real definition of forms and colours under limelight. It was as though the fever had assembled a crowd inside her head, had lighted lamps and turned on the gramophone. On the unnaturally brilliant stage the images came and went on their own initiative and in ferocious disregard of Helen's own wishes. Came and went, talked, gesticulated, acted out their elaborate, insane dramas, unceasingly, without mercy on her fatigue, without consideration for her longing to be at rest and alone. Sometimes, in the hope that the outer world would eclipse this scurrying lunacy within, she opened her eyes. But the light hurt her; and in spite of those bunched roses on the wallpaper, in spite of the white counterpane and the knobs at the end of the bedstead, in spite of the looking-glass, the hair-brushes, the bottle of eau-de-Cologne, those images on the other side of her eyes went on living that private life of theirs, undisturbed. A vehement and crazy life — now utterly irrelevant, like a story invented by somebody else, then all at once agonizingly to the point, agonizingly hers.

This morning, for example, this afternoon (which was it? time was at once endless and non-existent: but at any rate it was just after Mme Bonifay had been in to see her — stinking, stinking of garlic and dirty linen), there had been a huge hall, with statues. Gilded statues. She recognized Voltaire, fifty feet high, and there was one of those Chinese camels, but enormous. People were standing in groups, beautifully placed, like people on the stage. Indeed, they were on the stage. Acting a play of intrigue, a play with love scenes and revolvers. How bright the spotlights were! how clearly and emphatically they spoke the lines! Each word a bell, each figure a shining lamp.

'Hands up . . . I love you . . . If she falls into the trap . . .' And yet who were they, what were they saying? And now for some extraordinary reason they were talking about arithmetic. Sixty-six yards of linoleum at three and eleven a yard. And the woman with the revolver was suddenly Miss Cosmas. There was no Voltaire, no gilded camel. Only the blackboard. Miss Cosmas had always hated her because she

was so bad at maths, had always been odious and unfair. 'At three and eleven,' Miss Cosmas shouted, 'at three and eleven.' But Mme Bonifay's number was eleven, and Helen was walking once again along the rue de la Tombe-Issoire, feeling more and more sick with apprehension at every step. Walking slower and slower in the hope of never getting there. But the houses came rushing down towards her, like the walls of the moving staircases in the Underground. Came rushing towards her, and then, when number eleven drew level, stopped dead, noiselessly. 'Mme Bonifay. Sage Femme de Ière Classe.' She stood looking at the words, just as she had stood in reality, two days before; then walked on, just as she had walked on then. Only one more minute, she pleaded with herself, till she got over her nervousness, till she felt less sick. Walked up the street again, and was in the garden with her grandmother and Hugh Ledwidge. It was a walled garden with a pine wood at one end of it. And a man came running out of the wood, a man with some awful kind of skin disease on his face. Red blotches and scabs and scurf. Horrible! But all her grandmother said was, 'God spat in his face,' and everyone laughed. But in the middle of the wood, when she went on, stood a bed, and immediately, somehow, she was lying on it, looking at a lot more people in another play, in the same play, perhaps. Bright under the spotlights, with voices like bells in her ears; but incomprehensible, unrecognizable. And Gerry was there, sitting on the edge of her bed, kissing her, stroking her shoulders, her breasts. 'But, Gerry, you mustn't! All those people — they can see us. Gerry, don't!' But when she tried to push him away, he was like a block of granite, immovable; and all the time his hands, his lips were releasing soft moths of quick and fluttering pleasure under her skin; and the shame, the dismay at being seen by all those people, let loose at the same time a special physical anguish of its own — a finer-footed, wildier-fluttering sensation that was no longer a moth, but some huge beetle, revolting to the touch, and yet revoltingly delicious. 'Don't, Gerry, don't!' And suddenly she remembered everything — that night after the kitten had died, and all the other nights, and then the first signs, the growing anxiety, and the day she had telephoned to him and been told that he'd gone to Canada, and finally the money, and that evening when her mother . . . 'I hate you!' she cried: but as she managed with a last violent effort to push him away, she felt a stab of pain so excruciating that for a moment she forgot her delirium and was wholly at the mercy of immediate, physical reality. Slowly the pain died down; the other world of fever closed in on her again. And it wasn't Gerry any more, it was Mme Bonifay. Mme Bonifay with that thing in her hand. *Je vous ferai un peu mal.* And it wasn't the bed or the pine wood but the couch in Mme Bonifay's sitting-room. She clenched her teeth, just as she had clenched them then. Only this time it was worse, because she knew what was going to happen. And under the limelight the people were still there, acting their play. And lying there on the couch she herself was part of the play, outside, and at last was no longer herself, but someone else, someone in a bathing dress, with enormous breasts, like Lady Knipe's. And what was there to prevent her breasts from getting to be like that? Bell-clear, but incomprehensible, the actors discussed the nightmarish possibility. The possibility of Helen with enormous breasts, of Helen with thick rolls of fat round her hips, of Helen with creases in her thighs, of Helen with rows and rows of children — howling all the time; and that disgusting smell of curdled milk; and their diapers. And here, all of a sudden, was Joyce wheeling the pram along the streets of Aldershot. Taking the baby out. Feeding him. Half horrified, half fascinated, she watched him clinging, sucking. Flattened against the breast, the little frog face wore an expression of determined greed that gradually relaxed, as the stomach filled, to one of sleepy, imbecile ecstasy. But the hands — those were fully human, those were little miracles of the most delicate elegance. Lovely, exquisite little hands! Irresistible little hands! She took the baby from Joyce, she pressed him close against her body, she bent her head so as to be able to kiss those adorable little fingers. But the thing she held in her arms was the dying kitten, was those kidneys at the butcher's, was that horrible thing which she had opened her eyes to see Mme Bonifay nonchalantly picking up and carrying away in a tin basin to the kitchen.

* * *

The surgeon had been called in time, and Helen now was out of all danger. Reassured, Mme Bonifay had resumed the motherly and Rabelaisian good humour that was natural to her.

It was almost with a wink that she now talked of the operation that had saved Helen's life. 'Ton petit curetage,' she would say with a kind of jovial archness, as though she were talking of some illicit pleasure. For Helen, every tone of that fat, jolly voice was yet another insult, yet a further humiliation. The fever had left her; her present weakness was lucid; she inhabited the real world once more. Turning her head, she could see herself reflected in the wardrobe mirror. It gave her a certain satisfaction to see how thin she was, how pale, what blue transparent shadows there were under the eyes, and the eyes themselves, how lifelessly without lustre. She could have powdered herself now, painted her lips a little, and rouged her cheeks, brushed back the gloss into her dull untidy hair; but, perversely, she preferred her sick pallor and dishevelment. 'Like the kitten,' she kept thinking. Reduced to a dirty little rag of limp flesh, transformed from the bright living creature into something repellent, into the likeness of kidneys, of that unspeakable thing that Mme Bonifay . . . She shuddered. And now ton petit curetage — in the same tone as ton petit amoureux. It was horrible, the final humiliation. She loathed the beastly woman, but at the same time was glad that she was so awful. That cheerful gross vulgarity was somehow appropriate — in keeping with all the rest. But when Mme Bonifay had left the room she would start crying, silently, in an agony of self-pity.

Returning unexpectedly, Mme Bonifay found her, that second morning after the petit curetage, with the tears streaming down her face. Genuinely distressed, she offered comfort. But the comfort smelt, as usual, of onions. Physically disgusted as well as resentful of the intrusion upon the privacy of her unhappiness, Helen turned aside, and when Mme Bonifay tried to force consolation upon her, she shook her head and told her to go away. Mme Bonifay hesitated for a moment, then obeyed, but with a Parthian insult in the form of a tenderly suggestive remark about the letter she had brought and which she now laid on Helen's pillow. From him, without a doubt. A good heart, in spite of everything . . .

The letter, it turned out, was from Hugh. 'A holiday in Paris!' he wrote. 'From my dingy little kennel among the bric-à-brac, how I envy you, Helen! Paris in high summer. Gaily beautiful, as this place of hazy distances can never be. London's always mournful, even in the sunshine. One pines for the clear, unequivocal brilliance of the Paris summer. How I wish I were there! Selfishly, first of all, for the pleasure of being with you and out of London and the Museum. And then unselfishly, for your sake — because it worries me, the thought of your being all alone in Paris. Theoretically, with all my head, I know that nothing is likely to happen to you. But all the same — I'd like to be there, protective, but invisible, so that you wouldn't be aware of me, never feel my devotion as an importunity, but so that you should always have the confidence that comes from being two instead of one. Not, alas, that I should be a very good second in a tight corner. (How I hate myself sometimes for my shameful inadequacy!) But better, perhaps, than nobody. And I'd never encroach, never trespass or interfere. I'd be non-existent; except when you needed me. My reward would be just being in your neighbourhood, just seeing and hearing you — the reward of someone who comes out of a dusty place into a garden, and looks at the flowering trees, and listens to the fountains.

'I've never told you before (was afraid you'd laugh — and you may laugh; I don't mind: for after all it's your laughter), but the truth is that I sit sometimes, spinning stories to myself — stories in which I'm always with you, as I've told you I'd like to be with you now in Paris. Watching over you, keeping you from harm, and in return being refreshed by your loveliness, and warmed by your fire, and dazzled by your bright purity . . .'

Angrily, as though the irony in it had been intentional, Helen threw the letter aside. But an hour later she had picked it up again and was re-reading it from the beginning. After all, it was comforting to know that there was somebody who cared.

Chapter Forty. September 11th 1934

WITH MILLER TO see a show of scientific films. Development of the sea urchin. Fertilization, cell division, growth. A renewal of last year's almost nightmarish vision of a more-than-Bergsonian life force, of an ultimate Dark God, much darker, stranger, and more violent than any that Lawrence imagined. Raw material that, on its own inhuman plane, is already a perfectly finished product. A picture of earthworms followed. Week-long hermaphroditic love-making, worm to worm, within a tube of slime. Then an incredibly beautiful film showing the life-history of the blow-fly. The eggs. The grubs on their piece of decaying meat. Snow-white, like a flock of sheep on a meadow. Hurrying away from light. Then, after five days of growth, descending to the earth, burrowing, making a cocoon. In twelve more days, the fly emerges. Fantastic process of resurrection! An organ in the head is inflated like a balloon. Blown up so large, that the walls of the cocoon are split. The fly wriggles out. Positively now, instead of negatively phototropic, as it was as a grub. (Minor and incidental miracle!) Burrowing upwards, towards the light. At the surface, you see it literally pumping up its soft, wet body with air, smoothing out its crumpled wings by forcing blood into the veins. Astonishing and moving spectacle.

I put the question to Miller: what will be the influence of the spread of knowledge such as this? Knowledge of a world incomparably more improbable and more beautiful than the imaginings of any myth-maker. A world, only a few years ago, completely unknown to all but a handful of people. What the effects of its general discovery by all? Miller laughed. 'It will have exactly as much or as little effect as people want it to have. Those who prefer to think about sex and money will go on thinking about sex and money. However loudly the movies proclaim the glory of God.' Persistence of the ingenuous notion that the response to favourable circumstances is inevitably and automatically good. Raw material, once again, to be worked up. One goes on believing in automatic progress, because one wants to cherish this stupidity: it's so consoling. Consoling, because it puts the whole responsibility for everything you do or fail to do on somebody or something other than yourself.

Chapter Forty-One. December 1933

AT COLON THEY drove in a cab, at evening, along an esplanade. Whitish, like a vast fish's eye, the sea lay as though dead. Against a picture postcard sunset the immoderately tall thin palms were the emblems of a resigned hopelessness, and in the nostrils the hot air was like a vapour of wool. They swam for a little in the warm fish-eye, then returned through the deepening night to the town.

For the rich there were, after dinner, cabaret shows with expensive drinks and genuinely white prostitutes at ten dollars. For the poor, in the back streets, the mulatto women sat at doors that opened directly on to lighted bedrooms.

'If one were really conscientious,' said Anthony, as they walked back late that night to the hotel, 'I suppose one would have to go and infect oneself with syphilis.'

The smell of sweat, the smell of alcohol, the smells of sewage and decay and cheap perfumes; then, next morning, the Canal, the great locks, the ship climbing up from one ocean and down again to the other. A more than human achievement that made it possible, Mark explained, smiling anatomically, to transport whores and whisky by water instead of overland from Colon to Panama.

Their ship headed northwards. Once every couple of days they would call at a little port to pick up cargo. From among the bananas at San José, a spider, large as a fist and woolly, made its way into their cabin. Off Champerico, where the lighters came out loaded with bags of coffee, an Indian fell into the sea and was drowned.

At night, it was not the ship that seemed to move, but the stars. They mounted slowly, slantwise, hung at the top of their trajectory, then swooped downwards, travelled tentatively to the right and back to the left, then, beginning all over again, mounted once more towards the zenith.

‘Rather sickening,’ was Anthony’s verdict, ‘but beautiful.’

An improvement on the ordinary celestial mechanics. One could lie there and look at them indefinitely.

There was a note of grim satisfaction in Staithe’s voice as he replied that in two days’ time they would be at Puerto San Felipe.

Puerto San Felipe was a village of huts, with some wooden sheds, near the water, for storing coffee. Don Jorge’s agent at the port helped them through the customs. A pure Spaniard, half dead with tropical diseases, but still elaborately courteous. ‘My house is yours,’ he assured them, as they climbed the steep path towards his bungalow, ‘my house is yours.’

Orchids hung from the veranda, and, among them, cages full of incessantly screaming green parakeets.

An emaciated woman, prematurely old and tired, hopelessly tired, beyond the limit of her strength, came shuffling out of the house to welcome them, to apologize in advance for her hospitality. Puerto San Felipe was a small place, lacked commodities; and besides, she explained, the child was not well, not at all well. Mark asked her what was the matter. She looked at him with eyes expressionless with fatigue, and answered vaguely that it was fever; fever and a pain in the head.

They went with her into the house, and were shown a little girl lying on a camp-bed, restlessly turning her head from side to side, as if seeking, but always vainly, some cool place on which to rest her cheek, some position in which she might find relief from pain. The room was full of flies, and a smell of fried fish came from the kitchen. Looking at the child, Anthony suddenly found himself remembering Helen, that day on the roof — turning and turning her head in the torture of pleasure.

‘I suppose it must be mastoid,’ Mark was saying. ‘Or meningitis, perhaps.’

As he spoke, the child lifted thin arms from under the sheet and, clasping her head between her hands, began to roll still more violently from side to side, and at last broke out into a paroxysm of screaming.

In immediate response, the noise of the parakeets on the veranda swelled up, shriek after shriek, to a deafening maximum of intensity.

‘Quiet, quiet,’ the mother kept repeating, wheedlingly at first, then with a growing insistence, begging, exhorting, commanding the child to stop crying, to feel less pain. The screaming continued, the head went on rolling from side to side.

Tortured by pleasure, tortured by pain. At the mercy of one’s skin and mucus, at the mercy of those thin threads of nerve.

‘Quiet, quiet,’ the woman repeated almost angrily. She bent over the bed and, by main force, dragged down the child’s lifted arms; then, holding the two thin wrists in one hand, laid the other on the head in an effort to hold it unmoving on the pillows. Still screaming, the little girl struggled under the constraint. The woman’s bony hand tightened round the wrists, rested more heavily on the forehead. If she could forcefully restrain the manifestations of pain, perhaps the pain itself would cease, perhaps the child would stop that screaming, would sit up perhaps, smiling, and be well again.

‘Quiet, quiet,’ she commanded between clenched teeth.

With a violent effort the child released her arms from the grasp of those claw-like fingers; the hands flew once more to the head. Before the woman could snatch them away again, Mark touched her on the arm. She looked round at him.

‘Better to leave her,’ he was saying.

Obediently she straightened herself up and walked away towards the door that gave on to the veranda. They followed her. There was nothing whatever that they could do.

‘Mi casa es suya.’

Thank God, it wasn’t. The child’s screams had subsided; but the frying fish, the parakeets among the orchids . . . Politely, Mark refused the invitation to an early luncheon. They walked out again into the oppressive sunshine. The mozos had loaded their baggage on to the pack-mules, and the riding animals stood in the shade of a tree, ready saddled. They buckled on enormous spurs and mounted.

The track wound up and up from the coast, through a jungle silvery and brownish pink with drought. Sitting bolt upright on his high-backed saddle, Mark read Timon of Athens from his pocket edition of the Tragedies. Each time he turned a page, he gave his mule the spur; and for a few yards she would climb a little more quickly, then revert to the old, slow pace.

In the hotel at Tapatlan, where they spent the night, Anthony was bitten for the first time in his life by bed bugs, and the next morning it was an attack of dysentery. . . . On the fourth day he was well enough to go out and see the sights. The last earthquake had almost wrecked the church. A dense black fruitage of bats hung, like ripe plums, from the rafters; an Indian boy, ragged and bare-footed, was sweeping up the droppings; from the altars the baroque saints flapped and gesticulated in a frozen paroxysm of devotion. They walked out again into the market-place, where, secret and as though ambushed within their dark shawls, the brown Indian women squatted in the dust before their little piles of fruit and withering vegetables. The meat on the butcher's stall was covered with a crust of flies. Rhythmically shaking their long ears the donkeys passed, on small quick hoofs, noiseless in the dust. The women came and went in silence, carrying kerosene tins of water on their heads. From under hat brims, dark eyes regarded the strangers with an inscrutably reptilian glitter that seemed devoid of all curiosity, all interest, any awareness even of their presence.

'I'm tired,' Anthony announced. They had not walked very far; but at Tapatlan, it was an immense fatigue even to be living and conscious. 'When I die,' he went on after a silence, 'this is the part of hell I shall be sent to. I recognize it instantly.'

The bar of the hotel was in a dim crypt-like room with a vaulted ceiling supported at the centre by a pier of masonry, inordinately thick for its height, to resist the earthquake shocks. 'The Saxon ossuary,' Mark called it; and here, while he went to their room to fetch a handkerchief, he left Anthony installed in a cane chair.

Propped against the bar, a smartly dressed young Mexican in riding-breeches and an enormous felt hat was boasting to the proprietress about the alligators he had shot in the swamps at the mouth of the Coppalita, of his firmness in dealing with the Indians who had come to pick the coffee on his estate, of the money he expected to make when he sold his crop.

'A bit tight,' Anthony reflected, listening and looking on from his chair; and was enjoying the performance, when the young man turned, and, bowing with the grave formality of one who is so drunk that he must do everything with a conscious deliberation, asked if the foreign cavalier would take a glass of tequila with him.

Fatigue had made Anthony's Spanish more halting than usual. His efforts to explain that he had not been well, that it would not be good for him to drink alcohol, landed him very soon in incoherence. The young man listened, fixing him all the time with dark eyes, bright like the Indians', but, unlike theirs, comprehensibly expressive — European eyes, in which it was possible to read an intense and passionate interest, a focused awareness. Anthony mumbled on, and all at once those eyes took on a new and dangerous glitter; an expression of anger distorted the handsome face, the knuckles of the strong rapacious hands went white under a sudden pressure. The young man stepped forward menacingly.

'Usted me desprecia,' he shouted.

His movement, the violence of his tone, startled Anthony into a kind of panic alarm. He scrambled to his feet and, edging behind his chair, began to explain in a voice that he had meant to be calmly conciliatory, but which, in spite of all his efforts to keep it grave and steady, trembled into a breadless shrillness, that he hadn't dreamed of despising anyone, that it was merely a question of — he fumbled for the medical explanation and could find nothing better than a pain in the stomach — merely a question of un dolar en mi estómago.

For some reason the word *estómago* seemed to the young man the final, most outrageous insult. He bellowed something incomprehensible, but evidently abusive; his hand went back to his hip-pocket and, as the proprietress screamed for help, came forward again, holding a revolver.

'Don't, don't!' Anthony cried out, without knowing what he was saying; then, with extraordinary agility, darted out of his corner to take shelter behind the massive pillar at the centre of the room.

For a second the young man was out of sight. But suppose he were to creep up on tiptoe. Anthony imagined the revolver suddenly coming round the pillar into his face; or else from behind — he would feel the muzzle pressed against his back, would hear the ghastly explosion, and then . . . A fear so intense that it was like the most excruciating physical pain possessed him entirely; his heart beat more violently than ever, he felt as though he were going to be sick. Overcoming terror by a greater terror, he stuck out his head to the left. The young man was standing only two yards away, staring with a ferocious fixity at the pillar. Anthony saw him jerk into movement, and with a despairing shout for help jumped to the right, looked out again and jumped back to the left; then once more to the right.

‘I can’t go on,’ he was thinking. ‘I can’t do it much longer.’ The thought of that pistol coming unexpectedly round the pillar forced him to look out yet again.

The young man moved, and he darted precipitately to the left.

The noise of the revolver going off — that was what he dreaded most. The horrible noise, sudden and annihilating like the noise of that other explosion years before. His eyelids had stiffened and were irrepressibly trembling, ready to blink, in anticipation of the horrifying event. The lashes flickered before his eyes, and it was through a kind of mist that, peering out, he saw the door open and Mark moving swiftly across the room, Mark catching the young man by the wrist . . . The pistol went off; reverberated from the walls and ceiling, the report was catastrophically loud. Anthony uttered a great cry, as though he had been wounded, and, shutting his eyes, flattened himself against the pillar. Conscious only of nausea and that pain in the genitals, those gripings of the bowels, he waited, reduced to a mere quivering embodiment of fearful anticipation, for the next explosion. Waited for what seemed hours. Dim voices parleyed incomprehensibly. Then a touch on his shoulder made him start. He shouted, ‘No, don’t,’ and lifting eyelids that still twitched with the desirable blink, saw Mark Staithe, demonstrating muscle by muscle a smile of friendly amusement.

‘All clear,’ he said, ‘you can come out.’

Feeling profoundly ashamed and humiliated, Anthony followed him into the open. The young Mexican was at the bar again and already drinking. As they approached, he turned and with outstretched arms came to meet them. ‘Hombre,’ he said to Anthony, as he took him affectionately by the hand, ‘hombre’!

Anthony felt more abjectly humiliated than ever.

Chapter Forty-Two. September 15th 1934

HAVE BUILT UP during the last few days a meditation on a phrase of William Penn’s. ‘Force may subdue, but Love gains; and he who forgives first wins the laurel.’

‘Force may subdue.’ I visualize men using force. First, hand to hand. With fists, knives, truncheons, whips. Weals, red or livid across flesh. Lacerations, bruises, the broken bone sticking in jags through the skin, faces horribly swollen and bleeding. Then try to imagine, in my own body, the pain of a crushed finger, of blows with a stick or lash across the face, the searing touch of red-hot iron. All the short-range brutalities and tortures. Then, force from a distance. Machine-gun bullets, high explosive, gases, choking or blistering fire.

Force, finally, in the shape of economic coercion. Starved children, pot-bellied and with arms and legs like sticks. Women old at thirty. And those living corpses, standing in silence at the street corners in Durham or South Wales, shuffling in silence through the mud.

Yes, force may subdue. Subdue in death, subdue by wounds, subdue through starvation and terror. Vision of frightened faces, of abject gestures of servility. The manager at his desk, hectoring. The clerk cringing under the threat of dismissal. Force — the act of violently denying man’s ultimate unity with man.

‘Force may subdue, but Love gains.’ I rehearse the history of Penn himself among the Redskins. Remember how Miller used to allay the suspicious hostility of the Indians in the mountain villages. Think of Pennell on the North-West Frontier; of the Quakers during the Russian famine; of Elizabeth Fry and Damien.

Next I consider the translations of love into terms of politics. Campbell-Bannerman’s insistence that reparation should be made in South Africa — in the teeth of the protests, the Cassandra-like prophesyings of such ‘sane and practical men’ as Arthur Balfour. Love gains even in the clumsy, distorted form of a good political constitution. ‘He who forgives first wins the laurel.’ In South Africa, the English forgave those whom they had wronged — which is only less difficult than forgiving those by whom one has been wronged — and so secured a prize which they couldn’t have won by continued coercion. No prize has been won since the last war, because no combatant has yet forgiven those by whom he has been wronged or those he has wronged.

Consistently applied to any situation, love always gains. It is an empirically determined fact. Love is the best policy. The best not only in regard to those loved, but also in regard to the one who loves. For love is self-energizing. Produces the means whereby its policy can be carried out. In order to go on loving, one needs patience, courage, endurance. But the process of loving generates these means to its own continuance. Love gains because, for the sake of that which is loved, the lover is patient and brave.

And what is loved? Goodness and the potentialities for goodness in all human beings — even those most busily engaged in refusing to actualize those potentialities for goodness in relation to the lover himself. If sufficiently great, love can cast out the fear even of malevolently active enemies.

I end by holding the thought of goodness, still, as it were, before the eyes of my mind. Goodness, immanent in its potentialities, transcendent as a realized ideal; conceivable in its perfections, but also susceptible of being realized in practice, of being embodied at least partially in any situation in which we may find ourselves. ‘The thought of goodness’ — it is the wrong phrase. For in reality it is a whole system of thoughts and sentiments. It is this whole system that I hold, quite still, perceived simultaneously in its entirety — hold it without words, without images, undiscursively, as a single, simple entity. Hold it — then at last must retreat again, back into words, back at last (but refreshed, but made more conscious, but replenished, as it were) into ordinary life.

September 17th 1934

Was called in by Helen to help entertain her sister and brother-in-law, back on leave from India. Had to put on evening clothes — the first time this year — because Colin could not allow himself to be seen in a theatre or at the Savoy Grill in anything but a white tie. A depressing evening. Joyce sickly and gaunt before her time. Colin furtively interested in plumper, fresher bodies. She, jealous and nagging; he resentful at being tied to her and the children, blaming her for the strictness of his own code, which doesn’t allow him to be the libertine he would like to be. Each chronically impatient with the other. Every now and then an outburst of bad temper, an exchange of angry or spiteful words. Colin had other grievances as well. England, it seemed, didn’t show sufficient respect to the officer and gent. Cabmen were impertinent, the lower classes jostled him in the streets. ‘They call this a white man’s country.’ (This, after the second ‘quick one’ in the bar of the theatre, between the acts.) ‘It isn’t. Give me Poona every time.’

Reflect that we all have our Poonas, bolt-holes from unpleasant reality. The clanger, as Miller is always insisting, of meditation becoming such a bolt-hole. Quietism can be mere self-indulgence. Charismata like masturbations. Masturbations, however, that are dignified, by the amateur mystics who practise them, with all the most sacred names of religion and philosophy. ‘The contemplative life.’ It can be made a kind of high-brow substitute for Marlene Dietrich: a subject for erotic musings in the twilight. Meditation — valuable, not as a pleasurable end; only as a means for effecting desirable changes in the personality and mode of existence. To live contemplatively is not to live in some deliciously voluptuous or flattering Poona; it is to live in London, but to live there in a non-cockney style.

Chapter Forty-Three. July 20th and 21st 1914

THE RIGHT, THE auspicious moment for telling Brian the truth — or at any rate as much of the truth as it was expedient for him to know — never seemed to present itself. That first evening had been ruled out in advance — because Anthony felt that he must treat himself to a respite, because poor Brian was looking so ill and tired. At supper and after it, Anthony kept the conversation as entertainingly impersonal as he could make it. He talked about Sorel's *Réflexions sur la violence* — uncomfortable reading for Fabians! And had Brian seen how effectively his beloved Bergson had been punctured by Julien Benda? And what about Lascelles Abercrombie's blank verse? And the latest Gilbert Cannan? Next morning they set out for a walk on the Langdale Pikes. Both were out of training; but in spite of shortened breath and bumping heart, Brian pressed on with a kind of Spartan determination that to Anthony seemed at first absurd, then exasperating. When they got home, late in the afternoon, they were both thoroughly tired; but Anthony was also resentful. Rest and a meal did something to change his mood; but he still found it impossible to behave towards Brian except as a man, forgiving indeed, but still on his dignity; and dignity was obviously quite incompatible with the telling of this particular truth. They spent a silent evening — Anthony reading, the other restlessly prowling about the room, as though on the watch for an occasion to speak — an occasion which Anthony's air of intense preoccupation was deliberately intended not to give him.

In bed the next morning Anthony found himself startled broad awake by the uncomfortable thought that time was passing, and passing not only for himself but also for Joan and Brian. Joan's impatience might get the better of her promise not to write to Brian; besides, the longer he postponed the inevitable explanation with Brian, the worse Brian would think of him.

Inventing a blistered heel for the occasion, he let Brian go out by himself, and having watched him indomitably striding away up the steep slope behind the cottage, sat down to write his letter to Joan. To try to write it, rather; for every one of the drafts he produced displayed one or other of two faults, and each of the two faults exposed him, he realized, to a particular danger: the danger that, if he insisted too much on the esteem and affection which had prepared him to lose his head on that accursed evening, she would reply that so much esteem and affection accompanied by head-losing amounted to love, and were his justification (since love was supposed to justify everything) for betraying Brian; and the other danger that, if he insisted too exclusively on the head-losing and temporary insanity, she would feel insulted and complain to Brian, to Mrs Foxe, to her relations, raise a regular hue and cry against him as a cad, a seducer, and heaven only knew what else. After the expense of three hours and a dozen sheets of paper, the best of his efforts seemed to him too unsatisfactory to send off. He put it angrily aside, and, in his mood of exasperation, dashed off a violent letter of abuse to Mary. Damned woman! She was responsible for everything. 'Deliberate malice . . .' 'Shameless exploitation of my love for you . . .' 'Treating me as though I were some sort of animal you could torment for your private amusement . . .' The phrases flowed from his pen. 'This is good-bye,' he concluded, and, with half his mind, believed in what he was dramatically writing. 'I never want to see you again. Never.' But a quarrel, the other half of his mind was reflecting, can always be made up: he would give her this lesson: then, perhaps, if she behaved well, if he felt he simply couldn't do without her . . . He sealed up the letter, and at once walked briskly to the village to post it. This act of decision did something to restore his self-esteem. On his way home he made up his mind, quite definitely this time, that he would have his talk with Brian that evening, and then, in the light of his knowledge of Brian's attitude, re-write the letter to Joan the following morning.

Brian was back at six, triumphing in the fact that he had walked further and climbed to the tops of more mountains than on any previous occasion in his life, but looking, in spite of his exultations, completely exhausted. At the sight of that face he had known so long, that face now so tragically worn and emaciated beneath the transfiguration of the smile, Anthony felt an intenser renewal of the first evening's emotions — of anxious solicitude for an old friend, of distressed sympathy with a

human being's suffering — and along with these an excruciating sense of guilt towards the friend, of responsibility for the human being. Instant confession might have relieved his pain, might have allowed him at the same time to express his feelings; but he hesitated; he was silent; and in a few seconds, by an almost instantaneous process of psychological chemistry, the sympathy and the solicitude had combined with the sense of guilt to form a kind of anger. Yes, he was positively angry with Brian for looking so tired, for being already so miserable, for going to be so much more miserable the moment he was told the truth.

'You're mad to overtire yourself like this,' he said gruffly, and drove him into the house to take a rest before supper.

After the meal they went out on to the strip of terraced lawn in front of the cottage and spreading out a rug, lay down and looked up into a sky green at their arrival with the last trace of summer twilight, then gradually and ever more deeply blue.

The time, thought Anthony, with a certain sinking of the heart, had come, irrevocably; and through a long silence he prepared himself to begin, trying out in his mind one opening gambit after another; hesitating between the abrupt and precipitate clean-breast-of-it-all and more devious strategy that would prepare the victim for the final shock.

But before he had decided which was the best approach to his confession, the other broke out all at once into stammering speech. He too, it was evident, had been waiting for an opportunity to ease his mind, and instead of acting the penitent, as he had intended, Anthony found himself (to the relief of a part of his mind, to the dismay and embarrassment of the inhabitant of a deeper layer of consciousness) suddenly called upon to play the part of confessor and director of conscience; called upon to listen all over again to the story that Joan had already told him — the story that, adorned with St Monicas and uterine reactions, he had so joyfully passed on to Mary Amberley. He had to hear how humiliating, how painful his friend found it to be unable to gain the mastery of his body, to banish all the low desires unworthy of the love he felt for Joan. Or perhaps, Brian had qualified, citing Meredith's great volcano flinging fires of earth to sky, perhaps not unworthy when circumstances should have allowed them to take their place in the complex whole of a perfect marriage; but unworthy at that moment when it was not yet possible for them to find their legitimate expression, unworthy in so far as they were to defy the authority of the conscious mind.

'I've had to r-run away,' he explained, 'h-had to remove my b-body to a safe d-distance. B-because I wasn't able to c-c-c . . .'; 'control' would not come; he had to be satisfied with another less expressive word; 'to m-manage myself with my w-will. One's ash-shamed of being so weak,' Brian concluded.

Anthony nodded. Weak in making up one's mind to kiss, and no less weak when it came to interrupting a momentarily agreeable experience — though there had been something more than weakness there, something positive, a perverse revelling in an action known to be stupid, dangerous, wrong.

'But if one kn-knows one c-can't over-c-come it,' Brian was saying, 'I s-suppose it's b-best to r-run away. B-better than l-letting it g-get one into av-voidable trouble.'

'Yes, I agree,' said Anthony, wondering why he hadn't followed his impulse and turned back at Kendal.

'And not only ones-self, but o-other people. G-getting th-them into trouble t-too. 'There was a long silence; then, slowly and laboriously, he set out to explain that the lovely, the splendid thing about Joan was her naturalness. She had the strength of natural things and their spontaneity; she was warm, like nature, and generous and profoundly innocent. She had the qualities of a summer landscape, of a flowering tree, of a water-bird darting bright-eyed and glossy between the rushes. This naturalness was what he had chiefly loved in her, because it was the complementary opposite of his own scrupulousness and intellectualism. But it was this same naturalness that had made it all but impossible for Joan to understand why he had found her presence so dangerous, why he had felt it necessary to keep away from her. She had been hurt by his withholding of himself, had thought it was because he didn't love her; whereas the truth was . . .

The truth was, Anthony said to himself, finding a kind of consolation, a renewal of his sense of superiority, in the derisive cynicism of his thoughts, the truth was that she was thirsty for kisses, that at his first caress her whole body revealed itself a shuddering and palpitating protest against the continence that had been imposed on it.

'The t-truth,' Brian was laboriously saying, 'is that I l-love her m-more than I e-ever did. Unspeakably much.' He was silent once more for a little; then, looking up at Anthony, 'What shall I d-do?' he asked.

Still in his critical mood, Anthony scored, with the grossness of his unspoken answer, another private triumph — as short-lived however, as it was easy; for his first thought was succeeded almost instantaneously by the disquieting realization that he was being faced by a choice: either to tell Brian what had happened between himself and Joan; or else to make some anodyne and non-committal reply to his question, and postpone the telling of the truth till later on. By omission, the anodyne reply would be a monstrous falsehood; and when at last he came to tell the truth, this lie and all the other lies implied in more than two days of silence or irrelevant chatter would inevitably be remembered against him. But to tell the truth at once, in this particular context, would be especially painful — and painful, he went on to think, not only to himself but also, and above all, to Brian. After what Brian had been saying this evening, to blurt out a plain account of what had happened would be sheer cruelty and deliberate insult.

'What o-ought I to d-do?' Brian was insisting.

'I think,' Anthony answered softly, 'I think you ought to come to terms with reality.'

He had made this decision — or rather, as he preferred to put it when, later on, in the privacy of his bedroom, he thought of the events of the evening, the decision had made itself. Looking back, he felt that he had had nothing to do with the matter.

Chapter Forty-Four. September 21st 1934

REMARKS BY ST Teresa. 'Let us look at our own faults, and not at other people's. We ought not to insist on everyone following our footsteps, or to take upon ourselves to give instructions in spirituality when, perhaps, we do not even know what it is. Zeal for the good of souls, though given us by God, may often lead us astray.' To which add this. 'It is a great grace of God to practise self-examination, but too much is as bad as too little, as they say; believe me, by God's help, we shall accomplish more by contemplating the divinity than by keeping our eyes fixed on ourselves.' God may or may not exist. But there is the empirical fact that contemplation of the divinity — of goodness in its most unqualified form — is a method of realizing that goodness to some slight degree in one's life, and results, often, in an experience as if of help towards that realization of goodness, help from some being other than one's ordinary self and immensely superior to it. Christian God and the Buddhist's primal Mind — interpretations of concrete experiences, the Buddhist being the rationalization of a state further removed from the normal than the Christian. Christians, of course, have often experienced that state and found great difficulties in explaining it in orthodox terms. Both conceptions are legitimate — just as both macroscopical and microscopical views of matter are legitimate. We look at the universe with a certain kind of physico-mental apparatus. That apparatus can respond only to certain stimuli. Within relatively narrow limits, it is adjustable. The nature of the facts which each of us perceives as primary and given depends on the nature of the individual instrument and on the adjustment we have been brought up, or deliberately chosen, to give it. From these data one can draw inferences. Which may be logically sound or unsound. Any philosophy is intellectually legitimate if, one, it starts from facts which, for the philosopher, are data and if, two, the logical construction based on these facts is sound. But an intellectually is not the same as a morally legitimate philosophy. We can adjust our instrument deliberately, by an act of the will. This means that we can will modifications in the personal experiences which underlie our philosophy, the data from which we argue. Problem: to build really solid logical

bridges between given facts and philosophical inferences. All but insoluble. No bullet-proof arguments for any of the main cosmological theories. What, then, shall we do? Stick, so far as possible, to the empirical facts — always remembering that these are modifiable by anyone who chooses to modify the perceiving mechanism. So that one can see, for example, either irremediable senselessness and turpitude, or else actualizable potentialities for good — whichever one likes; it is a question of choice.

Chapter Forty-Five. April 14th 1928

HAPPINESS INEXPRESSIBLE — that was what her letter should have brought him. But Hugh's face, as he walked — walked instead of having his lunch — up and down the long gallery of the Ethnographical Collection, was a mask of perplexity and distress. The words of Helen's letter repeated themselves in his memory. 'Nobody cares a pin whether I'm alive or dead.'

From the Mexican case the symbol of death in crystal and that other skull inlaid with turquoise stared out at him as he passed. 'Nobody cares . . .' It should have been his opportunity. He had dreamt of her unhappiness — in an agony of commiseration, but also with hope. Unhappy, she would turn to him. 'Nobody cares . . .'

'Nobody except you.' His exultant pride and pleasure in those words had been tempered, as he read on, by the realization that she didn't really understand how he cared, didn't appreciate the exact quality of his feeling. 'My mother?' she had written. 'But, after all, ever since she started taking that horrible stuff, she's somebody else — always was somebody else really, even when she was well (though of course not so else). Just as I was always somebody else, if it comes to that. She expected a daughter; but I was always selfish and irresponsible. Just as she was. Somebody else. How could she care? You're not selfish, Hugh. You're . . .' But it wasn't a question merely of selfishness or unselfishness, he began to protest, with all the painted faces of the Peruvian vases staring down from the right with an unwinking intensity of frozen life. It was a question of something different, something deeper and more spiritual. On his left the trophies of the Papuan head-hunters hung shrivelled, but fantastically painted, like the heads of decapitated clowns. The skulls from the Torres Straits had been given round shining eyes of mother-of-pearl. Yes, more spiritual, Hugh insisted, thinking of what he had written about her — lyrically, lyrically! — and of that subtle analysis of his own emotions. The unselfishness was there, but melted down, as it were, in contemplation, refined into something aesthetic. Unselfishness in a picture. Unselfishness by Watteau, by Cima da Conegliano. And she herself, the object of his contemplative and aesthetic unselfishness — she too, in his imaginings, in the accumulating pages of his manuscript, had possessed the quality of a picture or a piece of music; something that it would be sufficient happiness merely to look at for ever, to listen to; perhaps, occasionally, to touch, as though she were a statue, to caress with an almost imperceptible tenderness. And sometimes in those imaginings she was cold, was unhappy — nobody cared a pin — and she asked to be comforted and made warm, she crept into his arms, into those unselfish, contemplative, impalpable arms of his, and lay there safely, but naked, lay there a picture, virginal, ideal, but melting, melting . . . Feathered like an ambassador in full dress uniform, with the beak of a bird, the teeth of a shark, this wooden mask had once made its wearer feel, as he danced, that he was more than human, akin to the gods. 'You've said you'd like to be always with me. Well, I've been thinking about it a lot recently, and I believe that that's what I'd like too. Dear Hugh, I'm not in love with you; but I like you more than anyone else. I think you're nicer, kinder, gentler, less selfish. And surely that's a good enough foundation to build on.' The words, when he read them first, had filled him with a kind of panic; and it was with the same protesting agitation that he now walked between New Caledonia and the Solomon Islands. In the belly of a wooden bonito fish the Melanesian widow opened a little door, and there, like a chamberpot, was her husband's skull. But it was always spiritually and aesthetically that he had wanted to be with her. Hadn't she been able to understand that? Surely he had made it clear enough? 'If you still want it, there I am — I want it too.'

It was terrible, he was thinking, terrible! She was forcing a decision on him, making it impossible for him to say no by assuming that he had already said yes. He felt himself hemmed in, driven into a corner. Marriage? But he would have to change his whole way of life. The flat wouldn't be large enough. She'd want to eat meat at night. Mrs Barton would give notice. Of the spears on his left some were tipped with obsidian, some with the spines of sting-rays, some with human bone. 'You probably think I'm a fool, and flighty and irresponsible; and it's true, I have been up till now. I'm hopeless. But I wasn't born hopeless — I was made it, because of the kind of life I've lived. Now I want to be something else, and I know I can be something else. Sérieuse. A good wife and all that, ridiculous and embarrassing as it sounds when one puts it down on paper. But I refuse to be ashamed of goodness any longer. I absolutely refuse.' That irresponsibility, he was thinking, was one of the loveliest and most moving things about her. It separated her from the common world, it promoted her out of vulgar humanity. He didn't want her to be responsible and a good wife. He wanted her to be like Ariel, like the delicate creature in his own manuscript, a being of another order, beyond good and evil. Meanwhile he had walked into Africa. The image of a Negress holding her long pointed breasts in her two hands glistened darkly from behind the confining glass. Her belly was tattooed, her navel projected in a little cone. The spears in the next case were headed with iron. Like Ariel, he repeated to himself, like those Watteaus at Dresden, like Debussy. For resonator, this xylophone had, not the usual gourd, but a human skull, and there were skulls festooned along the ivory fetish horns, thigh-bones around the sacrificial drum from Ashanti. She was spoiling everything, he said to himself resentfully. And suddenly, lifting his eyes, he saw that she was there, hurrying along the narrow passage between the cases to meet him.

'You?' he managed to whisper.

But Helen was too much perturbed to see the look of dismay, the pallor, and then the guilty blush, too intensely preoccupied with her own thoughts to hear the note of startled apprehension in his voice.

'I'm sorry,' she said breathlessly, as she took his hand. 'I didn't mean to come and pester you here. But you don't know what it's been like this morning at home.' She shook her head; her lips trembled. 'Mother's been like a mad-woman. I can't tell you. . . . You're the only person, Hugh . . .'

Clumsily, he tried to console her. But the reality was profoundly different from his imagination of her unhappiness. The imagination had always been his delicious opportunity; the reality was the menace of an unavoidable doom. Desperately, he tried the effect of changing the subject. These things from Benin were rather interesting. The ivory leopard, spotted with disks of copper inlay. The Negro warriors, in bronze, with their leaf-shaped spears and swords, and the heads of their enemies hanging from their belts. The Europeans, bearded and aquiline, in their high sixteenth-century morions and baggy hose, their matchlocks in their hands, and the cross hanging round their necks. Comic, he remarked, parenthetically, that the only thing these blackamoors ever got out of Christianity should have been the art of crucifying people. The punitive expedition in 1897 found the place full of crosses. And this beautiful head of the young girl with her tapering Phrygian cap of coral beads . . .

'Look at this,' Helen suddenly interrupted; and, pulling up her sleeve, she showed him two red semicircular marks on the skin of her forearm a few inches above the wrist. 'That's where she bit me, when I tried to make her go back to bed.'

Hugh was startled into pitying indignation. 'But it's awful!' he cried. 'It's too awful.' He took her hand. 'My poor child!' They stood for a moment in silence. Then, suddenly, his pity was shot through by the realization that the thing had happened. There could be no escape now. He found himself thinking again of Mrs Barton. If she were to give notice, what would he do?

Chapter Forty-Six. October 30th 1934

MARK, AT DINNER, said he'd been re-reading Anna Karenina. Found it good, as novels go. But complained of the profound untruthfulness of even the best imaginative literature. And he began to

catalogue its omissions. Almost total neglect of those small physiological events that decide whether day-to-day living shall have a pleasant or unpleasant tone. Excretion, for example, with its power to make or mar the day. Digestion. And, for the heroines of novel and drama, menstruation. Then the small illnesses — catarrh, rheumatism, headache, eyestrain. The chronic physical disabilities — ramifying out (as in the case of deformity or impotence) into luxuriant insanities. And conversely the sudden accessions, from unknown visceral and muscular sources, of more than ordinary health. No mention, next, of the part played by mere sensations in producing happiness. Hot bath, for example, taste of bacon, feel of fur, smell of freesias. In life, an empty cigarette-case may cause more distress than the absence of a lover; never in books. Almost equally complete omission of the small distractions that fill the greater part of human lives. Reading the papers; looking into shops; exchanging gossip; with all the varieties of day-dreaming, from lying in bed, imagining what one would do if one had the right lover, income, face, social position, to sitting at the picture palace passively accepting ready-made day-dreams from Hollywood.

Lying by omission turns inevitably into positive lying. The implications of literature are that human beings are controlled, if not by reason, at least by comprehensible, well-organized, avowable sentiments. Whereas the facts are quite different. Sometimes the sentiments come in, sometimes they don't. All for love, or the world well lost; but love may be the title of nobility given to an inordinate liking for a particular person's smell or texture, a lunatic desire for the repetition of a sensation produced by some particular dexterity. Or consider those cases (seldom published, but how numerous, as anyone in a position to know can tell!), those cases of the eminent statesmen, churchmen, lawyers, captains of industry — seemingly so sane, demonstrably so intelligent, publicly so high-principled; but, in private, under irresistible compulsion towards brandy, towards young men, towards little girls in trains, towards exhibitionism, towards gambling or hoarding, towards bullying, towards being whipped, towards all the innumerable, crazy perversions of the lust for money and power and position on the one hand, for sexual pleasure on the other. Mere tics and tropisms, lunatic and unavowable cravings — these play as much part in human life as the organized and recognized sentiments. And imaginative literature suppresses the fact. Propagates an enormous lie about the nature of men and women.

'Rightly, no doubt. Because, if human beings were shown what they're really like, they'd either kill one another as vermin, or hang themselves. But meanwhile, I really can't be bothered to read any more imaginative literature. Lies don't interest me. However poetically they may be expressed. They're just a bore.'

Agreed with Mark that imaginative literature wasn't doing its duty. That it was essential to know everything — and to know it, not merely through scientific textbooks, but also in a form that would have power to bring the facts home to the whole mind, not merely to the intellect. A complete expression (in terms of imaginative literature) leading to complete knowledge (with the whole mind) of the complete truth: indispensable preliminary condition of any remedial action, any serious attempt at the construction of a genuinely human being. Construction from within, by training in proper use of the self — training, simultaneously physical and mental. Construction, at the same time, from without, by means of social and economic arrangements devised in the light of a complete knowledge of the individual, and of the way in which the individual can modify himself.

Mark only laughed, and said I reminded him of the men who go round from house to house selling electric washing-machines.

November 4th 1934

Very good meeting in Newcastle with Miller and Purchas. Large and enthusiastic crowds — predominantly of the dispossessed. Note the significant fact that pacifism is in inverse ratio, generally, to prosperity. The greater the poverty, the longer the unemployment, the more whole-hearted the determination not to fight again, and the more complete the scepticism about the conventional idols, Empire, National Honour, and the like. A negative attitude closely correlated with bad economic conditions. Therefore not to be relied on. Such pacifism is without autonomous life. At the mercy, first of all, of anyone who comes along with money — and threats of war would lead to a vast increase of employment.

At the mercy, in the second place, of anyone who comes along with an alluring positive doctrine — however crazy and criminal its positiveness may be. The mind abhors a vacuum. Negative pacifism and scepticism about existing institutions are just holes in the mind, emptinesses waiting to be filled. Fascism or communism have sufficient positive content to act as fillers. Someone with the talents of Hitler may suddenly appear. The negative void will be pumped full in a twinkling. These disillusioned pacifist sceptics will be transformed overnight into drilled fanatics of nationalism, class war, or whatever it may be. Question: have we time to fill the vacuum with positive pacifism? Or, having the time, have we the ability?

Chapter Forty-Seven. January 10th and 11th 1934

OSTENSIBLY, DON JORGE'S telegram was an order for the immediate sale of six hundred bags of coffee. In fact, it announced that the moment had come, and that he was urgently expecting them.

Mark looked at his companion with an expression that was frankly hostile. 'Those blasted guts of yours!' he said.

Anthony protested that he was all right again.

'You're not fit to do the journey.'

'Yes, I am.'

'You're not,' Mark repeated with a solicitude that was at the same time a passionate resentment. 'Three days on a mule across these damned mountains. It's too much for anyone in your condition.'

Piqued by the other's words, and afraid, if he agreed with Mark, of seeming unwilling to face the difficulties and dangers that lay in front of them, Anthony insisted obstinately that he was fit for anything. Wishing to believe it, Mark soon allowed himself to be persuaded. An answer was dispatched to Don Jorge — the six hundred bags were being sold immediately; he might expect to hear further details on Friday — and after lunch, in the blazing heat of the early afternoon, they set out for the finca, lying high in the mountains above Tapatlan, where one of Don Jorge's friends would put them up for the night. Mark produced his pocket Shakespeare once again and, for four hours, they spurred their reluctant beasts, up and up, between dusty maize stubbles, and, above the fields, through a dry leafless scrub that gave place at last to the green darkness and golden lights of coffee plantations under their towering shade trees. Up and up, while Mark read the whole of Hamlet and two acts of Troilus and Cressida, and Anthony sat wondering, in a mist of fatigue, how much longer he could stand it. But at last, as night was falling, they reached their destination.

At four the next morning they were in the saddle again. Under the trees there was a double night of starless shadow; but the mules picked their way along the windings of the track with a reassuring certainty. From time to time they rode under invisible lemon trees, and in the darkness the scent of the flowers was like the brief and inenarrable revelation of something more than earthly — a moment's ecstasy, and then, as the mules advanced, hoof after hoof, up the stony path, the fading of the supernatural presence, the return to a common life symbolically represented by the smell of leather and sweat.

The sun rose, and a little later they emerged from the cultivated forest of the coffee plantations into an upland country of bare rocks and pine woods. Almost level, the track went winding in and out along the buttressed and indented flank of a mountain. To the left, the ground fell steeply away into valleys still dark with shadow. Far off, through air made hazy by the dry season's dust and the smoke of forest fires, a dim whiteness high up in the sky was the Pacific.

Mark went on reading Troilus and Cressida.

A descent so steep that they had to dismount and lead their animals brought them in another hour to the banks of a river. They forded it, and, in the blistering sunshine, began to climb the slope beyond. There was no shade, and the vast bald hills were the colour of dust and burnt grass. Nothing stirred,

not even a lizard among the stones. There was no sight or sound of life. Hopelessly empty, the chaos of tumbled mountains seemed to stretch away interminably. It was as though they had ridden across the frontier of the world out into nothingness, into an infinite expanse of hot and dusty negation.

At eleven they halted for a meal, and an hour later, with the sun almost perpendicularly above them, were off once more. The path climbed, dropped fifteen hundred feet into a ravine and climbed again. By three o'clock Anthony was so tired that he could scarcely think or even see. The landscape seemed to advance and retreat before his eyes, turned black sometimes and faded away altogether. He heard voices, and, in his mind, his thoughts began to lead a life of their own — a life that was autonomous in its mad and maddening irrelevance. Image succeeded image in a phantasmagoria that it was beyond his power to exorcize. It was as though he were possessed, as though he were being forced to lead someone else's life and think with another person's mind. But the sweat that poured like water off his face and soaked through his shirt and cotton riding-breeches, the intolerable aching of loins and thighs — these were his own. His own and excruciating, intolerable. He was tempted to groan, even to burst into tears. But through the other person's delirium he remembered his assurances to Mark, his confident promise that he wouldn't be tired. He shook his head and rode on — rode on through the illusory world of alien fancy and half-seen, vanishing landscape, rode on through the hideous reality of his pain and fatigue.

Mark's voice startled him out of his stupor.

'Are you all right?'

Looking up, and, with an effort, focusing his eyes, he saw that Mark had halted and was waiting at the turn of the track just above him. Fifty yards further up the slope the mozo was riding behind the baggage-mule.

'Mula-a-a!' came the long-drawn shout, and along with it the dull thump of a stick on mule-skin.

'Sorry,' Anthony mumbled, 'I must have dropped behind.'

'You're sure you're all right?'

He nodded.

'There's less than an hour to go,' said Mark. 'Stick it out if you can.' In the shadow of the enormous straw hat, his worn face twisted itself into a smile of encouragement.

Touched, Anthony smiled back and, to reassure him, tried to make a joke about the hardness of the wooden saddles on which they were riding.

Mark laughed. 'If we get through intact,' he said, 'we'll dedicate a pair of silver buttocks to St James of Compostella.'

He jerked the reins and gave his mule the spur. The animal started up the slope; then, in a slither of rolling stones, stumbled and fell forward on its knees.

Anthony had shut his eyes to rest them a moment from the glare. At the noise he opened them again and saw Mark lying face downwards on the ground and the mule heaving itself, in a series of violent spasms of movement, to its feet. The landscape snapped back into solidity, the moving images fell still. Forgetting the pain in his back and legs, Anthony swung himself down from the saddle and ran up the path. As he approached, Mark rolled over and raised himself to a sitting position.

'Hurt?' Anthony asked.

The other shook his head, but did not speak.

'You're bleeding.'

The breeches were torn at the left knee, and a red stain was creeping down the leg. Anthony shouted to the mozo to come back with the baggage-mule; then, kneeling down, opened his penknife, slid the blade into the rent and sawed a long jagged slit in the tough material.

'You're spoiling my bags,' Mark said, speaking for the first time.

Anthony did not answer, only tore away a wide panel of the stuff.

The whole knee-cap and the upper part of the skin were skinless red flesh, grey, where the blood was not oozing, with dust and grit. On the inner side of the knee was a deep cut that bled profusely.

Anthony frowned, and, as though the pain were his own, caught his lower lip between his teeth. A pang of physical disgust mingled with his horrified sympathy. He shuddered.

Mark had leaned forward to look at the damaged knee. 'Messy,' was his comment.

Anthony nodded without speaking, unscrewed the stopper of his water-bottle, and, wetting his handkerchief, began to wash the dirt out of the wounds. His emotion disappeared; he was wholly absorbed in his immediate task. Nothing was important any more except to wash this grit away without hurting Mark in the process.

By this time, the mozo had come back with the baggage-mule and was standing beside them in silence, looking down with expressionless black eyes on what was happening.

'I expect he thinks we're making an unnecessary fuss,' said Mark, and made an attempt to smile.

Anthony rose to his feet, ordered the mozo to untie the mule's load, and, from one of the canvas bundles, pulled out the medicine-chest.

Under the sting of the disinfectant Mark gave vent to an explosive burst of laughter. 'No humanitarian nonsense about iodine,' he said. 'The good old-fashioned idea of hurting you for your own good. Like Jehovah. Christ!' He laughed again as Anthony swabbed another patch of raw flesh. Then, when the knee was bandaged, 'Give me a hand,' he went on. Anthony helped him to his feet, and he took a few steps up the path and back again. 'Seems all right.' He bent down to look at the forelegs of his mule. They were hardly scratched. 'Nothing to prevent us pushing on at once,' he concluded.

They helped him to mount, and, spurring with his uninjured leg, he set off at a brisk pace up the hill. For the rest of the way he was, for Anthony, mostly a straight and rigid back, but sometimes also, at the zigzags of the path, a profile, marbly in its fixed pallor — the statue of a stoic, flayed, but still alive and silently supporting his agony.

In less than the appointed hour — for Mark had chosen to keep up a pace that set the mules blowing and sweating in the afternoon heat — they rode into San Cristobal el Alto. The thirty or forty Indian ranchos of which the village consisted were built on a narrow ridge between plunging gulfs, beyond which, on either side, the mountains stretched away chaotically, range after range, into the haze.

Seeing distinguished travellers, the village shopkeeper hurried out on to the plaza to offer them accommodation for the night. Mark listened to him, nodded and made a movement to dismount; then, wincing, let himself fall back into the saddle.

Without turning his head, 'You'll have to get me off this blasted mule,' he called in a loud, angry voice.

Anthony and the mozo helped him down; but, once on the ground, he refused any further assistance.

'I can walk by myself,' he said curtly, frowning while he spoke, as though, in offering an arm, Anthony had meant to insult him.

Their quarters for the night turned out to be a wooden shed, half-full of coffee bags and hides. After inspecting the place, Mark limped out again to look at the thatched lean-to, where the mules were to be stabled; then suggested a walk round the village, 'to see the sights,' he explained.

Walking, it was evident, hurt him so much that he could not trust himself to speak. It was in silence that they crossed the little plaza, in silence that they visited the church, the school, the cabildo, the village prison. In silence, and one behind the other. For if they walked abreast, Anthony had reflected, he would be able to see Mark's face, and Mark would feel that he was being spied upon. Whereas if he walked in front it would be an insult, a challenge to Mark to quicken his pace. Deliberately, Anthony lagged behind, silent, like an Indian wife trailing through the dust after her husband.

It was nearly half an hour before Mark felt that he had tortured himself sufficiently.

'So much for the sights,' he said grimly. 'Let's go and have something to eat.'

The night was piercingly cold, the bed merely a board of wood. It was from a restless and unrefreshing sleep that Anthony was roused next morning.

'Wake!' Mark was shouting to him. 'Wake!'

Anthony sat up, startled, and saw Mark, in the other wooden bed, propped on his elbow and looking across at him with angry eyes.

'Time to get away,' the harsh voice continued. 'It's after six.'

Suddenly remembering yesterday's accident, 'How's the knee?' Anthony asked.

'Just the same.'

'Did you sleep?'

'No, of course not,' Mark answered irritably. Then looking away. 'I can't manage to get out of bed,' he added. 'The thing's gone stiff on me.'

Anthony pulled on his boots and, having opened the door of the shed to admit the light, came and sat down on the edge of Mark's bed.

'We'd better put on a clean dressing,' he said, and began to untie the bandage.

The lint had stuck to the raw flesh. Anthony pulled it cautiously, then let it go. 'I'll see if they can give me some warm water at the shop,' he said.

Mark uttered a snort of laughter, and taking a corner of the lint between his thumb and forefinger, gave a violent jerk. The square of pink fabric came away in his hand.

'Don't!' Anthony had cried out, wincing as though the pain were his. The other only smiled at him contemptuously. 'You've made it bleed again,' he added, in another tone, finding a medical justification for his outburst. But in point of fact, that trickle of fresh blood was not the thing that disturbed him most when he bent down to look at what Mark had uncovered. The whole knee was horribly swollen and almost black with bruises, and round the edges of the newly opened wound the flesh was yellow with pus.

'You can't possibly go with your knee in this state,' he said.

'That's for me to decide,' Mark answered, and added, after a moment. 'After all, you did it the day before yesterday.'

The words implied a contemptuous disparagement. 'If a poor creature like you can overcome pain, then surely I . . .' That was what they meant to say. But the insult, Anthony realized, was unintended. It sprang from the depths of an arrogance that was almost childlike in its single-minded intensity. There was something touching and absurd about such ingenuousness. Besides, there was the poor fellow's knee. This was not the time to resent insults.

'I was practically well,' he argued in a conciliatory tone. 'You've got a leg that's ready to go septic at any moment.'

Mark frowned. 'Once I'm on my mule I shall be all right,' he insisted. 'It's just a bit stiff and bruised; that's all. Besides,' he added, in contradiction of what he had said before, 'there'll be a doctor at Miajutla. The quicker I get this thing into his hands, the better.'

'You'll make it ten times worse on the way. If you waited here a day or two . . .'

'Don Jorge would think I was leaving him in the lurch.'

'Damn Don Jorge! Send him a telegram.'

'The line doesn't go through this place. I asked.'

'Send the mozo, then.'

Mark shook his head. 'I wouldn't trust him.'

'Why not?'

'He'll get drunk at the first opportunity.'

'In other words, you don't want to send him.'

'Besides, it would be too late,' Mark went on. 'Don Jorge will be moving in a day or two.'

'And do you imagine you'll be able to move with him?'

'I mean to be there,' said Mark.

'You can't.'

'I tell you, I mean to be there. I'm not going to let him down.' His voice was cold and harsh with restrained anger. 'And now help me up,' he commanded.

'I won't.'

The two men looked at one another in silence. Then, making an effort to control himself, Mark shrugged his shoulders.

‘All right, then,’ he said, ‘I’ll call the mozo. And if you’re afraid of going on to Miajutla,’ he continued in a tone of savage contempt, ‘you can ride back to Tapatlan. I’ll go on by myself.’ Then, turning towards the open door, ‘Juan,’ he shouted. ‘Juan!’

Anthony surrendered. ‘Have it your own way. If you really want to be mad . . .’ He left the sentence unfinished. ‘But I take no responsibility.’

‘You weren’t asked to,’ Mark answered. Anthony got up and went to fetch the medicine-chest. He swabbed the wounds and applied the new dressing in silence; then, while he was trying to bandage, ‘Suppose we stopped quarrelling,’ he said. ‘Wouldn’t that make things easier?’

For a few seconds Mark remained hostile and averted; then looked up and twisted his face into a reconciliatory smile of friendliness. ‘Peace,’ he said, nodding affirmatively. ‘We’ll make peace.’

But he had reckoned without the pain. It began, agonizingly, when he addressed himself to the task of getting out of bed. For it turned out to be impossible for him, even with Anthony’s assistance, to get out of bed without bending his wounded knee; and to bend it was torture. When at last he was on his feet beside the bed, he was pale and the expression of his face hardened to a kind of ferocity.

‘All right?’ Anthony questioned.

Mark nodded and, as though the other had become his worst enemy, limped out of the shed without giving him a glance.

The torture began again when the time came for mounting, and was renewed with every step the mule advanced. As on the previous day, Mark took the lead. At the head of the cavalcade, he proved his superiority and at the same time put himself out of range of inquisitive eyes. The air was still cold; but from time to time, Anthony noticed, he took out his handkerchief and wiped his face, as if he were sweating. Each time he put the handkerchief away again, he would give the mule a particularly savage dig with his one available spur.

The track descended, climbed again, descended through pine woods, descended, descended. An hour passed, two hours, three; the sun was high in the sky, it was oppressively hot. Three hours, three and a half; and now there were clearings in the woods, steep fields, the stubble of Indian corn, a group of huts, and an old woman carrying water, brown children silently playing in the dust. They were on the outskirts of another village.

‘What about stopping here for some food?’ Anthony called, and spurred his animal to a trot. ‘We might get some fresh eggs,’ he continued as he drew up with the other mule.

The face Mark turned towards him was as white as paper, and, as he parted his clenched teeth to speak, the lower jaw trembled uncontrollably. ‘I think we’d better push on,’ he began in an almost inaudible voice. ‘We’ve still got a long way . . .’ Then the lids fluttered over his eyes, his head dropped, his body seemed to collapse upon itself; he fell forward on to the neck of his mule, slid to one side, and would have pitched to the ground if Anthony had not caught him by the arm and held him up.

Chapter Forty-Eight. July 23rd 1914

ANTHONY HAD DOZED off again after being called, and was late for breakfast. As he entered the little living-room, Brian looked up with startled eyes and, as though guiltily, folded away the letter he had been reading into his pocket, but not before Anthony had recognized from across the room the unmistakable characteristics of Joan’s rather heavy and elaborately looped writing. Putting a specially casual note of cheeriness into his good morning, he sat down and proceeded to busy himself elaborately, as though it were a complicated scientific process requiring the whole of his attention, with the pouring out of his coffee.

‘Should I tell him?’ he was wondering. ‘Yes, I ought to tell him. It ought to come from me, even though he does know it already. Bloody girl! Why couldn’t she keep her promise?’ He felt righteously indignant with Joan. Breaking her word! And what the devil has she told Brian? What would happen

if his own story was different from hers? And anyhow, what a fool he would look, confessing now, when it was too late. She had robbed him of the opportunity, the very possibility of telling Brian what had happened. The woman had queered his pitch; and as his anger modulated into self-pity, he perceived himself as a man full of good intentions, maliciously prevented, at the eleventh hour, from putting them into practice. She had stopped his mouth just as he was about to speak the words that would have explained and made amends for everything; and by doing so, she had made his situation absolutely intolerable. How the devil did she expect him to behave towards Brian, now that Brian knew? He answered the question, so far, at any rate, as the next few moments were concerned, by retiring behind the Manchester Guardian. Hidden, he pretended, while he ate his scrambled eggs, to be taking a passionate interest in all this stuff about Russia and Austria and Germany. But the silence, as it lengthened out, became at last intolerable.

‘This war business looks rather bad,’ he said at last, without lowering his barricade.

From the other end of the table Brian made a faint murmur of assent. Seconds passed. Then there was a noise of a chair being pushed back. Anthony sat there, a man so deeply preoccupied with the Russian mobilization that he wasn’t aware of what was going on in his immediate neighbourhood. It was only when Brian had actually opened the door that he started ostentatiously into consciousness.

‘Off already?’ he questioned, half turning, but not so far that he could see the other’s face.

‘I d-don’t think I shall g-go out this m-morning.’

Anthony nodded approvingly, like a family doctor. ‘That’s good,’ he said, and added that he himself proposed to hire a bicycle in the village and nip down to Ambleside. There were some things he had to buy. ‘See you at lunch-time,’ he concluded.

Brian said nothing. The door closed behind him.

By a quarter to one Anthony had returned his borrowed bicycle and was walking up the hill to the cottage. This time it was settled, definitely, once and for all. He would tell Brian everything — almost everything, the very moment he came in.

‘Brian!’ he called from the doorstep.

There was no answer.

‘Brian!’

The kitchen door opened, and old Mrs Benson, who did their cooking and cleaning, stepped out into the narrow hall. Mr Foxe, she explained, had started for a walk about half an hour before; wouldn’t be back for lunch, he had said, but had wanted (would you believe it?) to set off without anything to eat; she had made him take some sandwiches and a hard-boiled egg.

It was with a sense of inner discomfort that Anthony sat down to his solitary lunch. Brian had deliberately avoided him; therefore must be angry — or worse, it occurred to him, was hurt — too deeply to be able to bear his presence. The thought made him wince; to hurt people was so horrible, so hurting even to the hurter. And if Brian came back from his walk magnanimously forgiving — and, knowing him, Anthony felt convinced that he would — what then? It was also painful to be forgiven; particularly painful in the case of an offence one had not oneself confessed. ‘If only I could have told him,’ he kept repeating to himself, ‘if only I could have told him’; and almost contrived to persuade himself that he had been prevented.

After lunch he walked up into the wild country behind the cottage, hoping (for it was now so urgently necessary to speak), and at the same time (since the speaking would be such an agonizing process) profoundly fearing, to meet Brian. But he met nobody. Resting on the crest of the hill, he managed for a little while to forget his troubles in sarcasms at the expense of the view. So typically and discreditably English, he reflected, wishing that Mary were there to listen to his comments. Mountains, valleys, lakes, but on the pettiest scale. Miserably small and hole-and-cornery, like English cottage architecture — all ingle-nooks and charming features; nothing fine or grandiose. No hint of thirteenth-century megalomania or baroque gesticulation. A snug, smug little sublimity. It was almost in high spirits that he started his descent.

No, said old Mrs Benson, Mr Foxe hadn’t yet come back.

He had his tea alone, then sat on a deck-chair on the lawn and read de Gourmont on style. At six, Mrs Benson came out, and after elaborately explaining that she had the table and that the cold mutton was in the larder, wished him good evening and walked away down the road towards her own cottage.

Soon afterwards the midges began to bite and he went indoors. The little bird in the Swiss clock opened its door, cuckooed seven times and retired again into silence. Anthony continued to read about style. Half an hour later the bird popped out for a single cry. It was supper-time. Anthony rose and walked to the back door. Behind the cottage the hill was bright with an almost supernatural radiance. There was no sign of Brian. He returned to the sitting-room, and for a change read some Santayana. The cuckoo uttered eight shrill hiccups. Above the orange stain of sunset the evening planet was already visible. He lit the lamp and drew the curtains. Then, sitting down again, he tried to go on reading Santayana; but those carefully smoothed pebbles of wisdom rolled over the surface of his mind without making the smallest impression. He shut the book at last. The cuckoo announced that it was half past eight.

An accident, he was wondering, could the fellow have had an accident? But, after all, people don't have accidents — not when they're out for a quiet walk. A new thought suddenly came to him, and at once the very possibility of twisted ankles or broken legs disappeared. That walk — he felt completely certain of it now — had been to the station. Brian was in the train, on his way to London, on his way to Joan. It was obvious when one came to think of it; it simply couldn't be otherwise.

'Christ!' Anthony said aloud in the solitude of the little room. Then, made cynical and indifferent by the very hopelessness of the situation, he shrugged his shoulders and, lighting a candle, went out to the larder to fetch the cold mutton.

This time, he decided, as he ate his meal, he really would escape. Just bolt into hiding till things looked better. He felt no compunction. Brian's journey to London had relieved him, in his own estimation, of any further responsibility in the matter; he felt that he was now free to do whatever suited him best.

In preparation for his flight, he went upstairs after supper and began to pack his bag. The recollection that he had lent Brian *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman* to read in bed sent him, candle in hand, across the landing. On the chest of drawers in Brian's room three envelopes stood conspicuously propped against the wall. Two, he could see from the doorway, were stamped, the other was unstamped. He crossed the room to look at them more closely. The unstamped envelope was addressed to himself, the others to Mrs Foxe and Joan respectively. He set down the candle, took the envelope addressed to himself, and tore it open. A vague but intense apprehension had filled his mind, a fear of something unknown, something he dared not know. He stood there for a long time holding the open envelope in his hand and listening to the heavy pulse of his own blood. Then, coming at last to a decision, he extricated the folded sheets. There were two of them, one in Brian's writing, the other in Joan's. Across the top of Joan's letter Brian had written: 'Read this for yourself.' He read:

Dearest Brian, — By this time Anthony will have told you what has happened. And, you know, it did just happen — from outside, if you see what I mean, like an accident, like being run into by a train. I certainly hadn't thought about it before, and I don't think Anthony had — not really; the discovery that we loved one another just ran into us, ran over us. There wasn't any question of us doing it on purpose. That's why I don't feel guilty. Sorry, yes — more than words can say — for the pain I know I shall give you. Ready to do all I can to make it less. Asking forgiveness for hurting you. But not feeling guilty, not feeling I've treated you dishonourably. I should only feel that if I had done it deliberately; but I didn't. I tell you, it just happened to me — to us both. Brian dear, I'm unspeakably sorry to be hurting you. You of all people. If it were a matter of doing it with intention, I couldn't do it. No more than you could hurt me intentionally. But this thing has just happened, in the same way as it just happened that you hurt me because of that fear that you've always had of love. You didn't want to hurt me, but you did; you couldn't help it. The impulse that made you hurt me ran into you, ran over you, like this impulse of love that has run into me and Anthony. I don't think it's anybody's fault, Brian. We had bad luck. Everything ought to have been so good and beautiful. And then things happened to us — to you first, so that you had to hurt me; then to me. Later on, perhaps, we can still be friends. I

hope so. That's why I'm not saying good-bye to you, Brian dear. Whatever happens, I am always your loving friend,

Joan.

In the effort to keep up his self-esteem and allay his profound disquietude, Anthony forced himself to think with distaste of the really sickening style in which this kind of letter was generally written. A branch of pulpit oratory, he concluded, and tried to smile to himself. But it was no good. His face refused to do what he asked of it. He dropped Joan's letter and reluctantly picked up the other sheet in Brian's handwriting.

Dear A., — I enclose the letter I received this morning from Joan. Read it; it will save me explaining. How could he have done it? That's the question I've been asking myself all the morning; and now I put it to you. How could you? Circumstances may have run over her — like a train, as she says. And that, I know, was my fault. But they couldn't have run over you. You've told me enough about yourself and Mary Amberley to make it quite clear that there could be no question in your case of poor Joan's train. Why did you do it? And why did you come here and behave as though nothing had happened? How could you sit there and let me talk about my difficulties with Joan and pretend to be sympathetic, when a couple of evenings before you had been giving her the kisses I wasn't able to give? God knows, I've done all manner of bad and stupid things in the course of my life, told all manner of lies; but I honestly don't think I could have done what you have done. I didn't think anybody could have done it. I suppose I've been living in a sort of fool's paradise all these years, thinking the world was a place where this sort of thing simply couldn't happen. A year ago I might have known how to deal with the discovery that it can happen. Not now. I know that, if I tried, I should just break down into some kind of madness. This last year has strained me more than I knew. I realize now that I'm all broken to pieces inside, and that I've been holding myself together by a continuous effort of will. It's as if a broken statue somehow contrived to hold itself together. And now this has finished it. I can't hold any more. I know if I were to see you now — and it's not because I feel that you've done something you shouldn't have done; it would be the same with anyone, even my mother — yes, if I were to see anyone who had ever meant anything to me, I should just break down and fall to bits. A statue at one moment, and the next a heap of dust and shapeless fragments. I can't face it. Perhaps I ought to; but I simply can't. I was angry with you when I began to write this letter, I hated you; but now I find I don't hate you any longer. God bless you,

B.

Anthony put the two letters and the torn envelope in his pocket, and, picking up the two stamped envelopes and the candle, made his way downstairs to the sitting-room. Half an hour later, he went to the kitchen, and in the range, which was still smouldering, set fire one by one to all the papers that Brian had left behind him. The two unopened envelopes with their closely folded contents burnt slowly, had to be constantly relighted; but at last it was done. With the poker he broke the charred paper into dust, stirred up the fire to a last flame and drew the round cover back into place. Then he walked out into the garden and down the steps to the road. On the way to the village it suddenly struck him that he would never be able to see Mary again. She would question him, she would worm the truth out of him, and having wormed it out, would proclaim it to the world. Besides, would he even want to see her again now that Brian had . . . He could not bring himself to say the words even to himself. 'Christ!' he said aloud. At the entrance to the village he halted for a few moments to mink what he should say when he knocked up the policeman. 'My friend's lost . . . My friend has been out all day and . . . I'm worried about my friend . . .' Anything would do; he hurried on, only anxious to get it over.

Chapter Forty-Nine. January 12th and 14th 1934

IT WAS DARK in the little rancho, and from noon till sunset stiflingly hot; then cold all through the night. A partition divided the hut into two compartments; in the middle of the first compartment was a hearth of rough stones, and when the fire was lighted for cooking, the smoke filtered slowly away through the chinks in the windowless wooden walls. The furniture consisted of a stool, two kerosene tins for water, some earthenware cooking-pots, and a stone mortar for grinding maize. On the further side of the partition were a couple of plank beds on trestles. It was on one of these that they laid Mark.

By the following morning he was delirious with fever, and, from the knee, the infection had crept downwards, until the leg was swollen almost to the ankle.

For Anthony, as he sat there in the hot twilight, listening to the mutterings and sudden outcries of this stranger on the bed, there was, for the moment, only one thing to decide. Should he send the mozo to fetch a doctor and the necessary drugs from Miajutla? Or should he go himself?

It was the choice of evils. He thought of poor Mark, abandoned, alone in the hands of these inept and not too well-intentioned savages. But even if he himself were there, what could he do with the resources at his disposal? And suppose the mozo were sent and failed to persuade the doctor to come at once, failed to bring the necessary supplies, failed perhaps to return at all. Miajutla, as Mark had said, was in the pulque country; there would be oceans of cheap alcohol. Riding hard, he himself could be back again at Mark's bedside in less than thirty hours. A white man with money in his pocket, he would be able to bully and bribe the doctor to bestir himself. Hardly less important, he would know what stores to bring back with him. His mind was made up. He rose, and, going to the door, called to the mozo to saddle his mule.

He had ridden for less than two hours when the miracle happened. Coming round a bend in the track he saw advancing towards him, not fifty yards away, a white man, followed by two Indians, one mounted and one on foot, with a couple of laden baggage-mules. As they drew together, the white man courteously raised his hat. The hair beneath it was light brown, grizzled above the ears, and in the deeply bronzed face the blue eyes were startlingly pale.

'Buenas días, caballero,' he said.

There was no mistaking the accent. 'Good morning,' Anthony replied.

They reined up their beasts alongside one another and began to talk.

'This is the first word of English I've heard for seven and a half months,' said the stranger. He was an elderly little man, short and spare, but with a fine upright carriage that lent him a certain dignity. The face was curiously proportioned, with a short nose and an upper lip unusually long above a wide, tightly shut mouth. A mouth like an inquisitor's. But the inquisitor had forgotten himself and learned to smile; there were the potentialities of laughter in the deep folds of skin which separated the quivering sensitive corners of the mouth from the cheeks. And round the bright inquiring eyes those intricate lines seemed the traces and hieroglyphic symbols of a constantly repeated movement of humorous kindness. A queer face, Anthony decided, but charming.

'My name is James Miller,' said the stranger. 'What's yours?' And when he had been told, 'Are you travelling alone, Anthony Beavis?' he questioned, addressing the other, Quaker fashion, by both his names.

Anthony told him where he was bound and on what errand. 'I suppose you don't know anything about doctors in Miajutla,' he concluded.

With a sudden deepening of the hieroglyphs about the eyes, a sudden realization of those potentialities of laughter round the mouth, the little man smiled. 'I know about doctors here,' he said, and tapped himself on the chest. 'M.D., Edinburgh. And a good supply of materia medica on those mules, what's more.' Then, in another tone, 'Come on,' he said briskly. 'Let's get back to that poor friend of yours as quick as we can.'

Anthony wheeled his animal round, and side by side the two men set off up the track.

‘Well, Anthony Beavis,’ said the doctor, ‘you came to the right address.’

Anthony nodded. ‘Fortunately,’ he said, ‘I hadn’t been praying, otherwise I’d have had to believe in special providence and miraculous interventions.’

‘And that would never do,’ the doctor agreed. ‘Not that anything ever happens by chance, of course. One takes the card the conjuror forces on one — the card which one has oneself made it inevitable that he should force on one. It’s a matter of cause and effect.’ Then, without a pause, ‘What’s your profession?’ he asked.

‘I suppose you’d say I was a sociologist. Was one, at any rate.’

‘Indeed! Is that so?’ The doctor seemed surprised and pleased. ‘Mine’s anthropology,’ he went on. ‘Been living with the Lacandones in Chiapas these last months. Nice people when you get to know them. And I’ve collected a lot of material. Are you married, by the way?’

‘No.’

‘Never been married?’

‘No.’

Dr Miller shook his head. ‘That’s bad, Anthony Beavis,’ he said. ‘You ought to have been.’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘I can see it in your face. Here, and here.’ He touched his lips, his forehead. ‘I was married. For fourteen years. Then my wife died. Blackwater fever it was. We were working in West Africa then. She was qualified too. Knew her job better, in some ways, than I did.’ He sighed. ‘You’d have made a good husband, you know. Perhaps you will do, even now. How old are you?’

‘Forty-three.’

‘And look younger. Though I don’t like that sallow skin of yours,’ he protested with sudden vehemence. ‘Do you suffer much from constipation?’

‘Well, no,’ Anthony answered, smiling, and wondered whether it would be agreeable if everybody were to talk to one in this sort of way. A bit tiring, perhaps, to have to treat all the people you met as human beings, every one of them with a right to know all about you; but more interesting than treating them as objects, as mere lumps of meat dumped down beside you in the bus, jostling you on the pavements. ‘Not much,’ he qualified.

‘You mean, not manifestly,’ said the doctor. ‘Any eczema?’

‘Occasional touches.’

‘And the hair tends to be scurfy.’ Dr Miller nodded his own confirmation to this statement. ‘And you get headaches, don’t you?’

Anthony had to admit that he sometimes did.

‘And, of course, stiff necks and attacks of lumbago. I know. I know. A few years more and it’ll be settled in as sciatica or arthritis.’ The doctor was silent for a moment while he looked inquiringly into Anthony’s face. ‘Yes, that sallow skin,’ he repeated, and shook his head. ‘And the irony, the scepticism, the what’s-the-good-of-it-all attitude! Negative really. Everything you think of is negative.’

Anthony laughed; but laughed to hide a certain disquiet. This being on human terms with everyone you met could be a bit embarrassing.

‘Oh, don’t imagine I’m criticizing!’ cried the doctor, and there was a note of genuine compunction in his voice.

Anthony went on laughing, unconvincingly.

‘Don’t get it into your head that I’m blaming you in any way.’

Stretching out a hand, he patted Anthony affectionately on the shoulder. ‘We’re all of us what we are; and when it comes to turning ourselves into what we ought to be — well, it isn’t easy. No, it isn’t easy, Anthony Beavis. How can you expect to think in anything but a negative way, when you’ve got chronic intestinal poisoning? Had it from birth, I guess. Inherited it. And at the same time stooping, as you do. Slumped down on your mule like that — it’s awful. Pressing down on the vertebrae like a ton of bricks. One can almost hear the poor things grinding together. And when the spine’s in that state, what happens to the rest of the machine? It’s frightful to think of.’

‘And yet,’ said Anthony, feeling a little piqued by this remorseless enumeration of his physical defects, ‘I’m still alive. I’m here to tell the tale.’

‘Somebody’s here to tell the tale,’ the doctor answered. ‘But is he the one you’d like him to be?’

Anthony did not answer, only smiled uncomfortably.

‘And even that somebody won’t be telling the tale much longer, if you’re not careful. I’m serious,’ he insisted. ‘Perfectly serious. You’ve got to change if you want to go on existing. And if it’s a matter of changing — why, you need all the help you can get, from God’s to the doctor’s. I tell you this because I like you,’ he explained. ‘I think you’re worth changing.’

‘Thank you,’ said Anthony, smiling this time with pleasure.

‘Speaking as a doctor, I’d suggest a course of colonic irrigation to start with.’

‘And speaking for God,’ said Anthony, allowing his pleasure to overflow in good-humoured mockery, ‘a course of prayer and fasting.’

‘No, not fasting,’ the doctor protested very seriously, ‘not fasting. Only a proper diet. No butcher’s meat; it’s poison, so far as you’re concerned. And no milk; it’ll only blow you up with wind. Take it in the form of cheese and butter; never liquid. And a minimum of eggs. And, of course, only one heavy meal a day. You don’t need half the stuff you’re eating. As for prayer . . .’ He sighed and wrinkled his forehead into a pensive frown. ‘I’ve never really liked it, you know. Not what’s ordinarily meant by prayer, at any rate. All that asking for special favours and guidances and forgivenesses — I’ve always found that it tends to make one egotistical, preoccupied with one’s own ridiculous self-important little personality. When you pray in the ordinary way, you’re merely rubbing yourself into yourself. You return to your own vomit, if you see what I mean. Whereas what we’re all looking for is some way of getting beyond our own vomit.’

Some way, Anthony was thinking, of getting beyond the books, beyond the perfumed and resilient flesh of women, beyond fear and sloth, beyond the painful but secretly flattering vision of the world as menagerie and asylum.

‘Beyond this piddling, twopenny-halfpenny personality,’ said the doctor, ‘with all its wretched little virtues and vices, all its silly cravings and silly pretensions. But if you’re not careful, prayer just confirms you in the bad habit of being personal. I tell you, I’ve observed it clinically, and it seems to have the same effect on people as butcher’s meat. Prayer makes you more yourself, more separate. Just as a rumpsteak does. Look at the correlation between religion and diet. Christians eat meat, drink alcohol, smoke tobacco; and Christianity exalts personality, insists on the value of petitionary prayer, teaches that God feels anger and approves the persecution of heretics. It’s the same with the Jews and the Moslems. Kosher and an indignant Jehovah. Mutton and beef — and personal survival among the houris, avenging Allah and holy wars. Now look at the Buddhists. Vegetables and water. And what’s their philosophy? They don’t exalt personality; they try to transcend it. They don’t imagine that God can be angry; when they’re unenlightened, they think he’s compassionate, and when they’re enlightened, they think he doesn’t exist, except as an impersonal mind of the universe. Hence they don’t offer petitionary prayer; they meditate — or, in other words, try to merge their own minds in the universal mind. Finally, they don’t believe in special providences for individuals; they believe in a moral order, where every event has its cause and produces its effect — where the card’s forced upon you by the conjuror, but only because your previous actions have forced the conjuror to force it upon you. What worlds away from Jehovah and God the Father and everlasting, individual souls! The fact is, of course, that we drink as we eat. I eat like a Buddhist, because I find it keeps me well and happy; and the result is that I drink like a Buddhist — and, drinking like a Buddhist, I’m confirmed in my determination to eat like one.’

‘And now you’re recommending me to eat like one.’

‘More or less.’

‘And do you also want me to think like one?’

‘In the long run you won’t be able to avoid it. But, of course, it’s better to do it consciously.’

‘Well, as a matter of fact,’ said Anthony, ‘I do think like a Buddhist already. Not in all ways perhaps, but certainly in many ways. In spite of roast beef.’

‘You think you think like a Buddhist,’ said the doctor. ‘But you don’t. Thinking negatively isn’t thinking like a Buddhist; it’s thinking like a Christian who’s eating more butcher’s meat than his intestine can deal with.’

Anthony laughed.

‘Oh, I know it sounds funny,’ said the doctor. ‘But that’s only because you’re a dualist.’

‘I’m not.’

‘Not in theory perhaps. But in practice — how can you be anything but a dualist? What are you, Anthony Beavis? A clever man — that’s obvious. But it’s equally obvious that you’ve got an unconscious body. An efficient thinking apparatus and a hopelessly stupid set of muscles and bones and viscera. Of course you’re a dualist. You live your dualism. And one of the reasons you live it is because you poison yourself with too much animal protein. Like millions of other people, of course! What’s the greatest enemy of Christianity today? Frozen meat. In the past only members of the upper classes were thoroughly sceptical, despairing, negative. Why? Among other reasons, because they were the only people who could afford to eat too much meat. Now there’s cheap Canterbury lamb and Argentine chilled beef. Even the poor can afford to poison themselves into complete scepticism and despair. And only the most violent stimuli will rouse them to purposive activity, and, what’s worse, the only activity they’ll undertake is diabolic. They can only be stimulated by hysterical appeals to persecute Jews, or murder socialists or go to war. You personally happen to be too intelligent to be a fascist or a nationalist; but again, it’s a matter of theory, not of life. Believe me, Anthony Beavis, your intestines are ripe for fascism and nationalism. They’re making you long to be shaken out of the horrible negativity to which they’ve condemned you — to be shaken by violence into violence.’

‘As a matter of fact,’ said Anthony, ‘that’s one of the reasons why I’m here.’ He waved his hand towards the tumbled chaos of the mountains. ‘Simply to be shaken out of negativity. We were on our way to a revolution when poor Staithes got hurt.’

The doctor nodded. ‘You see,’ he said, ‘you see! And do you suppose you’d be here if you had a healthy intestine?’

‘Well, I don’t really know,’ Anthony answered, laughing.

‘You know quite well that you wouldn’t,’ said the doctor almost severely. ‘Not on that kind of lunatic’s errand, at any rate. For, of course, you might be here as an anthropologist, say, or a teacher, a healer, whatever you like, so long as it meant understanding people and helping them.’

Anthony nodded his head slowly, but did not speak; and for a long way they rode along in silence.

* * *

There was light out of doors, and it was cleaner under the sky than in the little rancho. Dr Miller had chosen as his operating theatre a little clearing in the woods, outside the village.

‘Beyond the range of the flies, let’s hope,’ he said, but without seeming too confident of it.

A hearth had been built by his two mozos, and on the fire stood a cauldron of boiling water. They had borrowed a table from the schoolmaster and some stools, with bowls for the disinfectant, and a cotton sheet to cover the bedstead.

Dr Miller had given him a dose of Nembutal, and when the time came Mark was carried out unconscious to the clearing among the pine trees. All the boys in the village escorted the stretcher and stood round in attentive silence while the patient was lifted on to the bed. Trousered, and in their wide hats, with their little blankets folded over their shoulders, they seemed, not children, but the absurd and derisive parodies of grown men.

Anthony, who had been holding the gangrened leg, straightened himself up, and, looking round, saw the ring of brown faces and the glitter of all those black, blank eyes. At the sight he found his growing apprehension abruptly transformed into uncontrollable anger.

‘Go away!’ he shouted in English, and advanced towards them, waving his arms. ‘Away, you little beasts, away!’

The children retreated, but slowly, reluctantly, with the manifest intention of returning the moment he should turn his back.

Anthony made a quick dart and caught one small boy by the arm.

‘Little beast!’

He shook the child violently, then, carried away by an irresistible impulse to inflict pain, gave him a cuff over the head that sent the big hat flying between the trees.

Uttering no cry, the child ran away after its companions. Anthony made a last menacing gesture in their direction, then turned and walked back towards the centre of the clearing. He had not taken more than a few steps when a stone, well-aimed, caught him full between the shoulders. He swung round furiously, exploding into such obscenities as he had not uttered since he was at school.

Dr Miller, who was washing his hands at the table, looked up. ‘What’s the matter?’ he asked.

‘The little devils are throwing stones.’

‘Serve you right,’ said the doctor unsympathetically. ‘Leave them alone, and come and do your duty.’

The unfamiliarly clerical and military word startled him into the uncomfortable realization that he had been behaving like a fool. Worse than a fool. With the realization of his discreditable folly came the impulse to justify it. It was in a tone of pained indignation that he spoke. ‘You’re not going to let them look on, are you?’

‘How am I to prevent them looking on, if they want to?’ asked the doctor, drying his hands as he spoke. ‘And now, Anthony Beavis,’ he went on sternly, ‘pull yourself together. This is going to be difficult enough anyhow, without your being hysterical.’

Silenced and, because he was ashamed of himself, angry with Miller, Anthony washed his hands and put on a clean shirt which had to do duty as overall.

‘Now,’ said the doctor, and stepped forward. ‘We must begin by draining the leg of blood.’

‘The’ leg, not ‘his’ leg, Anthony was thinking, as he stood beside the doctor, looking down on the man sleeping on the bed. Something impersonal, belonging to nobody in particular. The leg. But Mark’s face, Mark’s sleeping face, now so incredibly calm, so smooth, in spite of the emaciation, as though this death-like stupor had drawn a new skin across the flayed and twisted muscles — this could never be merely ‘the’ face. It was ‘his’, his for all its unlikeness to that contemptuous, suffering mask through which at ordinary times Mark looked out at the world. All the more genuinely his, perhaps, just because of that unlikeness. He remembered suddenly what Mark had said to him, beside the Mediterranean, only four months before, when he had woken to see those eyes now shut, but then wide-open and bright with derision, sardonically examining him through the mosquito net. Perhaps one really is what one seems to be in sleep. Innocence and peace — the mind’s essence, and all the rest mere accident.

‘Take his foot,’ Dr Miller ordered, ‘and lift the leg as nearly vertical as you can.’

Anthony did as he was told. Raised in this grotesque way, the horribly swollen and discoloured leg seemed more impersonal, more a mere thing than ever. The stink of mortified flesh was in his nostrils. From behind them, among the trees, a voice said something incomprehensible; there was a snicker of laughter.

‘Now leave the foot to the mozo and stand by here.’ Anthony obeyed, and smelt again the resin of the forest. ‘Hold that bottle for me.’

There was an astonished murmur of ‘Amarillo!’ as the doctor painted the thigh with flavine. Anthony looked again at his friend’s face; it remained undisturbed in its serenity. Essentially still and pure. The leg with its black dead flesh; the saw there in the bowl of permanganate solution, the knives and forceps; the fascinated children peering out of the forest — all were somehow irrelevant to the essential Mark.

‘Now the chloroform,’ said Dr Miller. ‘And the cotton wool. I’ll show you how to use it. Then you’ll have to go on by yourself.’

He opened the bottle, and the smell of pine trees in the sunshine was overlaid by a rasping and nauseating sweetness.

‘There, do you see the trick?’ asked the doctor. ‘Like that. Go on with that. I’ll tell you when to stop. I’ve got to put on the tourniquet.’

There were no birds in the trees, hardly, even, any insects. The wood was deathly still. This sunny clearing was a little island of speech and movement in an ocean of silence. And at the centre of that island lay another silence, intenser, more complete than the silence of the forest.

The tourniquet was in place. Dr Miller ordered the mozo to lower the grotesquely hoisted leg. He pulled up a stool to the bedside, sat down, then rose again and, as he washed his hands for the last time, explained to Anthony that he would have to operate sitting down. The bed was too low for him to be able to stand. Taking his seat once more, he dipped into the bowl of permanganate for a scalpel.

At the sight of those broad flaps of skin turned back, like the peel of a huge banana, but from a red and bleeding fruit, Anthony was seized with a horrible sensation of nausea. The saliva came pouring into his mouth and he had to keep swallowing and swallowing to get rid of it. Involuntarily, he gave vent to a retching cough.

‘Steady now,’ said the doctor without looking up. With an artery forceps, he secured the end of an oozing vessel.

‘Think of it scientifically.’ He made another sweeping cut through the red flesh. ‘And if you must be sick,’ he went on with sudden asperity, ‘for God’s sake go and do it quickly!’ Then, in another tone — the tone of the professor who demonstrates an interesting point to his students, ‘One has to cut back the nerves a long way,’ he said. ‘There’s a tremendous retraction as the tissues heal up. Anyhow,’ he added, ‘he’ll probably have to have a re-amputation at home. It won’t be a beautiful stump, I’m afraid.’

Calm and at peace, innocent of all craving, all malice, all ambition — it was the face of one who has made himself free, one for whom there are no more bars or chains, no more sepulchres under a stone, and on whom the bird-lime no longer sticks. The face of one who has made himself free . . . But in fact, Anthony reflected, in fact he had had his freedom forced upon him by this evil-smelling vapour. Was it possible to be one’s own liberator? There were snares; but also there was a way of walking out of them. Prisons; but they could be opened. And if the torture-chambers could never be abolished, perhaps the tortures could be made to seem irrelevant. As completely irrelevant as now to Mark this sound of sawing, as this revolting rasp and squeak of the steel teeth biting into the bone, of the steel blade rubbing back and forth in the deepening groove. Mark lay there serene, almost smiling.

Chapter Fifty. Christmas Day 1934

GOD — A person or not a person? Quién sabe? Only revelation can decide such metaphysical questions. And revelation isn’t playing the game — is equivalent to pulling three aces of trumps from up your sleeve.

Of more significance is the practical question. Which gives a man more power to realize goodness — belief in a personal or an impersonal God? Answer: it depends. Some minds work one way, some another. Mine, as it happens, finds no need, indeed, finds it impossible to think of the world in terms of personality. Patanjali says you may believe in a personal God, or not, according to taste. The psychological results will be the same in either case.

For those whose nature demands personality as a source of energy, but who find it impossible to believe that the universe is run by a person in any sense of the word that we can possibly understand — what’s the right policy? In most cases, they reject any practice which might be called religious. But this is throwing away the baby with the bath water. The desired relationship with a personality can be historical, not ontological. A contact, not with somebody existing at present as manager of the universe, but with somebody known to have existed at some time in the past. The Imitation of Christ (or of any other historical character) is just as effective if the model be regarded as having existed there, then, as it is if the model be conceived as existing here, now. And meditation on goodness, communication with goodness, contemplation of goodness are demonstrably effective means of realizing goodness in life, even when that which is meditated on, communicated with and contemplated, is not a person, but a

general mind, or even an ideal supposed to exist only in human minds. The fundamental problem is practical — to work out systems of psychological exercises for all types of men and women. Catholicism has many systems of mental prayer — Ignatian, Franciscan, Liguorian, Carmelite, and so on. Hinduism, Northern, Southern, and Zen Buddhism also have a variety of practices. There is a great work to be done here. Collecting and collating information from all these sources. Consulting books and, more important, people who have actually practised what is in the books, have had experience of teaching novices. In time, it might be possible to establish a complete and definite *Ars Contemplativa*. A series of techniques, adapted to every type of mind. Techniques for meditating on, communicating with and contemplating goodness. Ends in themselves and at the same time means for realizing some of that goodness in practice.

January 1st 1935

Machinery and good organization — modern inventions; and, like all blessings, have to be paid for. In many ways. One item is the general belief, encouraged by mechanical and social efficiency that progress is automatic and can be imposed from outside. We, as individuals, need do nothing about it. Liquidate undesirables, distribute enough money and goods — all will be well. It is a reversion to magic, a pandering to man's natural sloth. Note the striking way in which this tendency runs through the whole of modern life, cropping up at every point. There seems no obvious connexion between the Webbs and the Soviets on the one hand, and Modern Catholicism on the other. But what profound subterranean resemblances? The recent Catholic revival essentially a revival of sacraments. From a Catholic point of view, this is a 'sacramental age'. Magic power of sacraments regarded as sufficient for salvation. Mental prayer conspicuously absent. Exact analogy to the Webbs — Soviet idea of progress from without, through machinery and efficient organization. For English Catholics, sacraments are the psychological equivalents of tractors in Russia.

Chapter Fifty-One. February 7th 1934

DR MILLER DISMOUNTED at the open door, left his beast with the mozo, and stepped into the hut.

Propped up on his bed, Mark watched him enter — a small, erect figure, walking briskly, his blue eyes bright with inquiring kindness, the corners of his mouth alive with the potentialities of laughter.

'And how are all the little patients this evening?' Mark twisted up his pale and still emaciated face into a ferociously sardonic smile.

From the stool on which he was sitting beside the bed, Anthony shot a glance at him, and remembered the serenity of that face three weeks before, in the early morning sunshine among the pine trees. Serene and at peace. But now that life had come back to him, now that he was safely convalescent, the peace had departed, leaving him the embittered enemy of the whole world. There had been hatred in his eyes even before he was strong enough to speak. Hatred for everyone who came near him — above all for old Miller.

'I can't bear his perpetual twinkle,' was what he had said to Anthony later on. 'Nobody has a right to go about looking like the advertisement for a constipation cure.'

But the real reason for Mark's dislike was different. He hated old Miller because of his dependence upon him, because of the unflaggingly watchful efficiency of the man's care. Poor Mark! How acutely he suffered from having to accept a service and, still more, from being compelled by his own physical weakness to ask for it! How bitterly he resented even affection, if it were given by somebody to whom it was impossible for him to feel superior! His dislike for the doctor had been present from the first moment of his return to consciousness, had increased with every day that the old man delayed his departure in order to look after him.

‘But why don’t you get on with your journey?’ he had asked; and when the doctor answered that he was in no hurry and intended to see him safely down to the coast and even, since he himself was leaving, home through the Canal to England, had protested vehemently that his leg was practically healed, that there would be no difficulty in getting back to Puerto San Felipe, that he himself would probably be taking the northbound boat to Los Angeles.

But the doctor had remained, attending to Mark and in the intervals riding out to the neighbouring villages to treat the sick. To the convalescent this was an additional source of irritation — though why it should have annoyed him Anthony could not rightly understand. Perhaps he resented the fact that the benefactor of the Indians was not himself. Anyhow, there it was; he was never tired of baiting old Miller with those ‘little patients’ of his.

Then, a fortnight after the operation, had come the news of the ignominious failure of Don Jorge’s attempt at insurrection. He had been surprised with an insufficient guard, taken alive, summarily tried and shot with his chief lieutenant. The report added that the two men had cracked jokes together as they walked between the soldiers towards the cemetery, where their graves were already dug.

‘And he died,’ had been Mark’s comment, ‘believing that I’d taken fright at the last moment and let him down.’

The thought was like another wound to him.

‘If I hadn’t had this blasted accident . . .’ he kept repeating. ‘If I’d been there to advise him . . . That crazy rashness of his! That was why he’d asked me to come. He mistrusted his own judgement. And here was I lying in this stinking pigsty, while the poor devil marches off to the cemetery. . . .’ Cracking jokes, as he sniffed the cold morning air. ‘Huele al cimintero, Don Jaime.’ He too would have cracked his joke. Instead of which . . . It was just bad luck, of course, just a typical piece of providential idiocy; but providence was not there for him to vent his grievance on. Only Anthony and the doctor were there. His behaviour towards them, after the news of Don Jorge’s death, had become increasingly bitter and resentful. It was as though he regarded them as personally responsible for what had happened. Both of them, especially the doctor.

‘How’s the delicious bedside manner?’ Mark now went on, in the same derisive tone in which he had asked after the little patients.

‘Wasted, I’m afraid,’ Dr Miller answered good-humouredly as he took off his hat and sat down. ‘Either they haven’t got any beds for me to be at the side of — only a blanket on the floor. Or else they don’t speak any Spanish, and I don’t speak their brand of Indian dialect. And how’s yourself?’ he asked.

‘Myself,’ said Mark, returning the doctor his expression in a tone of emphatically contemptuous disgust, as though it were some kind of verbal ordure, ‘is very well, thanks.’

‘But doing a slight Bishop Berkeley,’ Anthony interposed. ‘Feeling pains in the knee he hasn’t got.’

Mark looked at him for a moment with an expression of stony dislike; then turning away and fixing his eyes on the bright evening landscape, visible through the open door of the hut, ‘Not pains,’ he said coldly, though it was as pains that he had described them to Anthony only half an hour before. ‘Just the sensation that the knee’s still there.’

‘Can’t avoid that, I’m afraid.’ The doctor shook his head.

‘I didn’t suppose one could,’ Mark said, as though he were replying with dignity to an aspersion on his honour.

Dr Miller broke the uncomfortable silence by remarking that there was a good deal of goitre in the higher valleys.

‘It has its charm,’ said Mark, stroking an imaginary bulge at his throat. ‘How I regret those cretins one used to see in Switzerland when I was a child! They’ve iodined them out of existence now, I’m afraid. The world’s too damned sanitary these days.’ He shook his head and smiled anatomically. ‘What do they do up there in the high valleys?’ he asked.

‘Grow maize,’ said the doctor. ‘And kill one another in the intervals. There’s a huge network of vendettas spread across these mountains. Everybody’s involved. I’ve been talking to the responsible men, trying to persuade them to liquidate all the old accounts and start afresh.’

‘They’ll die of boredom.’

‘No, I’m teaching them football instead. Matches between the villages.’ He smiled. ‘I’ve had a lot of experience with vendettas,’ he added. ‘All over the world. They all detest them, really. Are only too thankful for football when they’re used to it.’

‘Christ!’

‘Why “Christ”?’

‘Those games! Can’t we ever escape from them?’

‘But they’re the greatest English contribution to civilization,’ said the doctor. ‘Much more important than parliamentary government, or steam engines, or Newton’s Principia. More important even than English poetry. Poetry can never be a substitute for war and murder. Whereas games can be. A complete and genuine substitute.’

‘Substitutes!’ Mark echoed contemptuously. ‘You’re all content with substitutes. Anthony finds his in bed or in the British Museum Reading Room. You look for yours on the football field. God help you! Why are you so frightened of the genuine article?’

For a little while no one spoke. Dr Miller looked at Anthony, and, seeing that he did not propose to answer, turned back to the other. ‘It isn’t a question of being frightened, Mark Staithes,’ he said very mildly. ‘It’s a question of choosing something right instead of something wrong. . . .’

‘I’m suspicious of right choices that happen to need less courage than the wrong ones.’

‘Is danger your measure of goodness?’

Mark shrugged his shoulders. ‘What is goodness? Hard to know, in most cases. But at least one can be sure that it’s good to face danger courageously.’

‘And for that you’re justified in deliberately creating dangerous situations — at other people’s expense?’ Dr Miller shook his head. ‘That won’t do, Mark Staithes. If you want to use courage, why not use it in a good cause.’

‘Such as teaching blackamoors to play football,’ Mark sneered.

‘Which isn’t so easy, very often, as it sounds.’

‘They can’t grasp the offside rule, I suppose.’

‘They don’t want to grasp any rule at all, except the rule of killing the people from the next village. And when you’re between two elevens armed to the teeth and breathing slaughter to one another . . .’ He paused; his wide mouth twitched into a smile; the almost invisible hieroglyphs round his eyes deepened, as he narrowed the lids, into the manifest symbols of an inner amusement. ‘Well, as I say, it isn’t quite so easy as it sounds. Have you ever found yourself faced by a lot of angry men who wanted to kill you?’

Mark nodded, and an expression of rather malevolent satisfaction appeared on his face. ‘Several times,’ he answered. ‘When I was running a coffee finca a bit further down the coast, in Chiapas.’

‘And you faced them without arms?’

‘Without arms,’ Mark repeated, and, by the way of explanation, ‘The politicians,’ he added, ‘were still talking about revolution in those days. The land for the people — and all the rest. One fine morning the villagers came to seize the estate.’

‘Which, on your principles,’ said Anthony, ‘you ought to have approved of.’

‘And did approve, of course. But I could hardly admit it — not in those circumstances.’

‘Why not?’

‘Well, surely that’s pretty obvious, isn’t it? There they were, marching against me. Was I to tell them I sympathized with their politics and then hand over the estate? No, really, that would have been a bit too simple!’

‘What did you do, then?’

‘There were about a hundred of them the first time,’ Mark explained. ‘Festooned with guns and cartridge-belts like Christmas trees, and all with their machetes. But polite, soft-spoken. They had no particular quarrel with me, and the revolutionary idea was strange; they didn’t feel too certain of themselves. Not that they ever make much noise,’ he added. ‘I’ve seen them killing in silence. Like fish. It’s an aquarium, this country.’

‘Seems like an aquarium,’ Dr Miller emended. ‘But when one has learnt how the fishes think . . .’

‘I’ve always found it more important to learn how they drink,’ said Mark. ‘Tequila’s the real enemy. Luckily, mine were sober. Otherwise . . . Well, who knows what would have happened?’ After a pause, ‘They were standing on the cement drying floor,’ he went on, ‘and I was sitting at the door of the office, up a few steps, above them. Superior, as though I were holding a durbar of my loyal subjects.’ He laughed; the colour had come to his cheeks, and he spoke with a kind of gusto, as though the words had a pleasant taste in his mouth. ‘A hundred villainous, coffee-coloured peons, staring up at one with those beady tortoiseshell eyes of theirs — it wasn’t reassuring. But I managed to keep my face and voice from giving anything away. It helped a lot, I found, to think of the creatures as some kind of rather squalid insects. Cockroaches, dung beetles. Just a hundred big, staring bugs. It helped, I say. But still my heart did beat a bit. On its own — you know the sensation, don’t you? It’s as though you had a live bird under your ribs. A bird with its own birdlike consciousness. Suffering from its own private fears. An odd sensation, but exhilarating. I don’t think I was ever happier in my life than I was that day. The fact of being one against a hundred. A hundred armed to the teeth. But bugs, only bugs. Whereas the one was a man. It was a wonderful feeling.’ He was silent for a little, smiling to himself.

‘And what happened then?’ Anthony asked.

‘Nothing. I just gave them a little speech from the throne. Told them the finca wasn’t mine to give away. That, meanwhile, I was responsible for the place. And if I caught anybody trespassing on the land, or doing any mischief — well. I should know what to do. Firm, dignified, the real durbar touch. After which I got up, told them they could go, and walked up the path towards the house. I suppose I was within sight of them for about a minute. A full minute with my back turned to them. And there were at least a hundred of the creatures; nobody could have ever discovered who fired the shot. That bird under the ribs!’ Lifting a hand, he fluttered the fingers in the air. ‘And there was a new sensation — ants running up and down the spine. Terrors — but of the body only; autonomous, if you see what I mean. In my mind I knew that they wouldn’t shoot, couldn’t shoot. A hundred miserable bugs — it was morally impossible for them to do it. Bird under the ribs, ants up and down the spine; but inside the skull there was a man; and he was confident, in spite of the body’s doubts, he knew that the game had been won. It was a long minute, but a good one. A very good one. And there were other minutes like it afterwards. The only times they ever shot at me were at evening, from out of the bushes. I was within their range, but they were out of mine. Out of the range of my consciousness and will. That was why they had the courage to shoot. When the man’s away, the bugs will play. Luckily, no amount of courage has ever taught an Indian to shoot straight. In time, of course, they might have got me by a fluke; but meanwhile revolution went out of fashion. It never cut very much ice on the Pacific coast.’ He lit a cigarette. There was a long silence.

‘Well,’ said Dr Miller at last, ‘that’s one way of dealing with a hostile crowd. And seeing that you’re here to tell us, it’s evidently a way that sometimes succeeds. But it’s not my way. I’m an anthropologist, you see.’

‘What difference does that make?’

‘Quite a big one,’ Dr Miller replied. ‘An anthropologist is a person who studies men. But you prefer to deal with bugs. I’d call you an entomologist, Mark Staithes.’ His smile evoked no answering sign of friendliness. Mark’s face was stony as he met the doctor’s eyes and looked away again.

‘Entomologist!’ he repeated scornfully. ‘That’s just stupid. Why do you play with words?’

‘Because words express thoughts, Mark Staithes; and thoughts determine actions. If you call a man a bug, it means that you propose to treat him as a bug. Whereas if you call him a man, it means that you propose to treat him as a man. My profession is to study men. Which means that I must always

call men by their name; always think of them as men; yes, and always treat them as men. Because if you don't treat men as men, they don't behave as men. But I'm an anthropologist, I repeat. I want human material. Not insect material.'

Mark uttered an explosive little laugh. 'One may want human material,' he said. 'But that doesn't mean one's going to get it. What one actually gets . . .' He laughed again. 'Well, it's mostly plain, undiluted bug.'

'There,' said Dr Miller, 'you're wrong. If one looks for men, one finds them. Very decent ones, in a majority of cases. For example, go among a suspicious, badly treated, savage people; go unarmed, with your hands open.' He held out his large square hands in a gesture of offering. 'Go with the persistent and obstinate intention of doing them some good — curing their sick, for example. I don't care how bitter their grievance against white men may be; in the end, if you're given time enough to make your intentions clear, they'll accept you as a friend, they'll be human beings treating you as a human being. Of course,' he added, and the symbols of inner laughter revealed themselves once more about his eyes, 'it sometimes happens that they don't leave you the necessary time. They spear you before you're well under way. But it doesn't often happen — it has never happened to me, as you can see — and when it does happen, well, there's always the hope that the next man who comes will be more successful. Anthropologists may get killed; but anthropology goes on; and in the long run it can't fail to succeed. Whereas your entomological approach . . .' He shook his head. 'It may succeed at the beginning; you can generally frighten and overawe people into submission. That's to say that, by treating them as bugs, you can generally make them behave like bugs — crawl and scuttle to cover. But the moment they have the opportunity, they'll turn on you. The anthropologist may get killed while establishing his first contacts; but after that, he's safe; he's a man among men. The entomologist may start by being safe; but he's a bug-hunter among bugs — among bugs, what's more, who resent being treated as bugs, who know they aren't bugs. His bad quarter of an hour comes later on. It's the old story; you can do everything with bayonets except sit on them.'

'You don't have to sit on them,' said Mark. 'It's the other people's bottoms that get punctured, not yours. If you wielded the bayonets with a certain amount of intelligence, I don't see why you shouldn't go on ruling indefinitely. The real trouble is, of course, that there isn't the necessary intelligence. Most bug-hunters are indistinguishable from the bugs.'

'Exactly,' Dr Miller agreed. 'And the only remedy is for the bug-hunter to throw his bayonets away and treat the bugs as though they were human beings.'

'But we're talking about intelligence,' said Mark. The tone of contemptuous tolerance implied that he was doing his best not to get angry with the old fool for his incapacity to think. 'Being sentimental has nothing to do with being intelligent.'

'On the contrary,' the doctor insisted, 'it has everything to do with it. You can't be intelligent about human beings unless you're first sentimental about them. Sentimental in the good sense, of course. In the sense of caring for them. It's the first indispensable condition of understanding them. If you don't care for them, you can't possibly understand them; all your acuteness will just be another form of stupidity.'

'And if you care for them,' said Mark, 'you'll be carried away by your maudlin emotions and become incapable of seeing them for what they are. Look at the grotesque, humiliating things that happen when people care too much. The young men who fall in love and imagine that hideous, imbecile girls are paragons of beauty and intellect. The devoted women who persist in thinking that their squalid little hubbies are all that's most charming, noble, wise, profound.'

'They're probably quite right,' said Dr Miller. 'It's indifference and hatred that are blind, not love.'

'Not lo-ove!' Mark repeated derisively. 'Perhaps we might now sing a hymn.'

'With pleasure,' Dr Miller smiled. 'A Christian hymn, or a Buddhist hymn, or a Confucian — whichever you like. I'm an anthropologist; and after all, what's anthropology? Merely applied scientific religion.'

Anthony broke a long silence. 'Why do you only apply it to blackamoors?' he asked. 'What about beginning at home, like charity?'

'You're right,' said the doctor, 'it ought to have begun at home. If, in fact, it began abroad, that's merely a historical accident. It began there because we were imperialists and so came into contact with people whose habits were different from ours and therefore seemed stranger than ours. An accident, I repeat. But in some ways a rather fortunate accident. For thanks to it we've learnt a lot of facts and a valuable technique, which we probably shouldn't have learnt at home. For two reasons. Because it's hard to think dispassionately about oneself, and still harder to think correctly about something that's very complicated. Home's both those things — an elaborate civilization that happens to be our own. Savage societies are simply civilized societies on a small scale and with the lid off. We can learn to understand them fairly easily. And when we've learnt to understand savages, we've learnt, as we discover, to understand the civilized. And that's not all. Savages are usually hostile and suspicious. The anthropologist has got to learn to overcome that hostility and suspicion. And when he's learnt that, he's learnt the whole secret of politics.'

'Which is . . . ?'

'That if you treat other people well, they'll treat you well.'

'You're a bit optimistic, aren't you?'

'No. In the long run they'll always treat you well.'

'In the long run,' said Mark impatiently, 'we shall all be dead. What about the short run?'

'You've got to take a risk.'

'But Europeans aren't like your Sunday-school savages. It'll be an enormous risk.'

'Possibly. But always smaller than the risk you run by treating people badly and goading them into a war. Besides, they're not worse than savages. They've just been badly handled — need a bit of anthropology, that's all.'

'And who's going to give them the anthropology?'

'Well, among others,' Dr Miller answered, 'I am. And I hope you are, Mark Staithes.'

Mark made a flayed grimace and shook his head. 'Let them slit one another's throats,' he said. 'They'll do it anyhow, whatever you tell them. So leave them to make their idiotic wars in peace. Besides,' he pointed to the basket-work cage that kept the bed-clothes out of contact with his wound, 'what can I do now? Look on, that's all. We'd much better all look on. It won't be for long anyhow. Just a few years; and then . . .' He paused, looked down and frowned. 'What are those verses of Rochester's? Yes.' He raised his head again and recited:

'Then old age and experience, hand in hand,
Lead him to death, and make him understand,
After a search so painful and so long,
That all his life he had been in the wrong.
Huddled in dirt the reasoning engine lies,
Who was so proud, so witty and so wise.'

'Huddled in dirt,' he repeated. 'That's really admirable. Huddled in dirt. And one doesn't have to wait till one's dead to be that. We'll find a snug little patch of dirt and huddle together, shall we?' He turned to Anthony. 'Huddle together among the cow-pats and watch the doctor trying his best anthropological bedside manner on General Goering. There'll be some hearty laughs.'

'In spite of which,' said Anthony, 'I think I shall go and make myself ridiculous with Miller.'

Chapter Fifty-Two. July 24th 1914

THERE WERE FOUR of them in the search-party: Anthony, the policeman, an old shepherd, with the grey whiskers and the majestic profile of a Victorian statesman, and a fair, red-faced boy of seventeen,

the baker's son. The boy was made to carry the canvas part of the stretcher, while the shepherd and the policeman used the long poles as staves.

They set out from behind the cottage, walking in a line — like beaters, Anthony found himself reflecting — up the slope of the hill. It was a brilliant day, cloudless and windless. The distant hills showed as though through veils, dim with much sunlight and almost without colour. Under their feet the grass and heather were dusty with long drought. Anthony took off his jacket, and then, on second thoughts, his hat. A touch of sunstroke might simplify things; there would be no need to give explanations or answer questions. Even as it was, he felt rather sick and there was a griping in his bowels. But that was hardly enough. How many difficulties would be removed if he could be really ill! Every now and then, as they climbed slowly on, he put his hand to his head, and each time the hair felt hot to the touch, like the fur of a cat that has been sitting in front of the fire. It was a pity, he thought, that his hair was so thick.

Three hours later they had found what they were looking for. Brian's body was lying, face downwards, in a kind of rocky bay, at the foot of a cliff above the tarn. Bracken was growing between the rocks, and in the hot air its sweetish, oppressive scent was almost suffocatingly strong. The place was loud with flies. When the policeman turned the body over, the mangled face was almost unrecognizable. Anthony looked for a moment, then turned away. His whole body had begun to tremble uncontrollably; he had to lean against a rock to prevent himself from falling.

'Come, lad.' The old shepherd took him by the arm, and, leading him away, made him sit down on the grass, out of sight of the body. Anthony waited. A buzzard turned slowly in the sky, tracing out the passage of time on an invisible clock-face. Then at last they came out from behind the buttress of rock into his view. The shepherd and the boy walked in front, each holding one pole of the stretcher, while the policeman, behind, had to support the weight on both the poles. Brian's torn jacket had been taken off and spread over his face. One stiffened arm stuck out irrepressibly and, at every step the bearers took, swung and trembled in the air. There were blood-stains on the shirt. Anthony got up, and in spite of their protestations insisted on taking half the policeman's burden. Very slowly, they made their way down towards the valley. It was after three o'clock when at last they reached the cottage.

Later, the policeman went through the pockets of coat and trousers. A tobacco pouch, a pipe, Mrs Benson's packet of sandwiches, six or seven shillings in money, and a note-book half-full of jottings about the economic history of the Roman Empire. Not the smallest hint that what had happened had been anything but an accident.

Mrs Foxe arrived the following evening. Rigid at first with self-control, she listened in silence, stonily, to Anthony's story; then, all at once, broke down, fell to pieces as it were, in a passion of tears. Anthony stood by her for a moment, uncertainly; then crept out of the room.

Next morning, when he saw her again, Mrs Foxe had recovered her calm — but a different kind of calm. The calm of a living, sentient being, not the mechanical and frozen stillness of a statue. There were dark lines under her eyes, and the face was that of an old and suffering woman; but there was a sweetness and serenity in the suffering, an expression of dignity, almost of majesty. Looking at her, Anthony felt himself abashed, as though he were in the presence of something that he was not worthy, that he had no right, to approach. Abashed and guilty, more guilty even than he had felt the night before, when her grief had passed beyond her control.

He would have liked to escape once more; but she kept him with her all the morning, sometimes sitting in silence, sometimes speaking in that slow, beautifully modulated voice of hers. To Anthony silence and speech were equally a torture. It was an agony to sit there, saying nothing, listening to the clock ticking, and wondering, worrying about the future — how to get away from Joan, what to tell her about that accursed letter of hers; and every now and then stealing a glance at Mrs Foxe and asking himself what was going on in her mind and whether she had any knowledge, any suspicion even, of what had really happened. Yes, her silences were painful; but equally painful was her speech.

'I realize,' she began, slowly and pensively, 'I realize now that I loved him in the wrong way — too possessively.'

What was he to say? That it was true? Of course it was true. She had been like a vampire, fastened on poor Brian's spirit. Sucking his life's blood. (St Monica, he remembered, by Ary Scheffer.) Yes, a vampire. If anyone was responsible for Brian's death, it was she. But his self-justificatory indignation against her evaporated as she spoke again.

'Perhaps that was one of the reasons why it happened, in order that I might learn that love mustn't be like that.' Then, after a pause, 'I suppose,' she went on, 'Brian had learnt enough. He hadn't very much to learn, really. He knew so much to start with. Like Mozart — only his genius wasn't for music; it was for love. Perhaps that was why he could go so soon. Whereas I . . .' She shook her head. 'I've had to have this lesson. After all these long years of learning, still so wilfully stupid and ignorant!' She sighed and was silent once more.

A vampire — but she knew it; she admitted her share of responsibility. There remained his share — still unconfessed. 'I ought to tell her,' he said to himself, and thought of all that had resulted from his failure to tell the truth to Brian. But while he was hesitating, Mrs Foxe began again.

'One ought to love everyone like an only son,' she went on. 'And one's own only son as one amongst them. A son one can't help loving more than the rest, because one has more opportunities for loving him. But the love would be different only in quantity, not in kind. One ought to love him as one loves all the other only sons — for God's sake, not for one's own.'

The richly vibrant voice spoke on, and, with every word it uttered, Anthony felt more guilty — more guilty, and at the same time more completely and hopelessly committed to his guilt. The longer he delayed and the more she said in this strain of resignation, the harder it was going to be to undeceive her with the truth.

'Listen, Anthony,' she resumed, after another long pause. 'You know how fond of you I've always been. Ever since that time just after your mother's death — do you remember? — when you first came to stay with us. You were such a defenceless little boy. And that's how I've always seen you, ever since. Defenceless under your armour. For, of course, you've had an armour. You still have. To protect yourself against me, among other dangers.' She smiled at him. Anthony dropped his eyes, blushed and mumbled some incoherent phrase. 'Never mind why you've wanted to protect yourself,' she went on. 'I don't want to know, unless you want to tell me. And perhaps you'll feel you want to protect yourself still more now. Because I'm going to say that I'd like you to take Brian's place. The place,' she qualified, 'that Brian ought to have had if I'd loved him in the right way. Among all the other only sons, the one whom there's more opportunity of loving than the rest. That's what I'd like you to be, Anthony. But, of course, I won't force myself on you. It's for you to decide.'

He sat in silence, his face averted from her, his head bent. 'Blurt it out,' a voice was crying within him. 'Anyhow, at any price!' But if it had been difficult before, now it was impossible. Saying she wanted him to take Brian's place! It was she who had made it impossible. He was shaken by the gust of futile anger. If only she'd leave him in peace, let him go away and be alone! Suddenly his throat contracted, the tears came into his eyes, the muscles of his chest tightened in spasm after violent spasm; he was sobbing. Mrs Foxe crossed the room, and bending over him, laid a hand on his shoulder.

'Poor Anthony,' she whispered.

He was pinned irrevocably to his lie.

That evening he wrote to Joan. This horrible accident. So unnecessary. So stupid in its tragedy. It had happened, as a matter of fact, before he had had an opportunity for telling Brian about those events in London. And, by the way, had she written to Brian? An envelope addressed in her handwriting had been delivered at midday, when the poor fellow had already started out. He was keeping it for her and would return it personally, when he saw her next. Meanwhile, Mrs Foxe was bearing it wonderfully; and they must all be brave; and he was always hers affectionately.

Chapter Fifty-Three. February 23rd 1934

HELEN CAME INTO the sitting-room, holding a frying-pan in which the bacon was still spluttering from the fire.

'Breakfast!' she called.

'Komme gleich' came back from the bedroom, and a moment later Ekki showed himself at the open door in shirt-sleeves, razor in hand, his fair ruddy face covered with soap-suds.

'Almost finished,' he said in English, and disappeared again.

Helen smiled to herself as she sat down. Loving him as she did, she found an extraordinary pleasure in this close and incessant physical intimacy with him — the intimacy that their poverty had perforce imposed on them. Why do people want large houses, separate rooms, all the private hiding-places that the rich find indispensable? She couldn't imagine, now. Humming to herself, out of tune, Helen poured out the tea, helped herself to bacon, then began to sort the morning's letters. Helen Amberley. No Mrs. Communist frankness and informality. She opened the envelope. The letter was from Newcastle. Would it be possible for her or Giesebrecht to speak to a group of young comrades on conditions in Germany some time in March? Well, one would have to see. Mr E. Giesebrecht. From Switzerland; and surely that thin spiky writing was Holtzmann's. Ekki would be pleased.

'Something from Holtzmann,' she said as he came in. 'I wonder what news he'll have this time?'

Ekki took the letter, and, with that methodical deliberation that characterized all his actions, opened it; then, laid it down beside his plate and cut off a piece of bacon. He poked the bacon into his mouth, picked up the letter again, and, slowly chewing, began to read. An expression of intent and focused gravity came into his face; he could never do anything except thoroughly and whole-heartedly. When he had finished, he turned back to the first page and started reading all over again.

Helen's impatience got the better of her at last. 'Anything interesting?' she asked. Holtzmann was the best informed of the exiled journalists; he always had something to communicate. 'Tell me what he says.'

Ekki did not answer at once, but read on in silence for a few seconds, then folded up the letter and put it away in his pocket. 'Mach is in Basel,' he answered at last, looking up at her.

'Mach?' she repeated. 'Do you mean Ludwig Mach?'

In the course of these last months, the name of this most resourceful and courageous of all the German comrades engaged in the dissemination of Communist propaganda and censored news had become, for Helen, at once familiar and fabulous, like the name of a personage in literature or mythology. That Ludwig Mach should be at Basel seemed almost as improbable as that Odysseus should be there, or Odin, or the Scarlet Pimpernel. 'Ludwig Mach from Stuttgart?' she insisted incredulously.

Ekki nodded. 'I shall have to go and see him. Tomorrow.'

Spoken in that slow, emphatic, foreign way of his, the words had a strange quality of absolute irrevocableness. Even his most casual statements always sounded, when uttered in English, as though he had made them on oath.

'I shall have to go,' he repeated.

Carefully, conscientiously pronounced, each syllable had the same value. Two heavy spondees and the first half of a third. Whereas an Englishman, however irrevocably he had made up his mind, would have spoken the phrase as a kind of gobbled anapaest — I-shall-have-to-go. In another man, this way of speaking — so ponderous, so Jehovah-like, as she herself had teasingly called it — would have seemed to Helen intolerably grotesque. But, in Ekki, it was an added attraction. It seemed somehow right and fitting that this man, whom (quite apart from loving) she admired and respected beyond anyone she had ever known, should be thus touchingly absurd.

'If I couldn't laugh at him sometimes,' she explained to herself, 'it might all go putrid. A pool of stagnant adoration. Like religion. Like one of Landseer's dogs. The laughter keeps it aired and moving.'

Listening, looking into his face (at once so absurdly ingenuous in its fresh and candid gravity and so heroically determined), Helen felt, as she had so often felt before, that she would like to burst out laughing and then go down on her knees and kiss his hands.

‘I shall have to go too,’ she said aloud, parodying his way of speaking. He thought at first that she was joking; then, when he realized that she was in earnest, grew serious and began to raise objections. The fatigue — for they would be travelling third-class. The expense. But Helen was suddenly like her mother — a spoilt woman whose caprices had to be satisfied.

‘It’ll be such fun,’ she cried excitedly. ‘Such an adventure!’ And when he persisted in being negatively reasonable, she grew angry. ‘But I will come with you,’ she repeated obstinately. ‘I will.’

Holtzmann met them at the station, and, instead of being the tall, stiff, distinguished personage of Helen’s anticipatory fancy, turned out to be short and squat, with a roll of fat at the back of his neck, and, between little pig’s eyes, a soft shapeless nose like a potato. His hand, when she shook it, was so coldly sweaty that she felt her own defiled; surreptitiously, when he wasn’t looking, she wiped it on her skirt. But worse than even his appearance and his sweaty hands was the man’s behaviour. Her presence, she could see, had taken him aback.

‘I had not expected . . .’ he stammered, when Ekki presented her; and his face, for a moment, seemed to disintegrate in agitation. Then, recovering himself, he became effusively polite and cordial. It was gnädige Frau, lieber Ekki, unbeschreiblich froh all the way down the platform. As though he were meeting them on the stage, Helen thought. And acting badly, what was more, like someone in a third-rate touring company. And how detestable that nervousness was! A man had no business to giggle like that and gesticulate and make grimaces. Mopping and mowing, she said under her breath. Walking beside him, she felt herself surrounded by a bristling aura of dislike. This horrible creature had suddenly spoilt all the fun of the journey. She found herself almost wishing that she hadn’t come.

‘What a loathsome man!’ she managed to whisper to Ekki, while Holtzmann was engaged in extravagantly overacting the part of one who tells the porter to be careful with the typewriter.

‘You find him so?’ Ekki asked with genuine surprise. ‘I had not thought . . .’ He left the sentence unfinished and shook his head. A little frown of perplexity wrinkled his smooth forehead. But a moment later, interrupting Holtzmann’s renewed protestations of affection and delight, he was asking what Mach thought of the present situation in Germany; and when Holtzmann replied, he listened, absorbed.

Half angry with him for his insensitive obtuseness, half admiring him for his power to ignore everything that, to him, was irrelevant, Helen walked in silence at his side.

‘Men are extraordinary,’ she was thinking. ‘All the same, I ought to be like that.’

Instead of which she allowed herself to be distracted by faces, by gigglings and gestures; she wasted her feelings on pigs’ eyes and rolls of fat. And all the time millions of men and women and children were going cold and hungry, were being exploited, were being overworked, were being treated as though they were less than human, mere beasts of burden, mere cogs and levers; millions were being forced to live in chronic fear and misery and despair, were being dragooned and beaten, were being maddened with lies and cowed with threats and blows, were being herded this way and that like senseless animals on the road to market, to an ultimate slaughter-house. And here was she, detesting Holtzmann, because he had sweaty hands — instead of respecting him, as she should have done, for what he had dared, what he had suffered for the sake of those unhappy millions. His hands might be sweaty; but he lived precariously in exile, had been persecuted for his principles, was a champion of justice and truth. She felt ashamed of herself, but at the same time couldn’t help thinking that life, if you were like Ekki, must be strangely narrow and limited, unimaginably without colour. A life in black and white, she reflected, hard and clear and definite, like a Dürer engraving. Whereas hers — hers was a vague bright Turner, a Monet, a savage Gauguin. But ‘you look like a Gauguin’, Anthony had said, that morning on the blazing roof, and here in the chilly twilight of Basel station she suddenly winced, as though with physical pain.

‘Oh, how awful,’ she said to herself, ‘how awful!’

‘And the labour camps,’ Ekki was asking, intently, ‘what does Mach say about the feeling in the labour camps?’

Outside the station they halted.

‘Shall we begin by taking our things to a hotel?’ Ekki suggested.

But Holtzmann would not hear of it. ‘No, no, you must come at once,’ he insisted with a breathless emphasis. ‘To my house at once. Mach is waiting there. Mach wouldn’t understand it if there was any delay.’ But when Ekki agreed, he still stood irresolute and nervous at the pavement’s edge, like a swimmer afraid to plunge.

‘What’s the matter with the man?’ Helen wondered impatiently; then aloud, ‘Well, why don’t we take a taxi?’ she asked, forgetting for the moment that the time of taxis had long since come to an end. One took trams now, one took buses. But Gauguin had precipitated her into the past; it seemed natural to think of taxis.

Holtzmann did not answer her; but suddenly, with the quick, agitated movements of one who has been forced by circumstances to take a disagreeable decision, caught Ekki by the arm, and, drawing him aside, began to speak to him in a hurried whisper. Helen saw a look of surprise and annoyance come over Ekki’s face as he listened. His lips moved, he was evidently making an objection. The other replied in smiling deprecation and began to stroke his sleeve, as though in the hope of caressing him into acquiescence.

In the end Ekki nodded, and, turning back to Helen, ‘Holtzmann wants you to join us only at lunch,’ he said in his abrupt heavy way. ‘He says that Mach wouldn’t like it if there is anyone beside me.’

‘Does he think I’ll give him away to the Nazis?’ Helen asked indignantly.

‘It isn’t you,’ Ekki explained. ‘He doesn’t know you. If he did, it would be different. But he is afraid. Afraid of everyone he does not know. And he is quite right to be afraid,’ he added, in that tone of dogmatic finality which meant that the argument was closed.

Making a great effort to swallow her annoyance and chagrin, Helen nodded her head. ‘All right then, I’ll meet you at lunch-time. Though what the point was of my coming here at all,’ she couldn’t help adding, ‘I really can’t imagine.’

‘Dear Miss Amberley, chère consœur, gnädige Frau, comrade . . .’ Holtzmann overflowed with bourgeois and Communist courtesies in all the languages at his disposal. ‘Es tut mir so leid. So very sorry.’ But here was the address of his house. At half past twelve. And if he might advise her on the best way of spending a morning in Basel . . .

She slipped the card into her bag, and without waiting to listen to his suggestions, turned her back on the two men and walked quickly away.

‘Helen!’ Ekki called after her. But she paid no attention. He did not call again.

It was cold; but the sky was a clear pale blue, the sun was shining. And suddenly, emerging from behind high houses, she found herself beside the Rhine. Leaning over the parapet, she watched the green water hurrying past, silent, but swift and purposive, like a living thing, like life itself, like the power behind the world, eternally, irresistibly flowing; watched it, until at last it was as though she herself were flowing along with the great river, were one with it, a partaker of its power. ‘And shall Trelawney die?’ she found herself singing. ‘And shall Trelawney die? There’s twenty thousand Cornish men shall know the rea-ea-eason why.’ And suddenly it seemed certain that they would win, that the revolution was only just round the corner — there, after that first bend in the river. Irresistibly the flood drove on towards it. And meanwhile what a fool she had been to be cross with Ekki, what an absolute beast! Remorse gave place, after a little, to the ecstatically tender anticipation of their reconciliation. ‘Darling,’ she would say to him, ‘darling, you must forgive me. I was really too stupid and odious.’ And he would put one arm round her, and with the other hand would push back the hair from her forehead and then bend down and kiss her. . . .

When she walked on, the Rhine was still rushing within her, and, unburdened of her offence towards Ekki, she felt immaterially light, felt almost as though she were floating — floating in a thin intoxicating air of happiness. The starving millions receded once more into remote abstraction. How good everything was, how beautiful, how exactly as it ought to be! Even the fat old women were perfect, even the nineteenth-century Gothic houses. And that cup of hot chocolate in the café — how indescribably

delicious! And the old waiter, so friendly and paternal. Friendly and paternal, what was more, in an astonishing Swiss-German that made one want to roar with laughter, as though everything he said — from his commentaries on the weather to his complaints about the times — were one huge, continuous joke. Such gutterals, such neighings! Like the language of the Houyhnhnms, she thought, and led him on, with an unwearied delight in the performance, to hoick and whinny yet again.

From the café she went on at last to the picture gallery; and the picture gallery turned out to be as exquisitely comic in its own way as the waiter's German. Those Boecklins! All the extraordinary pictures one had only seen on postcards or hanging, in coloured reproduction, on the walls of pensions in Dresden. Mermaids and tritons caught as though by a camera; centaurs in the stiff ungainly positions of race-horses in a pressman's photograph. Painted with a good faith and a laborious lack of talent that were positively touching. And here — unspeakable joy! — was the Toteninsel. The funereal cypresses, the white tomb-like temples, the long-robed figures, the solitary boat on its way across the wine-dark sea . . . The joke was perfect. Helen laughed aloud. In spite of everything, she was still her mother's daughter.

In the room of the primitives she paused for a moment, on her way out, before a picture of the martyrdom of St Erasmus. An executioner in fifteenth-century costume, with a pale shell-pink cod-piece, was methodically turning the handle of a winch — like Mr Mantalini at the mangle — winding the saint's intestines, yard after yard, out of a gash in the emaciated belly, while the victim lay back, as if on a sofa, making himself thoroughly comfortable and looking up into the sky with an expression of unruffled equanimity. The joke here was less subtle than in Toteninsel, more frankly a knockabout; but excellent, none the less, in its own simple way. She was still smiling as she walked out into the street.

Holtzmann, it turned out, lived only a few hundred yards from the gallery, in a pretty little early nineteenth-century house (much too good for a man with sweaty hands!) set back from the road behind a little square of gravel. A large car was standing at the door. Holtzmann's? she wondered. He must be rich, the old pig! It had taken her so little time to come from the gallery that it was hardly a quarter past twelve as she mounted the steps. 'Never mind,' she said to herself. 'They'll have to put up with me. I refuse to wait one second longer.' The thought that, in a moment, she would see Ekki again made her heart beat quickly. 'What a fool I am! What an absolute fool! But how marvellous to be able to be a fool!' She rang the bell.

It was Holtzmann himself who opened — dressed in an overcoat, she was surprised to see, as though he were just going out. The expression with which he had greeted her at the station reappeared on his face as he saw her.

'You are so soon,' he said, trying to smile; but his nervousness and embarrassment amounted almost to terror. 'We had not awaited you until half-one.'

Helen laughed. 'I hadn't awaited myself,' she explained. 'But I got here quicker than I thought.'

She made a movement to step across the threshold; but Holtzmann held out his arm. 'We are not yet ready,' he said. His face was flushed and sweating with embarrassment. 'If you will return in a quarter hour,' he almost implored. 'Only a quarter hour.'

'Nur ein viertel Stündchen.' Helen laughed, thinking of those embroidered cushions on the sofas where the Geheimrats slept off the effects of noonday eating. 'But why shouldn't I wait indoors?' She pushed past him into a dark little hall that smelt of cooking and stale air. 'Where's Ekki?' she asked, suddenly overcome by the desire to see him, to see him at once, without another second's delay, so that she could tell him what a beast she had been, but how loving all the same, how adoring in spite of the beastliness, and how happy, how eager to share her happiness with him! At the other end of the vestibule a door stood ajar. Calling his name, Helen ran towards it.

'Stop!' Holtzmann shouted behind her.

But she was already across the threshold.

The room in which she found herself was a bedroom. On the narrow iron bed Ekki was lying with all his clothes on, his head on one side, his mouth open. His breath came slowly in long snores; he was asleep — but asleep as she had never seen him sleeping.

'Ekki!' she had time to cry, while a door slammed, another voice joined itself to Holtzmann's, and the vestibule was loud with violent movement. 'My darling . . .'

Then suddenly a hand closed on her shoulder from behind. She turned, saw the face of a strange man within a few inches of her own, heard somewhere from the background Holtzmann's 'Schnell, Willi, schnell!' and the stranger almost whispering, between clenched teeth, 'Schmutziges Frauenzimmer'; then, as she opened her mouth to scream, received a terrible blow on the chin that brought the teeth violently together again, and felt herself dropping into blackness.

When she came to herself, she was in bed in a hospital ward. Some peasants had found her lying unconscious in a little wood five or six miles from the town. An ambulance had brought her back to Basel. It was only on the following morning that the effects of the barbitone wore off and she remembered what had happened. But by that time Ekki had been over the frontier, in Germany, for nearly twenty hours.

Chapter Fifty-Four. February 23rd 1935

ANTHONY HAD SPENT the morning at the offices of the organization, dictating letters. For the most part, it was a matter of dealing with the intellectual difficulties of would-be pacifists. 'What would you do if you saw a foreign soldier attacking your sister?' Well, whatever else one did, one certainly wouldn't send one's son to murder his second cousin. Wearisome work! But it had to be done. He dictated twenty-seven letters; then it was time to go to lunch with Helen.

'There's practically nothing to eat,' she said, when he came in. 'I simply couldn't be bothered to cook anything. The unspeakable boredom of making meals!' Her voice took on a note of almost malevolent resentment.

They addressed themselves to tinned salmon and lettuce. Anthony tried to talk; but his words seemed to bounce off the impenetrable surface of her sullen and melancholy silence. In the end, he too sat speechless.

'It's just a year ago today,' she brought out at last.

'What is?'

'Just a year since those devils at Basel . . .'

 She shook her head and was silent again.

Anthony said nothing. Anything he could say would be an irrelevance, he felt, almost an insult.

'I often wish they'd killed me too,' she went on slowly. 'Instead of leaving me here, rotting away, like a piece of dirt on a rubbish heap. Like a dead kitten,' she added, as an afterthought. 'So much carrion.' The words were spoken with a vehement disgust.

'Why do you say that?' he asked.

'Because it's true. I am carrion.'

'There's no need for you to be.'

'I can't help it. I'm carrion by nature.'

'No, you're not,' he insisted. 'You've said it yourself. When Ekki was there . . .'

'No, I wasn't carrion then.'

'What you've been once, you can be again.'

'Not without him.'

He nodded. 'Yes, if you want to be, you can. It's a matter of choosing. Choosing and then setting to work in the right way.'

Helen shook her head. 'They ought to have killed me. If you only know how I disgust myself!' She screwed up her face into a grimace. 'I'm no good. Worse than no good. Just a lump of dirt.' After a pause, 'I'm not even interested in Ekki's work,' she went on. 'I don't like his friends. Communists. But they're just beastly little people, like anyone else. Stupid, vulgar, envious, pushing. One might as well have the fun of wearing a chinchilla coat and lunching at Claridge's. I shall probably end by selling

myself to a rich man. That is, if I can find one.’ She laughed again. Then, in a tone of more bitter self-contempt, ‘Only a year today,’ she resumed, ‘and already I’m sick of it all. Utterly sick of it and pining to get out of it. I’m disgusting.’

‘But are you entirely to blame?’

‘Of course I am.’

Anthony shook his head. ‘Perhaps it’s also the fault of the work.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Organized hatred — it’s not exactly attractive. Not what most people feel they really want to live for.’

‘Ekki lived for it. Lots of people live for it.’

‘But what sort of people?’ he asked. ‘They’re of three kinds. Idealists with an exceptional gift for self-deception. Either they don’t know that it’s organized hatred, or else they genuinely believe that the end justifies the means, genuinely imagine that the means don’t condition the end. Ekki was one of those. They form the majority. And then there are two minorities. A minority of people who know that the thing’s organized hatred and rejoice in the fact. And a minority that’s ambitious, that merely uses the movement as a convenient machine for realizing its ambition. You, Helen — you’re neither ambitious nor self-deceiving. And, in spite of what happened this day last year, don’t really want to liquidate people — not even Nazis. And that’s why the chinchillas and the orchids seem so attractive. Not because you actively long for them. Only because this particular alternative is so unsatisfactory.’

There was a silence. Helen got up, changed the plates and set a bowl of fruit on the table. ‘What is the satisfactory alternative?’ she asked, as she helped herself to an apple.

‘It begins,’ he answered, ‘with trying to cultivate the difficult art of loving people.’

‘But most people are detestable.’

‘They’re detestable, because we detest them. If we liked them, they’d be likeable.’

‘Do you think that’s true?’

‘I’m sure it’s true.’

‘And what do you do after that?’

‘There’s no “after”,’ he replied. ‘Because, of course, it’s a lifetime’s job. Any process of change is a lifetime’s job. Every time you get to the top of a peak, you see another peak in front of you — a peak that you couldn’t see from lower down. Take the mind-body mechanism, for example. You begin to learn how to use it better; you make an advance; from the position you’ve advanced to, you discover how you can use it better still. And so on, indefinitely. The ideal ends recede as you approach them; they’re seen to be other and more remarkable than they seemed before the advance was begun. It’s the same when one tries to change one’s relations with other people. Every step forward reveals the necessity of making new steps forward — unanticipated steps, towards a destination one hadn’t seen when one set out. Yes, it lasts a lifetime,’ he repeated. ‘There can’t be any “after”. There can only be an attempt, as one goes along, to project what one has discovered on the personal level on to the level of politics and economics. One of the first discoveries,’ he added, ‘one of the very first one makes, is that organized hatred and violence aren’t the best means for securing justice and peace. All men are capable of love for all other men. But we’ve artificially restricted our love. By means of conventions of hatred and violence. Restricted it within families and clans, within classes and nations. Your friends want to remove those restrictions by using more hatred and violence — that’s to say, by using exactly the same means as were the original causes of the restrictions.’ He smiled. ‘Can you be surprised if you find the work a bit unsatisfying?’

Helen looked at him for a little in silence, then shook her head. ‘I prefer my chinchillas.’

‘No, you don’t.’

‘Yes, I do. I’d rather be a lump of dirt. It’s easier.’ She got up. ‘What about some coffee?’ In the little kitchen, as they were waiting for the water to boil, she suddenly started to tell him about that young man in advertising. She had met him a couple of weeks before. Such an amusing and intelligent creature! And he had fallen violently in love with her. Her face brightened with a kind of reckless, laughing malice.

'Blue eyes,' she said, cataloguing the young man's merits, as though she were an auctioneer, 'curly hair, tremendous shoulders, narrow hips, first-rate amateur boxer — which is more than you ever were, my poor Anthony,' she added parenthetically and in a tone of contemptuous commiseration. 'In fact, thoroughly bed-worthy. Or at least he looks it. Because one never really knows till one's tried, does one?' She laughed. 'I've a good mind to try tonight,' she went on. 'To commemorate this anniversary. Don't you think it would be a good idea, Anthony?' And when he didn't answer, 'Don't you think so?' she insisted. 'Don't you think so?' She looked into his face, trying to detect in it the signs of anger, or jealousy, or disgust.

Anthony smiled back at her. 'It isn't so easy, being a lump of dirt,' he said. 'In fact, I should say it was very hard work indeed.'

The brightness faded out of her face. 'Hard work,' she repeated. 'Perhaps that's one of the reasons for going on trying.' After a pause, while she poured the water into the percolator, 'Did you say you were having a meeting tonight?'

'In Battersea.'

'Perhaps I shall come and listen to you. Unless,' she added, making an effort to laugh, 'unless, of course, I've decided to celebrate the anniversary in the other way.'

When they had drunk their coffee, Anthony walked back to his rooms, to put in a few hours' work at the new pamphlet he had promised to write for Purchas. Two letters had come by the midday delivery. One was from Miller, describing the excellent meetings he had been having in Edinburgh and Glasgow. The other, without an address, was typewritten.

Sir, [it began] we have been keeping an eye on you for some time past, and have decided that you cannot be allowed to go on in your present disloyal and treacherous way. We give you fair warning. If you make any more of your dirty pacifist speeches, we shall deal with you as you deserve. Appealing to the police will not do any good. We shall get you sooner or later, and it will not be pleasant for you. It is announced that you are speaking tonight in Battersea. We shall be there. So we advise you, if you value your yellow skin, to keep away. You do not deserve this warning, but we want to behave sportingly even towards a skunk like you. — Yours faithfully,

A Group of Patriotic Englishmen.

A joke, Anthony wondered? No, probably serious. He smiled. 'How virtuous they must be feeling!' he said to himself. 'And how heroic! Striking their blow for England.'

But the blow, he went on to reflect, as he sat down in front of the fire, the blow would fall upon himself — if he spoke, that was to say, if they weren't prevented from attacking him. And, of course, there could be no question of not speaking. No question of calling on the police for protection. Nothing to do but practise what he had been preaching.

But would he have the strength of mind to see it through? Suppose they set on him, suppose they started to knock him about? Would he know how to stand it?

He tried to work on the pamphlet; but the personal questions insistently recurred, thrusting aside those remoter and impersonal problems of colonies and prestige, markets, investment, migration. He visualized the horrible expression of anger on the men's distorted faces, heard in his fancy their violent insulting words, saw hands lifted, falling. Would he be able to prevent himself from flinching? And the pain of blows — sharp, excruciating, on the face, and sickening on the body — how much would he be able to bear, for how long? If only Miller were here to give advice and encouragement! But Miller was in Glasgow.

Doubt of himself grew upon him. To stand there, letting himself be struck, without hitting back, without giving ground — he would never be able to do that.

'I shan't have the guts,' he kept repeating, and was obsessed by the fear of being afraid. Remembering the way he had behaved at Tapatlan, he blushed with shame. And, this time, the disgrace would be in public. They would all know — Helen with the rest.

And this time, he went on to think, this time there wouldn't be the excuse of surprise. They had given him warning — 'even to a skunk like you'. And besides, he had been training himself for months

past to cope with just such a contingency as this. The scene had been rehearsed. He knew by heart every cue and gesture. But when the time actually came, when the pain was no longer imaginary but real, would he remember his part? What guarantee was there that he wouldn't hopelessly break down? In front of Helen — when Helen was standing hesitant on the threshold of her own life, perhaps also of his. Besides, if he broke down, he would be discrediting more than himself. To break down would be to deny his convictions, to invalidate his philosophy, to betray his friends. 'But why are you such a fool?' a small voice began to question; 'why do you go and saddle yourself with convictions and philosophies? And why put yourself in the position of being able to betray anyone? Why not go back to doing what nature meant you to do — to looking on from your private box and making comments? What does it all matter, after all? And even if it matters, what can you do? Why not quietly resign yourself to the inevitable, and in the interval get on with the job you can do best?'

The voice spoke out of a cloud of fatigue. For a minute he was nothing but a dead, dry husk enclosing black weariness and negation. 'Ring them up,' the voice went on. 'Tell them you've got flu. Stay in bed a few days. Then have yourself ordered to the south of France by the doctor . . .'

Suddenly he laughed aloud. From sinister, from insidiously persuasive, that small voice had become absurd. Carried to such a pitch, expressed so ingenuously, baseness was almost comic.

'Unity,' he said in an articulate whisper.

He was committed to them, as a hand is committed to the arm. Committed to his friends, committed even to those who had declared themselves his enemies. There was nothing he could do but would affect them all, enemies and friends — for good, if what he did were good, for evil if it were wrong. Unity, he repeated. Unity.

Unity of mankind, unity of all life, all being even.

Physical unity, first of all. Unity even in diversity, even in separation. Separate patterns, but everywhere alike. Everywhere the same constellations of the ultimate units of energy. The same on the surface of the sun as in the living flesh warmed by the sun's radiance; in the scented cluster of buddleia flowers as in the blue sea and the clouds on the horizon; in the drunken Mexican's pistol as in the dark dried blood on that mangled face among the rocks, the fresh blood spattered scarlet over Helen's naked body, the drops oozing from the raw contusion on Mark's knee.

Identical patterns, and identical patternings of patterns. He held the thought of them in his mind, and, along with it, the thought of life incessantly moving among the patterns, selecting and rejecting for its own purposes. Life building up simpler into more complex patterns — identically complex through vast ranges of animate being.

The sperm enters the egg, the cell divides and divides, to become at last this man, that rat or horse. A cow's pituitary will make frogs breed out of season. Urine of a pregnant woman bring the mouse on heat. Sheep's thyroid transforms the axolotl from a gilled larva into an air-breathing salamander, the cretinous dwarf into a well-grown and intelligent human being. Between one form of animal life and another, patterns are interchangeable. Interchangeable also between animal and plant, plant and the inanimate world. Patterns in seed and leaf and root, patterns built up from simpler patterns existent in the air and soil — these can be assimilated and transformed by insect, reptile, mammal, fish.

The unity of life. Unity demonstrated even in the destruction of one life by another. Life and all being are one. Otherwise no living thing could ever derive sustenance from another or from the unliving substances around it. One even in destruction, one in spite of separation. Each organism is unique. Unique and yet united with all other organisms in the sameness of its ultimate parts; unique above a substratum of physical identity.

And minds — minds also are unique, but unique above a substratum of mental identity. Identity and interchangeableness of love, trust, courage. Fearless affection restores the lunatic to sanity, transforms the hostile savage into a friend, tames the wild animal. The mental pattern of love can be transferred from one mind to another and still retain its virtue, just as the physical pattern of a hormone can be transferred, with all its effectiveness, from one body to another.

And not only love, but hate as well; not only trust, but suspicion; not only kindness, generosity, courage, but also malevolence and greed and fear.

Divisive emotions; but the fact that they can be interchanged, can be transferred from mind to mind and retain all their original passion, is a demonstration of the fundamental unity of minds.

Reality of unity, but equal reality of division — greater reality, indeed, of division. No need to meditate the fact of division. One is constantly aware of it. Constantly aware of being unique and separate; only sometimes, and then most often only intellectually, only as the result of a process of discursive thought, aware of being one with other minds, other lives and all being. Occasionally an intuition of unity, an intuition coming at random, or sought for, step by step, in meditation.

One, one, one, he repeated; but one in division; united and yet separate.

Evil is the accentuation of division; good, whatever makes for unity with other lives and other beings. Pride, hatred, anger — the essentially evil sentiments; and essentially evil because they are all intensifications of the given reality of separateness, because they insist upon division and uniqueness, because they reject and deny other lives and beings. Lust and greed are also insistences upon uniqueness, but insistences which do not entail any negative awareness of the others from whom the unique being is divided. Lust only says, 'I must have pleasure', not 'You must have pain'. Greed in its pure state is merely a demand for my satisfaction, not for your exclusion from satisfaction. They are wrong in emphasizing the separate self; but less wrong than pride or hatred or anger, because their self-emphasis is not accompanied by denial of others.

But why division at all? Why, unavoidably, even in the completest love, and, at the other end of the scale of being, even in that which is or seems to be below right and wrong, why must the evil of separation persist? Separation even of saint from saint, and separation even of mere physical pattern from mere physical pattern. One man cannot eat for another. The best must think, must enjoy and suffer, must touch, see, smell, hear, taste in isolation. The good man is merely a less completely closed universe than the bad; but still closed, even as the atom is closed.

And, of course, if there is to be existence — existence as we know it — being must be organized in closed universes. Minds like ours can only perceive undifferentiated unity as nothing. Unescapable paradox that we should desire that n should be equal to one, but that, in fact, we should always find that one is equal to nought.

Separation, diversity — conditions of our existence. Conditions upon which we possess life and consciousness, know right and wrong and have the power to choose between them, recognize truth, have experience of beauty. But separation is evil. Evil, then, is the condition of life, the condition of being aware, of knowing what is good and beautiful.

That which is demanded, that which men come finally to demand of themselves, is the realization of union between beings who would be nothing if they were not separate; is the actualization of goodness by creatures who, if they were not evil, would not exist. Impossibility — but none the less demanded.

'Born under one law, to another bound.'

He himself, Anthony went on to think, he himself had chosen to regard the whole process as either pointless or a practical joke. Yes, chosen. For it had been an act of the will. If it were all nonsense or a joke, then he was at liberty to read his books and exercise his talents for sarcastic comment; there was no reason why he shouldn't sleep with any presentable woman who was ready to sleep with him. If it weren't nonsense, if there were some significance, then he could no longer live irresponsibly. There were duties towards himself and others and the nature of things. Duties with whose fulfilment the sleeping and the indiscriminate reading and the habit of detached irony would interfere. He had chosen to think it nonsense, and nonsense for more than twenty years the thing had seemed to be — nonsense, in spite of occasional uncomfortable intimations that there might be a point, and that the point was precisely in what he had chosen to regard as the pointlessness, the practical joke. And now at last it was clear, now by some kind of immediate experience he knew that the point was in the paradox, in the fact that unity was the beginning and unity the end, and that in the meantime the condition of life and all existence was separation, which was equivalent to evil. Yes, the point, he insisted, is that one demands of oneself

the achievement of the impossible. The point is that, even with the best will in the world, the separate, evil universe of a person or a physical pattern can never unite itself completely with other lives and beings, or the totality of life and being. Even for the highest goodness the struggle is without end; for never in the nature of present things can the shut become the wholly open; goodness can never free itself completely from evil. It is a test, an education — searching, difficult, drawn out through a lifetime, perhaps through long series of lifetimes. Lifetimes passed in the attempt to open up further and a little further the closed universe that perpetually tends to spring shut the moment that effort is relaxed. Passed in overcoming the separating passions of hate and malice and pride. Passed in making still the self-emphasizing cravings. Passed in constant efforts to realize unity with other lives and other modes of being. To experience it in the act of love and compassion. To experience it on another plane through meditation, in the insight of direct intuition. Unity beyond the turmoil of separations and divisions. Goodness beyond the possibility of evil. But always the fact of separation persists, always evil remains the very condition of life and being. There must be no relaxation of the opening pressure. But even for the best of us, the consummation is still immeasurably remote.

Meanwhile there are love and compassion. Constantly obstructed. But oh, let them be made indefatigable, implacable to surmount all obstacles, the inner sloth, the distaste, the intellectual scorn; and, from without, the other's aversions and suspicions. Affection, compassion — and also, meanwhile, this contemplative approach, this effort to realize the unity of lives and being with the intellect, and at last, perhaps, intuitively in an act of complete understanding. From one argument to another, step by step, towards a consummation where there is no more discourse, only experience, only unmediated knowledge, as of a colour, a perfume, a musical sound. Step by step towards the experience of being no longer wholly separate, but united at the depths with other lives, with the rest of being. United in peace. In peace, he repeated, in peace, in peace. In the depth of every mind, peace. The same peace for all, continuous between mind and mind. At the surface, the separate waves, the whirlpools, the spray; but below them the continuous and undifferentiated expanse of sea, become calmer as it deepens, till at last there is an absolute stillness. Dark peace in the depths. A dark peace that is the same for all who can descend to it. Peace that by a strange paradox is the substance and source of the storm at the surface. Born of peace, the waves yet destroy peace; destroy it, but are necessary; for without the storm on the surface there would be no existence, no knowledge of goodness, no effort to allay the leaping frenzy of evil, no rediscovery of the underlying calm, no realization that the substance of the frenzy is the same as the substance of peace.

Frenzy of evil and separation. In peace there is unity. Unity with other lives. Unity with all being. For beneath all being, beneath the countless identical but separate patterns, beneath the attractions and repulsions, lies peace. The same peace as underlies the frenzy of the mind. Dark peace, immeasurably deep. Peace from pride and hatred and anger, peace from cravings and aversions, peace from all the separating frenzies. Peace through liberation, for peace is achieved freedom. Freedom and at the same time truth. The truth of unity actually experienced. Peace in the depths, under the storm, far down below the leaping of the waves, the frantically flying spray. Peace in this profound subaqueous night, peace in this silence, this still emptiness where there is no more time, where there are no more images, no more words. Nothing but the experience of peace; peace as a dark void beyond all personal life, and yet itself a form of life more intense, for all its diffuseness, for all the absence of aim or desire, richer and of finer quality than ordinary life. Peace beyond peace, focused at first, brought together, then opening out in a kind of boundless space. Peace at the tip, as it were, of a narrowing cone of concentration and elimination, a cone with its base in the distractions of the heaving surface of life and its point in the underlying darkness. And in the darkness the tip of one cone meets the tip of another; and, from a single, focal point, peace expands and expands towards a base immeasurably distant and so wide that its circle is the ground and source of all life, all being. Cone reversed from the broken and shifting light of the surface; cone reversed and descending to a point of concentrated darkness; thence, in another cone, expanding and expanding through the darkness towards, yes! some other light, steady, untroubled, as utterly calm as the darkness out of which it emerges. Cone reversed into cone upright. Passage from

wide stormy light to the still focus of darkness; and thence, beyond the focus, through widening darkness into another light. From storm to calm and on through yet profounder and intenser peace to the final consummation, the ultimate light that is the source and substance of all things; source of the darkness, the void, the submarine night of living calm; source finally of the waves and the frenzy of the spray — forgotten now. For now there is only the darkness expanding and deepening, deepening into light; there is only this final peace, this consciousness of being no more separate, this illumination . . .

The clock struck seven. Slowly and cautiously he allowed himself to lapse out of the light, back through the darkness into the broken gleams and shadows of everyday existence. He rose at last and went to the kitchen to prepare himself some food. There was not much time; the meeting was at eight, and it would take him a good half-hour to reach the hall. He put a couple of eggs to boil, and sat down meanwhile to bread and cheese. Dispassionately, and with a serene lucidity, he thought of what was in store for him. Whatever it might be, he knew now that all would be well.

After Many a Summer

In 1937, Huxley migrated to California with his wife, Maria and their son, Matthew, where he would remain until his death in November 1963. It was not long after the author moved that he became friends with the president of the liberal arts college, Remsen Bird. Huxley frequently visited the school and it was the major inspiration behind his next novel's fictional Tarzana College. *After Many a Summer* was first published in Britain in 1939 by Chatto & Windus and in the USA under the title *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* by Harper & Row. The author also based some of his characters on real-life acquaintances, including unflattering depictions of the newspaper baron and politician, William Randolph Hearst and his long-term partner, the actress, Marion Davies. The novel was adapted for a 1948 NBC radio production, starring Paul Henreid and a 1967 UK television production, directed by Douglas Camfield and starring Stubby Kaye.

After Many a Summer concerns a group of characters associated with the unscrupulous, millionaire businessman, Jo Stoyte. The cast of characters all adhere to different philosophies of the best way to live, as Huxley makes clear that he shares a similar view to the professor, William Propter. The title of the novel is taken from Alfred, Lord Tennyson's famous 1859 poem *Tithonus*. It retells the Greek myth of the suffering of Tithonus after he has been granted immortality, but not eternal youth. He continues to age while his companion, Eos, the goddess of the dawn, never ages. In time Tithonus begs to be allowed to escape from his life and die. The novel shares a similar theme to the poem as Huxley explores Stoyte's refusal to accept the inevitability of death or the purpose of life as more than just the prolonging of it.

The first edition

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Actress Marion Davies

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
And after many a summer dies the swan.
TENNYSON

Part One

Chapter One

IT HAD ALL been arranged by telegram; Jeremy Pordage was to look out for a coloured chauffeur in a grey uniform with a carnation in his button-hole; and the coloured chauffeur was to look out for a middle-aged Englishman carrying the Poetical Works of Wordsworth. In spite of the crowds at the station, they found one another without difficulty.

‘Mr. Stoyte’s chauffeur?’

‘Mr. Pordage, sah?’

Jeremy nodded and, his Wordsworth in one hand, his umbrella in the other, half extended his arms in the gesture of a self-deprecatory mannequin exhibiting, with a full and humorous consciousness of their defects, a deplorable figure accentuated by the most ridiculous clothes. ‘A poor thing,’ he seemed to be implying, ‘but myself.’ A defensive and, so to say, prophylactic disparagement had become a habit with him. He resorted to it on every sort of occasion. Suddenly a new idea came into his head. Anxiously he began to wonder whether, in this democratic Far West of theirs, one shook hands with the chauffeur — particularly if he happened to be a blackamoor, just to demonstrate that one wasn’t a pukka sahib even if one’s country did happen to be bearing the White Man’s burden. In the end he decided to do nothing. Or, to be more accurate, the decision was forced upon him — as usual, he said to himself, deriving a curious wry pleasure from the recognition of his own shortcomings. While he was hesitating what to do, the chauffeur took off his cap and, slightly over-acting the part of an old-world negro retainer, bowed, smiled toothily and said, ‘Welcome to Los Angeles, Mr. Pordage, sah!’ Then, changing the tone of his chanting drawl from the dramatic to the confidential, ‘I should have knowed you by your voice, Mr. Pordage,’ he went on, ‘even without the book.’

Jeremy laughed a little uncomfortably. A week in America had made him self-conscious about that voice of his. A product of Trinity College, Cambridge, ten years before the War, it was a small, fluty voice, suggestive of evensong in an English cathedral. At home, when he used it, nobody paid any particular attention. He had never had to make jokes about it, as he had done, in self-protection, about his appearance for example, or his age. Here, in America, things were different. He had only to order a cup of coffee or ask the way to the lavatory (which anyhow wasn’t called the lavatory in this disconcerting country) for people to stare at him with an amused and attentive curiosity, as though he were a freak on show in an amusement park. It had not been at all agreeable.

‘Where’s my porter?’ he said fussily in order to change the subject.

A few minutes later they were on their way. Cradled in the back seat of the car, out of range, he hoped, of the chauffeur’s conversation, Jeremy Pordage abandoned himself to the pleasure of merely looking. Southern California rolled past the windows; all he had to do was to keep his eyes open.

The first thing to present itself was a slum of Africans and Filipinos, Japanese and Mexicans. And what permutations and combinations of black, yellow and brown! What complex bastardies! And the girls — how beautiful in their artificial silk! ‘And negro ladies in white muslin gowns.’ His favourite line in *The Prelude*. He smiled to himself. And meanwhile the slum had given place to the tall buildings of a business district.

The population took on a more Caucasian tinge. At every corner there was a drug-store. The newspaper boys were selling headlines about Franco’s drive on Barcelona. Most of the girls, as they walked along, seemed to be absorbed in silent prayer; but he supposed, on second thoughts, it was only gum that they were thus incessantly ruminating. Gum, not God. Then suddenly the car plunged into a tunnel and emerged into another world, a vast, untidy, suburban world of filling-stations and

billboards, of low houses in gardens, of vacant lots and waste-paper, of occasional shops and office buildings and churches — Primitive Methodist churches built, surprisingly enough, in the style of the Cartuja at Granada, Catholic churches like Canterbury Cathedral, synagogues disguised as Hagia Sophia, Christian Science churches with pillars and pediments, like banks. It was a winter day and early in the morning; but the sun shone brilliantly, the sky was without a cloud. The car was travelling westwards, and the sunshine, slanting from behind them as they advanced, lit up each building, each sky-sign and billboard, as though with a spot-light, as though on purpose to show the new arrival all the sights.

EATS. COCKTAILS. OPEN NITES.

JUMBO MALTS.

DO THINGS, GO PLACES WITH CONSOL SUPER GAS!

AT BEVERLY PANTHEON FINE FUNERALS ARE NOT EXPENSIVE.

The car sped onwards, and here in the middle of a vacant lot was a restaurant in the form of a seated bulldog, the entrance between the front paws, the eyes illuminated.

‘Zoomorph,’ Jeremy Pordage murmured to himself, and again, ‘zoomorph.’ He had the scholar’s taste for words. The bulldog shot back into the past.

ASTROLOGY, NUMEROLOGY, PSYCHIC READINGS.

DRIVE IN FOR NUTBERGERS — whatever they were. He resolved at the earliest opportunity to have one. A nutberger and a jumbo malt.

STOP HERE FOR CONSOL SUPER GAS.

Surprisingly, the chauffeur stopped. ‘Ten gallons of Super-Super,’ he ordered; then, turning back to Jeremy, ‘This is our company,’ he added. ‘Mr. Stoyte, he’s the president.’ He pointed to a billboard across the street. CASH LOANS IN FIFTEEN MINUTES, Jeremy read; CONSULT COMMUNITY SERVICE FINANCE CORPORATION. ‘That’s another of ours,’ said the chauffeur proudly.

They drove on. The face of a beautiful young woman, distorted, like a Magdalene’s, with grief, stared out of a giant billboard. BROKEN ROMANCE, proclaimed the caption. SCIENCE PROVES THAT 73 PER CENT. OF ALL ADULTS HAVE HALITOSIS.

IN TIME OF SORROW LET BEVERLY PANTHEON BE YOUR FRIEND.

FACIALS, PERMANENTS, MANICURES.

BETTY’S BEAUTY SHOPPE.

Next door to the beauty shoppe was a Western Union office. That cable to his mother ... Heavens, he had almost forgotten! Jeremy leaned forward and, in the apologetic tone he always used when speaking to servants, asked the chauffeur to stop for a moment. The car came to a halt. With a preoccupied expression on his mild, rabbit-like face, Jeremy got out and hurried across the pavement, into the office.

‘Mrs. Pordage, The Araucarias, Woking, England,’ he wrote, smiling a little as he did so. The exquisite absurdity of that address was a standing source of amusement. ‘The Araucarias, Woking.’ His mother, when she bought the house, had wanted to change the name, as being too ingenuously middle-class, too much like a joke by Hilaire Belloc. ‘But that’s the beauty of it,’ he had protested. ‘That’s the charm.’ And he had tried to make her see how utterly right it would be for them to live at such an address. The deliciously comic incongruity between the name of the house and the nature of its occupants! And what a beautiful, topsy-turvy appositeness in the fact that Oscar Wilde’s old friend, the witty and cultured Mrs. Pordage, should write her sparkling letters from The Araucarias, and that from these same Araucarias, these Araucarias, mark you, at Woking, should come the works of mingled scholarship and curiously rarefied wit for which her son had gained his reputation. Mrs. Pordage had almost instantly seen what he was driving at. No need, thank goodness, to labour your points where she was concerned. You could talk entirely in hints and anacoluthons; she could be relied on to understand. The Araucarias had remained The Araucarias.

Having written the address, Jeremy paused, pensively frowned and initiated the familiar gesture of biting his pencil — only to find, disconcertingly, that this particular pencil was tipped with brass and fastened to a chain. ‘Mrs. Pordage, The Araucarias, Woking, England,’ he read out aloud, in the hope that the worlds would inspire him to compose the right, the perfect message — the message his

mother expected of him, at once tender and witty, charged with a genuine devotion ironically worded, acknowledging her maternal domination, but at the same time making fun of it, so that the old lady could salve her conscience by pretending that her son was entirely free, and herself the least tyrannical of mothers. It wasn't easy — particularly with this pencil on a chain. After several abortive essays he decided, though it was definitely unsatisfactory, on: 'Climate being subtropical shall break vow re underclothes stop Wish you were here my sake not yours as you would scarcely appreciate this unfinished Bournemouth indefinitely magnified stop.'

'Unfinished what?' questioned the young woman on the further side of the counter.

'B-o-u-r-n-e-m-o-u-t-h,' Jeremy spelled out. He smiled; behind the bi-focal lenses of his spectacles his blue eyes twinkled, and, with a gesture of which he was quite unconscious, but which he always, automatically, made when he was about to utter one of his little jokes, he stroked the smooth bald spot on the top of his head. 'You know,' he said, in a particularly fluty tone, 'the bourne to which no traveller goes, if he can possibly help it.'

The girl looked at him blankly; then, inferring from his expression that something funny had been said, and remembering that courteous Service was Western Union's slogan, gave the bright smile for which the poor old chump was evidently asking, and went on reading: 'Hope you have fun at Grasse stop Tendresses Jeremy.'

It was an expensive message; but luckily, he reflected, as he took out his pocket-book, luckily Mr. Stoyte was grossly overpaying him. Three months' work, six thousand dollars. So damn the expense.

He returned to the car and they drove on. Mile after mile they went, and the suburban houses, the gas-stations, the vacant lots, the churches, the shops went along with them, interminably. To right and left, between palms, or pepper trees, or acacias, the streets of the enormous residential quarter receded to the vanishing point.

CLASSY EATS. MILE HIGH CONES.

JESUS SAVES.

HAMBURGERS.

Yet once more the traffic lights turned red. A paperboy came to the window. 'Franco claims gains in Catalonia.' Jeremy read, and turned away. The frightfulness of the world had reached a point at which it had become for him merely boring. From the halted car in front of them, two elderly ladies, both with permanently waved white hair and both wearing crimson trousers, descended, each carrying a Yorkshire terrier. The dogs were set down at the foot of the traffic signal. Before the animals could make up their minds to use the convenience, the lights had changed. The negro shifted into first, and the car swerved forward, into the future. Jeremy was thinking of his mother. Disquietingly enough, she too had a Yorkshire terrier.

FINE LIQUORS.

TURKEY SANDWICHES.

GO TO CHURCH AND FEEL BETTER ALL THE WEEK.

WHAT IS GOOD FOR BUSINESS IS GOOD FOR YOU.

Another zoomorph presented itself, this time a real estate agent's office in the form of an Egyptian sphinx.

JESUS IS COMING SOON.

YOU TOO CAN HAVE ABIDING YOUTH WITH THRILL-PHORM BRASSIERES.

BEVERLY PANTHEON, THE CEMETERY THAT IS DIFFERENT.

With the triumphant expression of Puss-in-Boots enumerating the possessions of the Marquis of Carabas, the negro shot a glance over his shoulder at Jeremy, waved his hand towards the billboard and said, 'That's ours too.'

'You mean, the Beverly Pantheon?'

The man nodded. 'Finest cemetery in the world, I guess,' he said: and added, after a moment's pause, 'Maybe you's like to see it. It wouldn't hardly be out of our way.'

‘That would be very nice,’ said Jeremy with upper-class English graciousness. Then, feeling that he ought to express his acceptance rather more warmly and democratically, he cleared his throat and, with a conscious effort to reproduce the local vernacular, added that it would be swell. Pronounced in his Trinity-College-Cambridge voice, the word sounded so unnatural that he began to blush with embarrassment. Fortunately, the chauffeur was too busy with the traffic to notice.

They turned to the right, sped past a Rosicrucian Temple, past two cat-and-dog hospitals, past a School for Drum-Majorettes and two more advertisements of the Beverly Pantheon. As they turned to the left on Sunset Boulevard, Jeremy had a glimpse of a young woman who was doing her shopping in a hydrangea-blue strapless bathing-suit, platinum curls and a black fur jacket. Then she too was whirled back into the past.

The present was a road at the foot of a line of steep hills, a road flanked by small, expensive-looking shops, by restaurants, by night-clubs shuttered against the sunlight, by offices and apartment houses. Then they too had taken their places in the irrevocable. A sign proclaimed that they were crossing the city limits of Beverly Hills. The surroundings changed. The road was flanked by the gardens of a rich residential quarter. Through trees, Jeremy saw the façades of houses, all new, almost all in good taste — elegant and witty pastiches of Lutyens manor houses, of Little Trianons, of Monticellos; lighthearted parodies of Le Corbusier’s solemn machines-for-living-in; fantastic Mexican adaptations of Mexican haciendas and New England farms.

They turned to the right. Enormous palm trees lined the road. In the sunlight, masses of mesembryanthemums blazed with an intense magenta glare. The houses succeeded one another, like the pavilions at some endless international exhibition. Gloucestershire followed Andalusia and gave place in turn to Touraine and Oaxaca, Düsseldorf and Massachusetts.

‘That’s Harold Lloyd’s place,’ said the chauffeur, indicating a kind of Boboli. ‘And that’s Charlie Chaplin’s. And that’s Pickfair.’

The road began to mount, vertiginously. The chauffeur pointed across an intervening gulf of shadow at what seemed a Tibetan lamasery on the opposite hill, ‘That’s where Ginger Rogers lives. Yes, sir,’ he nodded triumphantly, as he twirled the steering-wheel.

Five or six more turns brought the car to the top of the hill. Below and behind lay the plain, with the city like a map extending indefinitely into a pink haze.

Before and to either hand were mountains — ridge after ridge as far as the eye could reach, a desiccated Scotland, empty under the blue desert sky.

The car turned a shoulder of orange rock, and there all at once, on a summit hitherto concealed from view, was a huge sky sign, with the words, BEVERLY PANTHEON, THE PERSONALITY CEMETERY, in six-foot neon tubes and, above it, on the very crest, a full-scale reproduction of the Leaning Tower of Pisa — only this one didn’t lean.

‘See that?’ said the negro impressively. ‘That’s the Tower of Resurrection. Two hundred thousand dollars, that’s what it cost. Yes, sir.’ He spoke with an emphatic solemnity. One was made to feel that the money had all come out of his own pocket.

Chapter Two

AN HOUR LATER, they were on their way again, having seen everything. Everything. The sloping lawns, like a green oasis in the mountain desolation. The groves of trees. The tombstones in the grass. The Pets’ Cemetery, with its marble group after Landseer’s ‘Dignity and Impudence.’ The tiny Church of the Poet — a miniature reproduction of Holy Trinity at Stratford-on-Avon complete with Shakespeare’s tomb and a twenty-four-hour service of organ music played automatically by the Perpetual Wurlitzer and broadcast by concealed loudspeakers all over the cemetery.

Then, leading out of the vestry, the Bride's Apartment (for one was married at the Tiny Church as well as buried from it) — the Bride's Apartment that had just been redecorated, said the chauffeur, in the style of Norma Shearer's boudoir in Marie Antoinette. And, next to the Bride's Apartment, the exquisite black marble Vestibule of Ashes, leading to the Crematorium, where three super-modern oil-burning mortuary furnaces were always under heat and ready for any emergency.

Accompanied wherever they went by the tremolos of the Perpetual Wurlitzer, they had driven next to look at the Tower of Resurrection — from the outside only; for it housed the executive offices of the West Coast Cemeteries Corporation. Then the Children's Corner with its statues of Peter Pan and the Infant Jesus, its groups of alabaster babies playing with bronze rabbits, its lily pool and an apparatus labelled The Fountain of Rainbow Music, from which there spouted simultaneously water, coloured lights and the inescapable strains of the Perpetual Wurlitzer. Then, in rapid succession, the Garden of Quiet, the Tiny Taj Mahal, the Old World Mortuary. And, reserved by the chauffeur to the last, as the final and crowning proof of his employer's glory, the Pantheon itself.

Was it possible, Jeremy asked himself, that such an object existed? It was certainly not probable. The Beverly Pantheon lacked all verisimilitude, was something entirely beyond his powers to invent. The fact that the idea of it was now in his mind proved, therefore, that he must really have seen it. He shut his eyes against the landscape and recalled to his memory the details of that incredible reality. The external architecture, modelled on that of Boecklin's 'Toteninsel.' The circular vestibule. The replica of Rodin's 'Le Baiser,' illuminated by concealed pink floodlights. With its flights of black marble stairs. The seven-story columbarium, the endless galleries, its tiers on tiers of slab-sealed tombs. The bronze and silver urns of the cremated, like athletic trophies. The stained-glass windows after Burne-Jones. The texts inscribed on marble scrolls. The Perpetual Wurlitzer crooning on every floor. The sculpture

...

That was the hardest to believe, Jeremy reflected, behind closed eyelids. Sculpture almost as ubiquitous as the Wurlitzer. Statues wherever you turned your eyes. Hundreds of them, bought wholesale, one would guess, from some monumental masonry concern at Carrara or Pietrasanta. All nudes, all female, all exuberantly nubile. The sort of statues one would expect to see in the reception-room of a high-class brothel in Rio de Janeiro. 'Oh, Death,' demanded a marble scroll at the entrance to every gallery, 'where is thy sting?' Mutely, but eloquently, the statues gave their reassuring reply. Statues of young ladies in nothing but a very tight belt imbedded, with Bernini-like realism, in the Parian flesh. Statues of young ladies crouching; young ladies using both hands to be modest; young ladies stretching, writhing, callipygously stooping to tie their sandals, reclining. Young ladies with doves, with panthers, with other young ladies, with upturned eyes expressive of the soul's awakening. 'I am the Resurrection and the Life,' proclaimed the scrolls. 'The Lord is my shepherd; therefore shall I want nothing.' Nothing, not even Wurlitzer, not even girls in tightly buckled belts. 'Death is swallowed up in victory' — the victory no longer of the spirit but of the body, the well-fed body, for ever youthful, immortally athletic, indefatigably sexy. The Moslem paradise had had copulations six centuries long. In this new Christian heaven, progress, no doubt, would have stepped up the period to a millennium and added the joys of everlasting tennis, eternal golf and swimming.

All at once the car began to descend. Jeremy opened his eyes again, and saw that they had reached the further edge of the range of hills, among which the Pantheon was built.

Below lay a great tawny plain, chequered with patches of green and dotted with white houses. On its further side, fifteen or twenty miles away, ranges of pinkish mountains fretted the horizon.

'What's this?' Jeremy asked.

'The San Fernando Valley,' said the chauffeur. He pointed into the middle distance. 'That's where Groucho Marx has his place,' he said. 'Yes, sir.'

At the bottom of the hill the car turned to the left along a wide road that ran, a ribbon of concrete and suburban buildings, through the plain. The chauffeur put on speed; sign succeeded sign with bewildering rapidity. MALTS CABIN DINE AND DANCE AT THE CHATEAU HONOLULU SPIRITUAL HEALING AND COLONIC IRRIGATION BLOCKLONG HOT DOGS BUY YOUR DREAM HOME

NOW. And behind the signs the mathematically planted rows of apricot and walnut trees flicked past — a succession of glimpsed perspectives preceded and followed every time by fan-like approaches and retirements.

Dark-green and gold, enormous orange orchards manœuvred, each one a mile-square regiment glittering in the sunlight. Far off, the mountains traced their uninterpretable graph of boom and slump.

‘Tarzana,’ said the chauffeur startingly; there, sure enough, was the name suspended, in white letters, across the road. ‘There’s Tarzana College,’ the man went on, pointing to a group of Spanish-Colonial palaces clustering round a Romanesque basilica. ‘Mr. Stoyte, he’s just given them an auditorium.’

They turned to the right along a less important road. The orange groves gave place for a few miles to huge fields of alfalfa and fusty grass, then returned again more luxuriant than ever. Meanwhile the mountains on the northern edge of the valley were approaching and, slanting in from the west, another range was looming up to the left. They drove on. The road took a sudden turn, aiming, it seemed, at the point where the two ranges must come together. All at once, through a gap between two orchards, Jeremy Pordage saw a most surprising sight. About half a mile from the foot of the mountains, like an island off a cliff-bound coast, a rocky hill rose abruptly, in places almost precipitously, from the plain. On the summit of the bluff and as though growing out of it in a kind of efflorescence, stood a castle. But what a castle! The donjon was like a skyscraper, the bastions plunged headlong with the effortless swoop of concrete dams. The thing was Gothic, mediaeval, baronial — doubly baronial, Gothic with a Gothicity raised, so to speak, to a higher power, more mediaeval than any building of the thirteenth century. For this ... this Object, as Jeremy was reduced to calling it, was mediaeval, not out of vulgar historical necessity, like Coucy, say, or Alnwick, but out of pure fun and wantonness, platonically, one might say. It was mediaeval as only a witty and irresponsible modern architect would wish to be mediaeval, as only the most competent modern engineers are technically equipped to be.

Jeremy was startled into speech. ‘What on earth is that?.’ he asked, pointing at the nightmare on the hill-top.

‘Why, that’s Mr. Stoyte’s place,’ said the retainer; and smiling yet once more with the pride of vicarious ownership, he added: ‘It’s a pretty fine home, I guess.’

The orange groves closed in again; leaning back in his seat, Jeremy Pordage began to wonder, rather apprehensively, what he had let himself in for when he accepted Mr. Stoyte’s offer. The pay was princely; the work, which was to catalogue the almost legendary Hauberk Papers, would be delightful. But that cemetery, this ... Object — Jeremy shook his head. He had known, of course, that Mr. Stoyte was rich, collected pictures, owned a show-place in California. But no one had ever led him to expect this. The humorous puritanism of his good taste was shocked; he was appalled at the prospect of meeting the person capable of committing such an enormity. Between that person and oneself, what contact, what community of thought or feeling could possibly exist? Why had he sent for one? For it was obvious that he couldn’t conceivably like one’s books. But had he even read one’s books? Did he have the faintest idea of what one was like? Would he be capable, for example, of understanding why one had insisted on the name of *The Araucarias* remaining unchanged? Would he appreciate one’s point of view about ...?

These anxious questionings were interrupted by the noise of the horn, which the chauffeur was sounding with a loud and offensive insistence. Jeremy looked up. Fifty yards ahead, an ancient Ford was creeping tremulously along the road. It carried lashed insecurely to roof and running-boards and luggage-rack, a squalid cargo of household goods — rolls of bedding, an old iron stove, a crate of pots and pans, a folded tent, a tin bath. As they flashed past, Jeremy had a glimpse of three dull-eyed, anaemic children, of a woman with a piece of sacking wrapped around her shoulders, of a haggard, unshaved man.

‘Transients,’ the chauffeur explained in a tone of contempt.

‘What’s that?’ Jeremy asked.

‘Why, transients,’ the negro repeated, as though the emphasis were an explanation. ‘Guess that lot’s from the dust bowl. Kansas licence plate. Come to pick our navels.’

‘Come to pick your navels?’ Jeremy echoed incredulously.

‘Navel oranges,’ said the chauffeur. ‘It’s the season. Pretty good year for navels, I guess.’

They emerged once more into the open, and there once more was the Object, larger than ever. Jeremy had time to study the details of its construction. A wall with towers encircled the base of the hills, and there was a second line of defence, in the most approved post-Crusades manner, half-way up. On the summit stood the square keep, surrounded by subsidiary buildings.

From the donjon, Jeremy’s eyes travelled down to a group of buildings in the plain, not far from the foot of the hill. Across the façade of the largest of them the words, ‘Stoyte Home for Sick Children,’ were written in gilded letters. Two flags, one the stars and stripes, the other a white banner with the letter S in scarlet, fluttered in the breeze. Then a grove of leafless walnut trees shut out the view once again. Almost at the same moment the chauffeur threw his engine out of gear and put on the brakes. The car came gently to a halt beside a man who was walking at a brisk pace along the grassy verge of the road.

‘Want a ride, Mr. Propter?’ the negro called.

The stranger turned his head, gave the man a smile of recognition and came to the window of the car. He was a large man, broad-shouldered, but rather stooping, with brown hair turning grey and a face, Jeremy thought, like the face of one of those statues which Gothic sculptors carved for a place high up on a West front — a face of sudden prominences and deeply shadowed folds and hollows, emphatically rough-hewn so as to be expressive even at a distance. But this particular face, he went on to notice, was not merely emphatic, not only for the distance; it was a face also for the near point, also for intimacy, a subtle face, in which there were the signs of sensibility and intelligence as well as of power, of a gentle and humorous serenity no less than of energy and strength.

‘Hullo, George,’ the stranger said, addressing the chauffeur; ‘nice of you to stop for me.’

‘Well, I’m sure glad to see you, Mr. Propter,’ said the negro cordially. Then he half-turned in his seat, waved a hand towards Jeremy, and with a florid formality of tone and manner said, ‘I’d like to have you meet Mr. Pordage of England. Mr. Pordage, this is Mr. Propter.’

The two men shook hands, and, after an exchange of courtesies, Mr. Propter got into the car.

‘You’re visiting with Mr. Stoyte?’ he asked, as the chauffeur drove on.

Jeremy shook his head. He was here on business; had come to look at some manuscripts — the Hauberk Papers, to be precise.

Mr. Propter listened attentively, nodded from time to time and, when Jeremy had finished, sat for a moment in silence.

‘Take a decayed Christian,’ he said at last in a meditative tone, ‘and the remains of a Stoic; mix thoroughly with good manners, a bit of money and an old-fashioned education; simmer for several years in a university. Result: a scholar and a gentleman. Well, there were worse types of human being.’ He uttered a little laugh. ‘I might almost claim to have been one myself, once, long ago.’

Jeremy looked at him enquiringly. ‘You’re not William Propter, are you?’ he asked. ‘Not Short Studies in the Counter Reformation, by any chance?’

The other inclined his head.

Jeremy looked at him in amazement and delight. Was it possible? he asked himself. Those Short Studies had been one of his favourite books — a model, he had always thought, of their kind.

‘Well, I’m jiggered!’ he said aloud, using the school-boyish locution deliberately and as though between inverted commas. He had found that, both in writing and in conversation, there were exquisite effects to be obtained by the judicious employment, in a solemn or cultural context, of a phrase of slang, a piece of childish profanity or obscenity. ‘I’ll be damned!’ he exploded again, and his consciousness of the intentional silliness of the words made him stroke his bald head and cough.

There was another moment of silence. Then, instead of talking, as Jeremy had expected, about the Short Studies, Mr. Propter merely shook his head and said, ‘We mostly are.’

‘Mostly are what?’ asked Jeremy.

‘Jiggered,’ Mr. Propter answered. ‘Damned. In the psychological sense of the word,’ he added.

The walnut trees came to an end, and there once more, on the starboard bow, was the Object. Mr. Propter pointed in its direction. 'Poor Jo Stoyte!' he said. 'Think of having that millstone round one's neck. Not to mention, of course, all the other millstones that go with it. What luck we've had, don't you think? — we who've never been given the opportunity of being anything much worse than scholars and gentlemen!' After another little silence, 'Poor Jo,' he went on with a smile, 'he isn't either of them. You'll find him a bit trying. Because of course he'll want to bully you, just because tradition says that your type is superior to his type. Not to mention the fact,' he added, looking into Jeremy's face with an expression of mingled amusement and sympathy, 'that you're probably the sort of person that invites persecution. A bit of a murderee, I'm afraid, as well as a scholar and gentleman.'

Feeling simultaneously annoyed by the man's indiscretion and touched by his friendliness, Jeremy smiled rather nervously and nodded his head.

'Maybe,' Mr. Propter went on, 'maybe it would help you to be less of a murderee towards Jo Stoyte if you knew what gave him the original impulsion to get damned in just that way' — and he pointed again towards the Object. 'We were at school together, Jo and I — only nobody called him Jo in those days. We called him Slob, or Jelly-Belly. Because, you see, poor Jo was the local fat-boy, the only fat-boy in the school during those years.' He paused for a moment; then went on in another tone, 'I've often wondered why people have always made fun of fatness. Perhaps there's something intrinsically wrong with fat. For example, there isn't a single fat saint — except, of course, old Thomas Aquinas; and I cannot see any reason to suppose that he was a real saint, a saint in the popular sense of the word, which happens to be the true sense. If Thomas is a saint, then Vincent de Paul isn't. And if Vincent's a saint, which he obviously is, then Thomas isn't. And perhaps that enormous belly of his had something to do with it. Who knows? But anyhow, that's by the way. We're talking about Jo Stoyte. And poor Jo, as I say, was a fat-boy and, being fat, was fair game for the rest of us. God, how we punished him for his glandular deficiencies! And how disastrously he reacted to that punishment! Over-compensation.... But here I am at home,' he added, looking out of the window as the car slackened speed and came to a halt in front of a small white bungalow set in the midst of a clump of eucalyptus trees. 'We'll go on with this another time. But remember, if poor Jo gets too offensive, think of what he was at school and be sorry for him — and don't be sorry for yourself.' He got out of the car, closed the door behind him and, waving a hand to the chauffeur, walked quickly up the path and entered the little house.

The car rolled on again. At once bewildered and reassured by his encounter with the author of the Short Studies, Jeremy sat, inertly looking out of the window. They were very near the Object now; and suddenly he noticed, for the first time, that the castle hill was surrounded by a moat. Some few hundred yards from the water's edge, the car passed between two pillars, topped by heraldic lions. Its passage, it was evident, interrupted a beam of invisible light directed on a photo-electric cell; for no sooner were they past the lions than a drawbridge began to descend. Five seconds before they reached the moat, it was in place; the car rolled smoothly across and came to a halt in front of the main gateway of the castle's outer walls. The chauffeur got out and, speaking into a telephone-receiver concealed in a convenient loophole, announced his presence. The chromium-plated portcullis rose noiselessly, the double doors of stainless steel swung back. They drove in. The car began to climb. The second line of walls was pierced by another gate, which opened automatically as they approached. Between the inner side of this second wall and the slope of the hill a ferro-concrete bridge had been constructed, large enough to accommodate a tennis-court. In the shadowy space beneath, Jeremy caught sight of something familiar. An instant later he had recognized it as a replica of the grotto of Lourdes.

'Miss Maunciple, she's a Catholic,' remarked the chauffeur, jerking his thumb in the direction of the grotto. 'That's why he had it made for her. We's Presbyterians in our family,' he added.

'And who is Miss Maunciple?'

The chauffeur hesitated for a moment. 'Well, she's a young lady Mr. Stoyte's kind of friendly with,' he explained at last; then changed the subject.

The car climbed on. Beyond the grotto all the hillside was a cactus garden. Then the road swung round to the northern slope of the bluff, and the cactuses gave place to grass and shrubs. On a little

terrace, over-elegant like a fashion-plate from some mythological Vogue for goddesses, a bronze nymph by Giambologna spouted two streams of water from her deliciously polished breasts. A little further on, behind wire netting, a group of baboons squatted among the rocks or paraded the obscenity of their hairless rumps.

Still climbing, the car turned again and finally drew up on a circular concrete platform, carried out on cantilevers over a precipice. Once more the old-fashioned retainer, the chauffeur taking off his cap, did a final impersonation of himself welcoming the young master home to the plantation, then set to work to unload the luggage.

Jeremy Pordage walked to the balustrade and looked over. The ground fell almost sheer for about a hundred feet, then sloped steeply to the inner circle of walls and, below them, to the outer fortifications. Beyond lay the moat, and on the further side of the moat stretched the orange orchards. 'Im dunklen Laub die goldn' Orangen glühen,' he murmured to himself; and then: 'He hangs in shades the orange bright. Like golden lamps in a green night.' Marvell's rendering, he decided, was better than Goethe's. And, meanwhile, the oranges seemed to have become brighter and more significant. For Jeremy, direct, unmediated experience was always hard to take in, always more or less disquieting. Life became safe, things assumed meaning, only when they had been translated into words and confined between the covers of a book. The oranges were beautifully pigeon-holed; but what about the castle? He turned round and, leaning back against the parapet, looked up. The Object impended, insolently enormous. Nobody had dealt poetically with that. Not Childe Roland, not the King of Thule, not Marmion, not the Lady of Shalott, not Sir Leoline. Sir Leoline, he repeated to himself with a connoisseur's appreciation of romantic absurdity, Sir Leoline, the baron rich who had — what? A toothless mastiff bitch. But Mr. Stoyte had baboons and a sacred grotto, Mr. Stoyte had a chromium portcullis and the Hauberk Papers, Mr. Stoyte had a cemetery like an amusement park and a donjon like ...

There was a sudden rumbling sound; the great nail-studded doors of the Early English entrance porch rolled back, and from between them, as though propelled by a hurricane, a small, thick-set man, with a red face and a mass of snow-white hair, darted out on to the terrace and bore down upon Jeremy. His expression, as he advanced, did not change. The face wore that shut, unsmiling mask which American workmen tend to put on in their dealing with strangers — in order to prove, by not making the ingratiating grimaces of courtesy, that theirs is a free country and you're not going to come it over them.

Not having been brought up in a free country, Jeremy had automatically begun to smile as this person, whom he guessed to be his host and employer, came hurrying towards him. Confronted by the unwavering grimness of the other's face, he suddenly became conscious of this smile — conscious that it was out of place, that it must be making him look a fool. Profoundly embarrassed, he tried to readjust his face.

'Mr. Pordage?' said the stranger in a harsh, barking voice. 'Pleased to meet you. My name's Stoyte.' As they shook hands, he peered, still unsmiling, into Jeremy's face. 'You're older than I thought,' he added.

For the second time that morning Jeremy made his mannequin's gesture of apologetic self-exhibition. 'The sere and withered leaf,' he said. 'One's sinking into senility. One's ...'

Mr. Stoyte cut him short. 'What's your age?' he asked in a loud peremptory tone, like that of a police sergeant interrogating a captured thief.

'Fifty-four.'

'Only fifty-four?' Mr. Stoyte shook his head. 'Ought to be full of pep at fifty-four. How's your sex-life?' he added disconcertingly.

Jeremy tried to laugh off his embarrassment. He twinkled; he patted his bald head. 'Mon beau printemps et mon été ont fait le sault par la fenêtre,' he quoted.

'What's that?' said Mr. Stoyte, frowning. 'No use talking foreign languages to me. I never had any education.' He broke into sudden braying of laughter. 'I'm head of an oil company here,' he said. 'Got two thousand filling-stations in California alone. And not one man in any of those filling-stations that

isn't a college graduate!' He brayed again, triumphantly. 'Go and talk foreign languages to them.' He was silent for a moment; then, pursuing an unexplicit association of ideas, 'My agent in London,' he went on, 'the man who picks up things for me there — he gave me your name. Told me you were the right man for those — what do you call them? You know, those papers I bought this summer. Roebuck? Hobuck?'

'Hauberk,' said Jeremy, and with a gloomy satisfaction noted that he had been quite right. The man had never read one's books, never even heard of one's existence. Still, one had to remember that he had been called Jelly-Belly when he was young.

'Hauberk,' Mr. Stoyte repeated with a contemptuous impatience. 'Anyhow, he said you were the man.' Then, without pause or transition, 'What was it you were saying, about your sex-life, when you started that foreign stuff on me?'

Jeremy laughed uncomfortably. 'One was implying that it was normal for one's age.'

'What do you know about what's normal at your age?' said Mr. Stoyte. 'Go and talk to Dr. Obispo about it. It won't cost you anything. Obispo's on salary. He's the house physician.' Abruptly changing the subject, 'Would you like to see the castle?' he asked. 'I'll take you round.'

'Oh, that's very kind of you,' said Jeremy effusively. And, for the sake of making a little polite conversation, he added: 'I've already seen your burial-ground.'

'Seen my burial-ground?' Mr. Stoyte repeated in a tone of suspicion: suspicion turned suddenly to anger. 'What the hell do you mean?' he shouted.

Quailing before his fury, Jeremy stammered something about the Beverly Pantheon and that he had understood from the chauffeur that Mr. Stoyte had a financial interest in the company.

'I see,' said the other, somewhat mollified, but still frowning. 'I thought you meant ...' Stoyte broke off in the middle of the sentence, leaving the bewildered Jeremy to guess what he had thought. 'Come on,' he barked; and, bursting into movement, he hurried towards the entrance to the house.

Chapter Three

THERE WAS SILENCE in Ward Sixteen of the Stoyte Home for Sick Children; silence and the luminous twilight of drawn venetian blinds. It was the mid-morning rest period. Three of the five small convalescents were asleep. A fourth lay staring at the ceiling, pensively picking his nose. The fifth, a little girl, was whispering to a doll as curly and Aryan as herself. Seated by one of the windows, a young nurse was absorbed in the latest issue of True Confessions.

'His heart gave a lurch,' she read. 'With a strangled cry he pressed me closer. For months we'd been fighting against just this; but the magnet of our passion was too strong for us. The clamorous pressure of his lips had struck an answering spark within my melting body.'

"Germaine," he whispered. "Don't make me wait. Won't you be good to me now, darling?"

'He was so gentle, but so ruthless too — as a girl in love wants a man to be ruthless. I felt myself swept away by the rising tide of ...'

There was a noise outside in the corridor. The door of the ward flew open, as though before the blast of a hurricane, and someone came rushing into the room.

The nurse looked up with a start of surprise which the completeness of her absorption in 'The Price of a Thrill' rendered positively agonizing. Her almost immediate reaction to the shock was one of anger.

'What's the idea?' she began indignantly; then she recognized the intruder and her expression changed. 'Why, Mr. Stoyte!'

Disturbed by the noise, the young nose-picker dropped his eyes from the ceiling, the little girl turned away from her doll.

'Uncle Jo!' they shouted simultaneously. 'Uncle Jo!'

Starting out of sleep, the others took up the cry.

‘Uncle Jo! Uncle Jo!’

Mr. Stoyte was touched by the warmth of his reception. The face which Jeremy had found so disquietingly grim relaxed into a smile. In mock protest he covered his ears with his hands. ‘You’ll make me deaf,’ he cried. Then, in an aside to the nurse, ‘Poor kids!’ he murmured. ‘Makes me feel I’d kind of like to cry.’ His voice became husky with sentiment. ‘And when one thinks how sick they’ve been ...’ He shook his head, leaving the sentence unfinished; then, in another tone, ‘By the way,’ he added, waving a large square hand in the direction of Jeremy Pordage, who had followed him into the ward and was standing near the door, wearing an expression of bewildered embarrassment, ‘this is Mr.... Mr.... Hell! I’ve forgotten your name.’

‘Pordage,’ said Jeremy, and reminded himself that Mr. Stoyte’s name had once been Slob.

‘Pordage, that’s it. Ask him about history and literature,’ he added derisively to the nurse. ‘He knows it all.’

Jeremy was modestly protesting that his period was only from the invention of Ossian to the death of Keats, when Mr. Stoyte turned back to the children and in a voice that drowned the other’s faintly fluted disclaimers, shouted: ‘Guess what Uncle Jo’s brought you!’

They guessed. Candies, bubble gum, balloons, guineapigs. Mr. Stoyte continued triumphantly to shake his head. Finally, when the children had exhausted their power of imagination, he dipped into the pocket of his old tweed jacket and produced, first a whistle, then a mouth-organ, then a small musical box, then a trumpet, then a wooden rattle, then an automatic pistol. This, however, he hastily put back.

‘Now play,’ he said, when he had distributed the instruments. ‘All together. One, two, three.’ And, beating time with both arms, he began to sing, ‘Way down upon the Swanee River.’

At this latest in a long series of shocks and surprises, Jeremy’s mild face took on an expression of intenser bewilderment.

What a morning! The arrival at dawn. The negro retainer. The interminable suburb. The Beverly Pantheon. The Object among the orange trees, and his meeting with William Propter and this really dreadful Stoyte. Then, inside the castle, the Rubens and the great El Greco in the hall, the Vermeer in the elevator, the Rembrandt etchings along the corridors, the Winter-halter in the butler’s pantry.

Then Miss Maunciple’s Louis XV boudoir, with the Watteau and the two Lancrets and the fully equipped soda-fountain in a rococo embrasure, and Miss Maunciple herself, in an orange kimono, drinking a raspberry and peppermint ice-cream soda at her own counter. He had been introduced, had refused the offer of a sundae and been hurried on again, always at top speed, always as though on the wings of a tornado, to see the other sights of the castle. The Rumpus Room, for example, with frescoes of elephants by Sert. The library, with its woodwork by Grinling Gibbons, but with no books, because Mr. Stoyte had not yet brought himself to buy any. The small dining-room, with its Fra Angelico and its furniture from Brighton Pavilion. The large dining-room, modelled on the interior of the mosque at Fatehpur Sikri. The ballroom, with its mirrors and coffered ceiling. The thirteenth-century stained-glass in the eleventh-floor W.C. The morning-room, with Boucher’s picture of ‘La Petite Morphil’ bottom upwards on a pink satin sofa. The chapel, imported in fragments from Goa, with the walnut confessional used by St. François de Sales at Annecy. The functional billiard-room. The indoor swimming-pool. The Second Empire bar, with its nudes by Ingres. The two gymnasiums. The Christian Science Reading Room, dedicated to the memory of the late Mrs. Stoyte. The dentist’s office. The Turkish bath. Then down, with Vermeer, into the bowels of the hill, to look at the cellar in which the HauberK Papers had been stored. Down again yet deeper, to the safe-deposit vaults, the power-house, the air-conditioning plant, the well and pumping-station. Then up once more to ground level and the kitchens, where the Chinese chef had shown Mr. Stoyte the newly arrived consignment of turtles from the Caribbean. Up again to the fourteenth, to the bedroom which Jeremy was to occupy during his stay. Then up another six stories to the business office, where Mr. Stoyte gave orders to his secretary, dictated a couple of letters and had a long telephone conversation with his brokers in Amsterdam. And when that was finished, it had been time to go to the hospital.

Meanwhile, in Ward Sixteen, a group of nurses had collected and were watching Uncle Jo, his white hair flying like Stokowski's, frantically spurring his orchestra to yet louder crescendos of cacophony.

'He's like a great big kid himself,' said one of them in a tone of almost tender amusement.

Another, evidently with literary leanings, declared that it was like something in Dickens. 'Don't you think so?' she insisted to Jeremy.

He smiled nervously and nodded a vague and noncommittal assent.

More practical, a third wished she had her Kodak with her. 'Candid Camera portrait of the President of Consol Oil, California Land and Minerals Corporation. Bank of the Pacific, West Coast Cemeteries, etc., etc....' She reeled off the names of Mr. Stoyte's chief companies, mock-heroically, indeed, but with admiring gusto, as a convinced legitimist with a sense of humour might enumerate the titles of a grandee of Spain. 'The papers would pay you good money for a snap like that,' she insisted. And to prove that what she was saying was true, she went on to explain that she had a boy friend who worked with an advertising firm, so that he ought to know, and only the week before he had told her that ...

Mr. Stoyte's knobbed face, as he left the hospital, was still illuminated with benevolence and happiness.

'Makes you feel kind of good, playing with those poor kids,' he kept repeating to Jeremy.

A wide flight of steps led down from the hospital entrance to the roadway. At the foot of these steps Mr. Stoyte's blue Cadillac was waiting. Behind it stood another, smaller car which had not been there when they arrived. A look of suspicion clouded Mr. Stoyte's beaming face as he caught sight of it. Kidnappers, blackmailers — one never knew. His hand went to the pocket of his coat. 'Who's there?' he shouted in a tone of such loud fury that Jeremy thought for a moment that the man must have suddenly gone mad.

Moon-like, a large, snub-featured face appeared at the car window, smiling round the chewed butt of a cigar.

'Oh, it's you, Clancy,' said Mr. Stoyte. 'Why didn't they tell me you were here?' he went on. His face had flushed darkly; he was frowning and a muscle in his cheek had begun to twitch. 'I don't like having strange cars around. Do you hear, Peters?' he almost screamed at his chauffeur — not because it was the man's business, of course; simply because he happened to be there, available. 'Do you hear, I say?' Then, suddenly, he remembered what Dr. Obispo had said to him that time he had lost his temper with the fellow. 'Do you really want to shorten your life, Mr. Stoyte?' The doctor's tone had been one of cool amusement; he had smiled with an expression of politely sarcastic indulgence. 'Are you absolutely bent on having a stroke? A second stroke, remember; and you won't get off so lightly next time. Well, if so, then go on behaving as you're doing now. Go on.' With an enormous effort of will, Mr. Stoyte swallowed his anger. 'God is love,' he said to himself. 'There is no death.' The late Prudence McGladdery Stoyte had been a Christian Scientist. 'God is love,' he said again, and reflected that if people would only stop being so exasperating he would never have to lose his temper. 'God is love.' It was all their fault.

Clancy, meanwhile, had left his car and, grotesquely pot-bellied over spindly legs, was coming up the steps, mysteriously smiling and winking as he approached.

'What is it?' Mr. Stoyte enquired, and wished to God the man wouldn't make those faces. 'Oh, by the way,' he added, 'this is Mr.... Mr....'

'Pordage,' said Jeremy.

Clancy was pleased to meet him. The hand he gave to Jeremy was disagreeably sweaty.

'I got some news for you,' said Clancy in a hoarse conspiratorial whisper; and, speaking behind his hand, so that his words and the smell of cigar should be for Mr. Stoyte alone, 'You remember Tittelbaum?' he added.

'That chap in the City Engineer's Department?'

Clancy nodded. 'One of the boys,' he affirmed enigmatically and again winked.

'Well, what about him?' asked Mr. Stoyte; and in spite of God's being love, there was a note in his voice of renascent exasperation.

Clancy shot a glance at Jeremy Pordage; then, with the elaborate by-play of Guy Fawkes talking to Catesby on the stage of a provincial theatre, he took Mr. Stoyte by the arm and led him a few feet away, up the steps. 'Do you know what Tittelbaum told me to-day?' he asked rhetorically.

'How the devil should I know?' (But no, God is love. There is no death.)

Undeterred by the signs of Mr. Stoyte's irritation, Clancy went on with his performance. 'He told me what they've decided about ...' he lowered his voice still further, 'about the San Felipe Valley.'

'Well, what have they decided?' Once more Mr. Stoyte was at the limits of his patience.

Before answering, Clancy removed the cigar-butt from his mouth, threw it away, produced another cigar out of his waistcoat pocket, tore off the cellophane wrapping and stuck it, unlighted, in the place occupied by the old one.

'They've decided,' he said very slowly, so as to give each word its full dramatic effect, 'they've decided to pipe the water into it.'

Mr. Stoyte's expression of exasperation gave place at last to one of interest. 'Enough to irrigate the whole valley?' he asked.

'Enough to irrigate the whole valley,' Clancy repeated with solemnity.

Mr. Stoyte was silent for a moment. 'How much time have we got?' he asked at last.

'Tittelbaum thought the news wouldn't break for another six weeks.'

'Six weeks?' Mr. Stoyte hesitated for a moment; then made his decision. 'All right. Get busy at once,' he said with the peremptory manners of one accustomed to command. 'Go down yourself and take a few of the other boys along with you. Independent purchasers — interested in cattle-raising; want to start a Dude Ranch. Buy all you can. What's the price, by the way?'

'Averages twelve dollars an acre.'

'Twelve,' Mr. Stoyte repeated, and reflected that it would go to a hundred as soon as they started laying the pipe. 'How many acres do you figure you can get?' he asked.

'Maybe thirty thousand.'

Mr. Stoyte's face beamed with satisfaction. 'Good,' he said briskly. 'Very good. No mention of my name, of course,' he added, and then, without pause or transition: 'What's Tittelbaum going to cost?'

Clancy smiled contemptuously. 'Oh, I'll give him four or five hundred bucks.'

'That all?'

The other nodded. 'Tittelbaum's in the bargain basement,' he said. 'Can't afford to ask any fancy prices. He needs the money — needs it awful bad.'

'What for?' asked Mr. Stoyte, who had a professional interest in human nature. 'Gambling? Women?'

Clancy shook his head. 'Doctors,' he explained. 'He's got a kid that's paralysed.'

'Paralysed?' Mr. Stoyte echoed in a tone of genuine sympathy. 'That's too bad.' He hesitated for a moment; then, in a sudden burst of generosity, 'Tell him to send the kid here,' he went on, making a large gesture towards the hospital. 'Best place in the State for infantile paralysis, and it won't cost him anything. Not a red cent.'

'Hell, that's kind of you, Mr. Stoyte,' said Clancy admiringly. 'That's real kind.'

'Oh, it's nothing,' said Mr. Stoyte, as he moved towards his car. 'I'm glad to be able to do it. Remember what it says in the Bible about children. You know,' he added, 'I get a real kick out of being with those poor kids in there. Makes you feel kind of warm inside.' He patted the barrel of his chest. 'Tell Tittelbaum to send in an application for the kid. Send it to me personally. I'll see that it goes through at once.' He climbed into the car and shut the door after him; then, catching sight of Jeremy, opened it again without a word. Mumbling apologetically, Jeremy scrambled in. Mr. Stoyte slammed the door once more, lowered the glass and looked out. 'So long,' he said. 'And don't lose any time about that San Felipe business. Make a good job of it, Clancy, and I'll let you have ten per cent of all the acreage over twenty thousand.' He raised the window and signalled to the chauffeur to start. The car swung out of the drive and headed towards the castle. Leaning back in his seat, Mr. Stoyte thought of those poor kids and the money he would make out of the San Felipe business. 'God is love,' he said yet

once more, with momentary conviction and in a whisper that was audible to his companion. 'God is love.' Jeremy felt more uncomfortable than ever.

The drawbridge came down as the blue Cadillac approached, the chromium portcullis went up, the gates of the inner rampart rolled back to let it pass. On the concrete tennis-court the seven children of the Chinese cook were roller-skating. Below, in the sacred grotto, a group of masons were at work. At the sight of them, Mr. Stoyte shouted to the chauffeur to stop.

'They're putting up a tomb for some nuns,' he said to Jeremy as they got out of the car.

'Some nuns?' Jeremy echoed in surprise.

Mr. Stoyte nodded, and explained that his Spanish agents had bought some sculpture and iron-work from the chapel of a convent that had been wrecked by the anarchists at the beginning of the civil war. 'They sent some nuns along too,' he added. 'Embalmed, I guess. Or maybe just sun-dried: I don't know. Anyhow, there they are. Luckily I happened to have something nice to put them in.' He pointed to the monument which the masons were in process of fixing to the south wall of the grotto. On a marble shelf above a large Roman sarcophagus were the statues by some nameless Jacobean stonemason of a gentleman and lady, both in ruffs, kneeling, and behind them, in three rows of three, nine daughters diminishing from adolescence to infancy. 'Hic jacet Carolus Franciscus Beals, Armiger ...' Jeremy began to read.

'Bought it in England, two years ago,' said Mr. Stoyte, interrupting him. Then, turning to the workmen, 'When will you boys be through?' he asked.

'To-morrow noon. Maybe to-night.'

'That's all I wanted to know,' said Mr. Stoyte, and turned away. 'I must have those nuns taken out of storage,' he said, as they walked back to the car.

They drove on. Poised on the almost invisible vibration of its wings, a humming-bird was drinking at the jet that spouted from the left nipple of Giambologna's nymph. From the enclosure of the baboons came the shrill noise of battle and copulation. Mr. Stoyte shut his eyes. 'God is love,' he repeated, trying deliberately to prolong the delightful condition of euphoria into which those poor kids and Clancy's good news had plunged him. 'God is love. There is no death.' He waited to feel that sense of inward warmth, like the after-effect of whisky, which had followed his previous utterance of the words. Instead, as though some immanent fiend were playing a practical joke on him, he found himself thinking of the shrunken leathery corpses of those nuns, and of his own corpse, and of judgment and the flames. Prudence McGladdery Stoyte had been a Christian Scientist; but Joseph Budge Stoyte, his father, had been a Sandemanian; and Letitia Morgan, his maternal grandmother, had lived and died a Plymouth Sister. Over his cot in the attic room of the little framehouse in Nashville, Tennessee, had hung the text, in vivid orange on a black background: 'IT IS A TERRIBLE THING TO FALL INTO THE HANDS OF THE LIVING GOD.' 'God is love,' Mr. Stoyte desperately reaffirmed. 'There is no death.' But for sinners, such as himself, it was only the worm that never died.

'If you're always scared of dying,' Obispo had said, 'you'll surely die. Fear's a poison; and not such a slow poison either.'

Making another enormous effort, Mr. Stoyte suddenly began to whistle. The tune was, 'I'm making hay in the moonlight in my Baby's arms,' but the face which Jeremy Pordage saw and, as though from some horrible and indecent secret, immediately averted his eyes from, was the face of a man in a condemned cell.

'Old sour-puss,' the chauffeur muttered to himself as he watched his employer get out of the car and walk away.

Followed by Jeremy, Mr. Stoyte hurried in silence through the Gothic portal, crossed a pillared Romanesque lobby like the Lady Chapel at Durham, and, his hat still pulled down over his eyes, stepped into the cathedral twilight of the great hall.

A hundred feet overhead, the sound of the two men's footsteps echoed in the vaulting. Like iron ghosts, the suits of armour stood immobile round the walls. Above them, sumptuously dim, the fifteenth-century tapestries opened windows upon a leafy world of phantasy. At one end of the cavernous room,

lit by a hidden searchlight, El Greco's 'Crucifixion of St. Peter' blazed out in the darkness like the beautiful revelation of something incomprehensible and profoundly sinister. At the other, no less brilliantly illuminated, hung a full-length portrait of H el ene Fourment, dressed only in a bearskin cape. Jeremy looked from one to the other — from the ectoplasm of the inverted saint to the unequivocal skin and fat and muscle which Rubens had so loved to see and touch; from unearthly flesh-tints of green-white ochre and carmine, shadowed with transparent black, to the creams and warm pinks, the nacreous blues and greens of Flemish nudity. Two shining symbols, incomparably powerful and expressive — but of what, of what? That, of course, was the question.

Mr. Stoyte paid attention to none of his treasures, but strode across the hall, inwardly cursing his buried wife for having made him think about death by insisting that there wasn't any.

The door of the elevator was in an embrasure between pillars. Mr. Stoyte opened it, and the light came on, revealing a Dutch lady in blue satin sitting at a harpsichord — sitting, Jeremy reflected, at the very heart of an equation, in a world where beauty and logic, painting and analytical geometry, had become one. With what intention? To express, symbolically, what truths about the nature of things? Again, that was the question. Where art was concerned, Jeremy said to himself, that was always the question.

'Shut the door,' Mr. Stoyte ordered; then when it was done, 'We'll have a swim before lunch,' he added, and pressed the topmost of a long row of buttons.

Chapter Four

MORE THAN A dozen families of transients were already at work in the orange grove, as the man from Kansas, with his wife and his three children and his yellow dog, hurried down the line towards the trees which the overseer had assigned to him. They walked in silence, for they had nothing to say to one another and no energy to waste on words.

Only half a day, the man was thinking; only four hours till work would be stopped. They'd be lucky if they made as much as seventy-five cents. Seventy-five cents. Seventy-five cents; and that right front tyre wasn't going to last much longer. If they meant to get up to Fresno and then Salinas, they'd just have to get a better one. But even the rottenest old second-hand tyre cost money. And money was food. And did they eat! he thought with sudden resentment. If he were alone, if he didn't have to drag the kids and Minnie around, then he could rent a little place somewhere. Near the highway, so that he could make a bit extra by selling eggs and fruit and things to the people that rode past in their automobiles, sell a lot cheaper than the markets and still make good money. And then, maybe, he'd be able to buy a cow and a couple of hogs; and then he'd find a girl — one of those fat ones, he liked them rather fat: fat and young with ...

His wife started coughing again; the dream was shattered. Did they eat! More than they were worth. Three kids with no strength in them. And Minnie going sick on you half the time so that you had to do her work as well as yours!

The dog had paused to sniff at a post. With sudden and surprising agility the man from Kansas took two quick steps forward and kicked the animal squarely in the ribs. 'You goddam dog!' he shouted. 'Get out of the way!' It ran off, yelping. The man from Kansas turned his head in the hope of catching in his children's faces an expression of disapproval or commiseration. But the children had learnt better than to give him an excuse for going on from the dog to themselves. Under the tousled hair, the three pale, small faces were entirely blank and vacant. Disappointed, the man turned away, grumbling indistinctly that he'd belt the hell out of them if they weren't careful. The mother did not even turn her head. She was feeling too sick and tired to do anything but walk straight on. Silence settled down again over the party.

Then, suddenly, the youngest of the three children let out a shrill cry. 'Look there!' She pointed. In front of them was the castle. From the summit of its highest tower rose a spidery metal structure, carrying a succession of platforms to a height of twenty or thirty feet above the parapet. On the highest of these platforms, black against the shining sky, stood a tiny human figure. As they looked, the figure spread its arms and plunged head foremost out of sight behind the battlements. The children's shrill outcry of astonishment gave the man from Kansas the pretext which, a moment before, they had denied him. He turned on them furiously. 'Stop that yellin',' he yelled; then rushed at them, hitting out — a slap on the side of the head for each of them. With an enormous effort, the woman lifted herself from the abyss of fatigue into which she had fallen; she halted, she turned, she cried out protestingly, she caught her husband's arm. He pushed her away, so violently that she almost fell.

'You're as bad as the kids,' he shouted at her. 'Just layin' around and eatin'. Not worth a damn. I tell you, I'm just sick and tired of the whole lot of you. Sick and tired,' he repeated. 'So you keep your mouth shut, see!' He turned away and, feeling a good deal better for his outburst, walked briskly on, at a rate which he knew his wife would find exhausting, between the rows of loaded orange trees.

From that swimming-pool at the top of the donjon the view was prodigious. Floating on the translucent water, one had only to turn one's head to see, between the battlement, successive vistas of plain and mountain, of green and tawny and violet and faint blue. One floated, one looked, and one thought, that is, if one were Jeremy Pordage, of that tower in Epipsychidion, that tower with its chambers

Looking towards the golden Eastern air
And level with the living winds.

Not so, however, if one were Miss Virginia Maunciple. Virginia neither floated, nor looked, nor thought of Epipsychidion, but took another sip of whisky and soda, climbed to the highest platform of the diving-tower, spread her arms, plunged, glided under water and, coming up immediately beneath the unsuspecting Pordage, caught him by the belt of his bathing-pants and pulled him under.

'You asked for it,' she said, as he came up again, gasping and spluttering, to the surface, 'lying there without moving, like a silly old Buddha.' She smiled at him with an entirely good-natured contempt.

These people that Uncle Jo kept bringing to the castle. An Englishman with a monocle to look at the armour; a man with a stammer to clean the pictures; a man who couldn't speak anything but German to look at some silly old pots and plates; and to-day this other ridiculous Englishman with a face like a rabbit's and a voice like Songs without Words on the saxophone.

Jeremy Pordage blinked the water out of his eyes and, dimly, since he was presbyopic and without his spectacles, saw the young laughing face very close to his own, the body foreshortened and wavering uncertainly through the water. It was not often that he found himself in such proximity to such a being. He swallowed his annoyance and smiled at her.

Miss Maunciple stretched out a hand and patted the bald patch at the top of Jeremy's head. 'Boy,' she said, 'does it shine. Talk of billiard-balls. I know what I shall call you: Ivory. Good-bye, Ivory.' She turned, swam to the ladder, climbed out, walked to the table on which the bottles and glasses were standing, drank the rest of her whisky and soda, then went and sat down on the edge of the couch on which, in black spectacles and bathing-drawers, Mr. Stoyte was taking his sun-bath.

'Well, Uncle Jo,' she said in a tone of affectionate playfulness, 'feeling kind of good?'

'Feeling fine, Baby,' he answered. It was true; the sun had melted away his dismal forebodings; he was living again in the present, that delightful present in which one brought happiness to sick children; in which there were Tittelbaums prepared, for five hundred bucks, to give one information worth at the very least a million; in which the sky was blue and the sunshine a caressing warmth upon the stomach; in which, finally, one stirred out of a delicious somnolence to see little Virginia smiling down at one as though she really cared for her old Uncle Jo, and cared for him, what was more, not merely as an old uncle — no, sir; because, when all's said and done, a man is only as old as he feels and acts; and where his Baby was concerned did he feel young? did he act young? Yes, sir. Mr. Stoyte smiled to himself, a smile of triumphant self-satisfaction.

'Well, Baby,' he said aloud, and laid a square, thick-fingered hand on the young woman's bare knee.

Through half-closed eyelids Miss Maunciple gave him a secret and somehow indecent look of understanding and complicity; then uttered a little laugh and stretched her arms. ‘Doesn’t the sun feel good!’ she said; and, closing her lids completely, she lowered her raised arms, clasped her hands behind her neck, and threw back her shoulders. It was a pose that lifted the breasts, that emphasized the inward curve of the loins and the contrary swell of the buttocks — the sort of pose that a new arrival in the seraglio would be taught by the eunuchs to assume at her first interview with the sultan; the very pose, Jeremy recognized, as he had chanced to look her way, of that quite particularly unsuitable statue on the third floor of the Beverly Pantheon.

Through his dark glasses, Mr. Stoyte looked up at her with an expression of possessiveness at once gluttonous and paternal. Virginia was his baby, not only figuratively and colloquially, but also in the literal sense of the word. His sentiments were simultaneously those of the purest father-love and the most violent eroticism.

He looked up at her. By contrast with the shiny white satin of her beach clout and brassière the sunburnt skin seemed more richly brown. The planes of the young body flowed in smooth continuous curves, effortlessly solid, three-dimensional, without accent or abrupt transition. Mr. Stoyte’s regards travelled up to the auburn hair and came down by way of the rounded forehead, of the wide-set eyes, and small, straight, impudent nose, to the mouth. That mouth — it was her most striking feature. For it was to the mouth’s short upper lip that Virginia’s face owed its characteristic expression of childlike innocence — an expression that persisted through all her moods, that was noticeable whatever she might be doing, whether it was telling smutty stories or making conversation with the Bishop, taking tea in Pasadena or getting tight with the boys, enjoying what she called ‘a bit of yum-yum’ or attending Mass. Chronologically, Miss Maunciple was a young woman of twenty-two; but that abbreviated upper lip gave her, in all circumstances, an air of being hardly adolescent, of not having reached the age of consent. For Mr. Stoyte, at sixty, the curiously perverse contrast between childishness and maturity, between the appearance of innocence and the fact of experience, was intoxicatingly attractive. It was not only so far as he was concerned that Virginia was both kinds of baby; she was also both kinds of baby objectively, in herself.

Delicious creature! The hand that had lain inert, hitherto, upon her knee slowly contracted. Between the broad spatulate thumb and the strong fingers, what smoothness, what a sumptuous and substantial resilience!

‘Jinny, he said. ‘My Baby!’

The Baby opened her large blue eyes and dropped her arms to her sides. The tense back relaxed, the lifted breasts moved downwards and forwards like soft living creatures sinking to repose. She smiled at him.

‘What are you pinching me for, Uncle Jo?’

‘I’d like to eat you,’ her Uncle Jo replied in a tone of cannibalistic sentimentality.

‘I’m tough.’

Mr. Stoyte uttered a maudlin chuckle. ‘Little tough kid!’ he said.

The tough kid stooped down and kissed him.

Jeremy Pordage, who had been quietly looking at the panorama and continuing his silent recitation of *Epipsychidion*, happened at this moment to turn once more in the direction of the couch, and was so much embarrassed by what he saw that he began to sink and had to strike out violently with arms and legs to prevent himself from going under. Turning round in the water, he swam to the ladder, climbed out and, without waiting to dry himself, hurried to the elevator.

‘Really!’ he said to himself as he looked at the Vermeer. ‘Really!’

‘I did some business this morning,’ said Mr. Stoyte when the Baby had straightened herself up again.

‘What sort of business?’

‘Good business,’ he answered. ‘Might make a lot of money. Real money,’ he insisted.

‘How much?’

‘Maybe half a million,’ he said cautiously, understating his hopes; ‘maybe a million; maybe even more.’

‘Uncle Jo,’ she said, ‘I think you’re wonderful.’ Her voice had the ring of complete sincerity. She genuinely did think him wonderful. In the world in which she had lived it was axiomatic that a man who could make a million dollars must be wonderful. Parents, friends, teachers, newspapers, radio, advertisements — explicitly or by implication, all were unanimous in proclaiming his wonderfulness. And besides, Virginia was very fond of her Uncle Jo. He had given her a wonderful time, and she was grateful. Besides, she liked to like people if she possibly could; she liked to please them. Pleasing them made her feel good — even when they were elderly, like Uncle Jo, and when some of the ways in which she was called upon to please them didn’t happen to be very appetizing. ‘I think you’re wonderful,’ she repeated.

Her admiration gave him an intense satisfaction. ‘Oh, it’s quite easy,’ he said with hypocritical modesty, angling for more.

Virginia gave it him. ‘Easy, nothing!’ she said firmly. ‘I say you are wonderful. So just keep your mouth shut.’

Enchanted, Mr. Stoyte took another handful of firm flesh and squeezed it affectionately. ‘I’ll give you a present, if the deal goes through,’ he said. ‘What would you like, Baby?’

‘What would I like?’ she repeated. ‘But I don’t want anything.’

Her disinterestedness was not assumed. For it was true; she never did want things this way, in cold blood. At the moment a want occurred, for an ice-cream soda, for example, for a bit of yum-yum, for a mink coat seen in a shop-window — at such moments she did want things, and wanted them badly, couldn’t wait to have them. But as for long-range wants, wants that had to be thought about in advance — no, she never had wanted like that. The best part of Virginia’s life was spent in enjoying the successive instants of present contentment of which it was composed; and if ever circumstances forced her out of this mindless eternity into the world of time, it was a narrow little universe in which she found herself, a world whose furthest boundaries were never more than a week or two away in the future. Even as a show-girl, at eighteen dollars a week, she had found it difficult to bother much about money and security and what would happen if you had an accident and couldn’t show your legs any more. Then Uncle Jo had come along, and everything was there, as though it grew on trees — a swimming-pool tree, a cocktail tree, a Schiaparelli tree. You just had to reach out your hand and there it was, like an apple in the orchard back home in Oregon. So where did presents come in? Why should she want anything? Besides, it was obvious that Uncle Jo got a tremendous kick out of her not wanting things; and to be able to give Uncle Jo a kick always made her feel good. ‘I tell you, Uncle Jo, I don’t want anything.’

‘Don’t you?’ said a strange voice, startlingly close behind them. ‘Well, I do.’

Dark-haired and dapper, glossily Levantine, Dr. Sigmund Obispo stepped briskly up to the side of the couch.

‘To be precise,’ he went on, ‘I want to inject one-point-five cubic centimetres of testosterone into the great man’s gluteus medius. So off you go, my angel,’ he said to Virginia in a tone of derision, but with a smile of unabashed desire. ‘Hop!’ He gave her a familiar little pat on the shoulder, and another, when she got up to make room for him, on the white satin posterior.

Virginia turned round sharply, with the intention of telling him not to be so fresh; then, as her glance travelled from that barrel of hairy flesh which was Mr. Stoyte to the other’s handsome face, so insultingly sarcastic and at the same time so flatteringly concupiscent, she changed her mind and, instead of telling him, loudly, just where he got off, she made a grimace and stuck out her tongue at him. What was begun as a rebuke had ended, before she knew it, as the acquiescence in an impertinence, as an act of complicity with the offender and of disloyalty to Uncle Jo. Poor Uncle Jo! she thought, with a rush of affectionate pity for the old gentleman. For a moment she felt quite ashamed of herself. The trouble, of course, was that Dr. Obispo was so handsome; that he made her laugh; that she liked his admiration; that it was fun to lead him on and see how he’d act. She even enjoyed getting mad at him, when he was rude, which he constantly was.

'I suppose you think you're Douglas Fairbanks Junior,' she said, making an attempt to be scathing; then walked away with as much dignity as her two little strips of white satin would permit her to assume and, leaning against a battlement, looked down at the plain below. Ant-like figures moved among the orange trees. She wondered idly what they were doing; then her mind wandered to other, more interesting and personal matters. To Sig and the fact that she couldn't help feeling rather thrilled when he was around, even when he acted the way he had done just now. Some day, maybe — some day, just to see what it was like and if things got a bit dull out here at the castle ... Poor Uncle Jo! she reflected. But then what could he expect — at his age and at hers? The unexpected thing was that, in all these months, she hadn't yet given him any reason for being jealous — unless, of course, you counted Enid and Mary Lou; which she didn't; because she really wasn't that way at all; and when it did happen, it was nothing more than a kind of little accident; nice, but not a bit important. Whereas with Sig, if it ever happened, the thing would be different; even though it weren't very serious; which it wouldn't be — not like with Walt, for example, or even with little Buster back in Portland. It would be different from the accidents with Enid and Mary Lou, because, with a man, those things generally did matter a good deal, even when you didn't mean them to matter. Which was the only reason for not doing them, outside of their being sins, of course; but somehow that never seemed to count very much when the boy was a real good looker (which one had to admit Sig was, even though it was rather in the style of Adolphe Menjou; but, come to think of it, it was those dark ones with oil on their hair that had always given her the biggest kick!). And when you'd had a couple of drinks, maybe, and you felt you'd like some thrills, why, then it never even occurred to you that it was a sin; and then the one thing led to another, and before you knew what had happened — well, it had happened; and really she just couldn't believe it was as bad as Father O'Reilly said it was; and, anyhow, Our Lady would be a lot more understanding and forgiving than he was; and what about the way Father O'Reilly ate his food, whenever he came to dinner? — like a hog, there wasn't any other word for it; and wasn't gluttony just as bad as the other thing? So who was he to talk like that?

'Well, and how's the patient?' Dr. Obispo enquired in the parody of a bedside manner, as he took Virginia's place on the couch. He was in the highest of spirits. His work in the laboratory was coming along unexpectedly well; that new preparation of bile salts had done wonders for his liver; the rearmament boom had sent his aircraft shares up another three points; and it was obvious that Virginia wasn't going to hold out much longer. 'How's the little invalid this morning?' he went on, enriching his parody with the caricature of an English accent; for he had done a year of post-graduate work at Oxford.

Mr. Stoyte growled inarticulately. There was something about Dr. Obispo's facetiousness that always enraged him. In some not easily definable way it had the quality of a deliberate insult. Mr. Stoyte was always made to feel that Obispo's apparently good-natured banter was in reality the expression of a calculated and malignant contempt. The thought of it made Mr. Stoyte's blood boil. But when his blood boiled, his blood-pressure, he knew, went up, his life was shortened. He could not afford to be as angry with Obispo as he would have liked. And what was more, he couldn't afford to get rid of the man. Obispo was an indispensable evil. 'God is love; there is no death.' But Mr. Stoyte remembered with terror that he had had a stroke, that he was growing old. Obispo had put him on his feet again when he was almost dying, had promised him ten more years of life even if those researches didn't work out as well as he hoped; and if they did work out — then more, much more. Twenty years, thirty, forty. Or it might even be that the loathsome little kike would find some way of proving that Mrs. Eddy was right, after all. Perhaps there really and truly wouldn't be any death — not for Uncle Jo, at any rate. Glorious prospect! Meanwhile ... Mr. Stoyte sighed, resignedly, profoundly. 'We all have our cross to bear,' he said to himself, echoing, across the intervening years, the words his grandmother used to repeat when she made him take castor oil.

Dr. Obispo, meanwhile, had sterilized his needle, filed the top off a glass ampoule, filled his syringe. His movements, as he worked, were characterized by a certain studied exquisiteness, by a florid and self-conscious precision. It was as though the man were simultaneously his own ballet and his own audience

— a sophisticated and highly critical audience, it was true; but then, what a ballet! Nijinsky, Karsavina, Pavlova, Massine — all on a single stage. However terrific the applause it was always merited.

‘Ready,’ he called at last.

Obediently and in silence, like a trained elephant, Mr. Stoyte rolled over on to his stomach.

Chapter Five

JEREMY HAD DRESSED again and was sitting in the subterranean store-room that was to serve as his study. The dry acrid dust of old documents had gone to his head, like a kind of intoxicating snuff. His face was flushed as he prepared his files and sharpened his pencils; his bald head shone with perspiration; behind their bifocal lenses his eyes were bright with excitement.

There! Everything was ready. He turned round in his swivel-chair and sat for a little while quite still, voluptuously savouring his anticipations. Tied up in innumerable brown-paper parcels, the Hauberk Papers awaited their first reader. Twenty-seven crates of still unravished brides of quietness. He smiled to himself at the thought that he was to be their Bluebeard. Thousands of brides of quietness accumulated through centuries by successive generations of indefatigable Hauberks. Hauberk after Hauberk; barony after knighthood; earldom after barony; and then Earl of Gonister after Earl of Gonister down to the last, the eighth. And, after the eighth, nothing but death-duties and an old house and two old spinster ladies, sinking ever deeper into solitude and eccentricity, into poverty and family pride, but finally, poor pets! more deeply into poverty than pride. They had sworn they would never sell; but in the end they had accepted Mr. Stoyte’s offer. The papers had been shipped to California. They would be able, now, to buy themselves a couple of really sumptuous funerals. And that would be the end of the Hauberks. Delicious fragment of English history! Cautionary perhaps, or perhaps, and more probably, merely senseless, merely a tale told by an idiot. A tale of cut-throats and conspirators, of patrons of learning and shady speculators, of bishops and kings’ catamites and minor poets, of admirals and pimps, of saints and heroines and nymphomaniacs, of imbeciles and prime ministers, of art collectors and sadists. And here was all that remained of them, in twenty-seven crates, higgledy-piggledy, never catalogued, never even looked at, utterly virgin. Gloating over his treasure, Jeremy forgot the fatigues of the journey, forgot Los Angeles and the chauffeur, forgot the cemetery and the castle, forgot even Mr. Stoyte. He had the Hauberk Papers, had them all to himself. Like a child dipping blindly into a bran pie for a present which he knows will be exciting, Jeremy picked up one of the brown-paper parcels with which the first crate was filled and cut the string. What rich confusion awaited him within! A book of household accounts for the year 1576 and 1577; a narrative by some Hauberk cadet of Sir Kenelm Digby’s expedition to Scanderoon; eleven letters in Spanish from Miguel de Molinos to that Lady Ann Hauberk who had scandalized her family by turning papist; a collection, in early eighteenth-century handwriting, of sickroom recipes; a copy of Drelincourt On Death; and an odd volume of Andréa de Nerciat’s *Félicia, ou Mes Fredaines*. He had just cut the string of the second bundle and was wondering whose was the lock of pale brown hair preserved between the pages of the Third Earl’s holograph *Reflections on the Late Popish Plot*, when there was a knock at the door. He looked up and saw a small, dark man in a white overall advancing towards him. The stranger smiled, said, ‘Don’t let me disturb you,’ but nevertheless disturbed him. ‘My name’s Obispo,’ he went on, ‘Dr. Sigmund Obispo: Physician in ordinary to His Majesty King Stoyte the First — and let’s hope also the last.’

Evidently delighted by his own joke, he broke into a peal of startlingly loud metallic laughter. Then, with the elegantly fastidious gesture of an aristocrat in a dust-heap, he picked up one of Molinos’s letters and started, slowly, and out loud, to decipher the first line of the flowing seventeenth-century calligraphy that met his eyes. “‘Ame a Dios como es en sí y no como se lo dice y forma su imaginación.’” He looked up at Jeremy with an amused smile. ‘Easier said than done, I should think. Why, you can’t even love a woman as she is in herself; and after all, there is some sort of objective physical basis for

the phenomenon we call a female. A pretty nice basis in some cases. Whereas poor old Dios is only a spirit — in other words, pure imagination. And here's this idiot, whoever he is, telling some other idiot that people mustn't love God as he is in their imagination.' Once again self-consciously the aristocrat, he threw down the letter with a contemptuous flick of the wrist. 'What drivell it all is!' he went on. 'A string of words called religion. Another string of words called philosophy. Half a dozen other strings called political ideals. And all the words either ambiguous or meaningless. And people getting so excited about them they'll murder their neighbours for using a word they don't happen to like. A word that probably doesn't mean as much as a good belch. Just a noise without even the excuse of gas on the stomach. "Ame a Dios come es en sí" he repeated derisively. 'It's about as sensible as saying "hiccough a hiccough como es en hiccough." I don't know how you litterae humaniores boys manage to stand it. Don't you pine for some sense once in a while?'

Jeremy smiled with an expression of nervous apology. 'One doesn't bother too much about the meanings,' he said. Then, anticipating further criticism by disparaging himself and the things he loved most dearly, 'One gets a lot of fun, you know,' he went on, 'just scrabbling about in the dust-heaps.'

Dr. Obispo laughed and patted Jeremy encouragingly on the shoulders. 'Good for you!' he said. 'You're frank. I like that. Most of the Ph.D. boys one meets are such damned Pecksniffs. Trying to pull that high-moral culture stuff on you! You know: wisdom rather than knowledge; Sophocles instead of science. "Funny," I always say to them when they try that on me, "funny that the thing you get your income from should happen to be the thing that's going to save humanity." Whereas you don't try to glorify your little racket. You're honest. You admit you're in the thing merely for the fun of it. Well, that's why I'm in my little racket. For the fun. Though, of course, if you'd given me any of that Sophocles stuff, I'd just have let you have my piece about science and progress, science and happiness, even science and ultimate truth, if you'd been obstinate.' He showed his white teeth in a happy derision of everybody.

His amusement was infectious. Jeremy also smiled. 'I'm glad I wasn't obstinate,' he said in a tone whose fluty demureness implied how much he objected to disquisitions on ultimate truth.

'Mind you,' Dr. Obispo went on, 'I'm not entirely blind to the charms of your racket. I'd draw the line at Sophocles, of course. And I'd be deadily bored with this sort of stuff' — he nodded towards the twenty-seven crates. 'But I must admit,' he concluded handsomely, 'I've had a lot of fun out of old books in my time. Really, a lot of fun.'

Jeremy coughed and caressed his scalp; his eyes twinkled in anticipation of the deliciously dry little joke he was just about to make. But, unfortunately, Dr. Obispo gave him no time. Serenely unaware of Jeremy's preparations he looked at his watch; then rose to his feet. 'I'd like to show you my laboratory,' he said. 'There's plenty of time before lunch.'

'Instead of asking if I'd like to see his bloody laboratory,' Jeremy protested inwardly, as he swallowed his joke; and it had been such a good one! He would have liked, of course, to go on unpacking the Hauberk Papers; but, lacking the courage to say so, he rose obediently and followed Dr. Obispo towards the door.

Longevity, the doctor explained, as they left the room. That was his subject. Had been ever since he left medical school. But, of course, so long as he was in practice he hadn't been able to do any serious work on it. Practice was fatal to serious work, he added parenthetically. How could you do anything sensible, when you had to spend all your time looking after patients? Patients belonged to three classes: those that imagined they were sick, but weren't; those that were sick, but would get well anyhow; those that were sick and would be much better dead. For anybody capable of serious work to waste his time with patients was simply idiotic. And, of course, nothing but economic pressure would ever have driven him to do it. And he might have gone on in that groove for ever. Wasting himself on morons. But then, quite suddenly, his luck had turned. Jo Stoyte had come to consult him. It had been positively providential.

'Most awfully a godsend,' Jeremy murmured, quoting his favourite phrase of Coleridge.

Jo Stoyte, Dr. Obispo repeated, Jo Stoyte on the verge of breaking up completely. Forty pounds overweight and having had a stroke. Not a bad one, luckily; but enough to put the old bastard into a

sweat. Talk of being scared to death! (Dr. Obispo's white teeth flashed again in wolfish good-humour.) In Jo's case it had been a panic. Out of that panic had come Dr. Obispo's liberation from his patients; had come his income, his laboratory for work on the problems of longevity, his excellent assistant; had come, too, the financing of that pharmaceutical work at Berkeley, of those experiments with monkeys in Brazil, of that expedition to study the tortoises on the Galapagos Islands. Everything a research worker could ask for, with old Jo himself thrown in as the perfect guinea-pig — ready to submit to practically anything short of vivisection without anaesthetics, provided it offered some hope of keeping him above ground a few years longer.

Not that he was doing anything spectacular with the old buzzard at the moment. Just keeping his weight down; and taking care of his kidneys; and pepping him up with periodical shots of synthetic sex hormone; and watching out for those arteries. The ordinary, commonsense treatment for a man of Jo Stoyte's age and medical history. Meanwhile, however, he was on the track of something new, something that promised to be important. In a few months, perhaps in a few weeks, he'd be in a position to make a definite pronouncement.

'That's very interesting,' said Jeremy with hypocritical politeness.

They were walking along a narrow corridor, whitewashed and bleakly illuminated by a series of electric bulbs. Through open doors Jeremy had occasional glimpses of vast cellars crammed with totem poles and armour, with stuffed orang-utans and marble groups by Thorwaldsen, with gilded Bodhisattvas and early steam-engines, with lingams and stage-coaches and Peruvian pottery, with crucifixes and mineralogical specimens.

Dr. Obispo, meanwhile, had begun to talk again about longevity. The subject, he insisted, was still in the pre-scientific stage. A lot of observations without any explanatory hypothesis. A mere chaos of facts. And what odd, what essentially eccentric facts! What was it, for example, that made a cicada live as long as a bull? or a canary outlast three generations of sheep? Why should dogs be senile at fourteen and parrots sprightly at a hundred? Why should female humans become sterile in the forties, while female crocodiles continued to lay eggs into their third century? Why in heaven's name should a pike live to two hundred without showing any signs of senility? Whereas poor old Jo Stoyte ...

From a side passage two men suddenly emerged carrying between them on a stretcher a couple of mummified nuns. There was a collision.

'Damned fools!' Dr. Obispo shouted angrily.

'Damned fool yourself!'

'Can't you look where you're going?'

'Keep your face shut!'

Dr. Obispo turned contemptuously away and walked on.

'Who the hell do you think you are?' they called after him.

Jeremy meanwhile had been looking with lively curiosity at the mummies. 'Discalced Carmelites,' he said to nobody in particular; and enjoying the flavour of that curious combination of syllables, he repeated them with a certain emphatic relish. 'Discalced Carmelites.'

'Discalced your ass,' said the foremost of the two men, turning fiercely upon this new antagonist.

Jeremy gave one glance at that red and angry face, then, with ignominious haste, hurried after his guide.

Dr. Obispo halted at last. 'Here we are,' he said, opening a door. A smell of mice and absolute alcohol floated out into the corridor. 'Come on in,' he said cordially.

Jeremy entered. There were the mice all right — cage upon cage of them, in tiers along the wall directly in front of him. To the left, three windows, hewn in the rock, gave on to the tennis-court and a distant panorama of orange trees and mountains. Seated at a table in front of one of these windows, a man was looking through a microscope. He raised his fair, tousled head as they approached, and turned towards them a face of almost childlike candour and openness. 'Hullo, doc,' he said with a charming smile.

‘My assistant,’ Dr. Obispo explained. ‘Peter Boone. Pete, this is Mr. Pordage.’ Pete rose and revealed himself an athletic young giant.

‘Call me Pete,’ he said, when Jeremy had called him Mr. Boone. ‘Everyone calls me Pete.’

Jeremy wondered whether he ought to invite the young man to call him Jeremy — but wondered, as usual, so long that the appropriate moment for doing so passed, irrevocably.

‘Pete’s a bright boy,’ Dr. Obispo began again in a tone that was affectionate in intention, but a little patronizing in fact. ‘Knows his physiology. Good with his hands, too. Best mouse surgeon I ever saw.’ He patted the young man on the shoulder.

Pete smiled — a little uncomfortably, it seemed to Jeremy, as though he found it rather difficult to make the right response to the other’s cordiality.

‘Takes his politics a bit too seriously,’ Dr. Obispo went on. ‘That’s his only defect. I’m trying to cure him of that. Not very successfully so far, I’m afraid. Eh, Pete?’

The young man smiled again, more confidently; this time he knew exactly where he stood and what to do.

‘Not very successfully,’ he repeated. Then, turning to Jeremy, ‘Did you see the Spanish news this morning?’ he asked. The expression on his large, fair, open face changed to one of concern.

Jeremy shook his head.

‘It’s something awful,’ said Pete gloomily. ‘When I think of those poor devils without planes or artillery or ...’

‘Well, don’t think of them,’ Dr. Obispo cheerfully advised. ‘You’ll feel better.’

The young man looked at him, then looked away again without saying anything. After a moment of silence he pulled out his watch. ‘I think I’ll go and have a swim before lunch,’ he said, and walked towards the door.

Dr. Obispo picked up a cage of mice and held it within a few inches of Jeremy’s nose. ‘These are the sex-hormone boys,’ he said with a jocularly that the other found curiously offensive. The animals squeaked as he shook the cage. ‘Lively enough while the effect lasts. The trouble is that the effects are only temporary.’

Not that temporary effects were to be despised, he added, as he replaced the cage. It was always better to feel temporarily good than temporarily bad. That was why he was giving old Jo a course of that testosterone stuff. Not that the old bastard had any great need of it with that Maunciple girl around....

Dr. Obispo suddenly put his hand over his mouth and looked round towards the window. ‘Thank God,’ he said, ‘he’s out of the room. Poor old Pete!’ A derisive smile appeared on his face. ‘Is he in love!’ He tapped his forehead. ‘Thinks she’s like something in the Works of Tennyson. You know, chemically pure. Last month he nearly killed a man for suggesting that she and the old boy ... Well, you know. God knows what he figures the girl is doing here. Telling Uncle Jo about the spiral nebulae, I suppose. Well, if it makes him happy to think that way, I’m not the one that’s going to spoil his fun.’ Dr. Obispo laughed indulgently. ‘But to come back to what I was saying about Uncle Jo....’

Just having that girl around the house was the equivalent of a hormone treatment. But it wouldn’t last. It never did. Brown-Séguard and Voronoff and all the rest of them — they’d been on the wrong track. They’d thought that the decay of sexual power was the cause of senility. Whereas it was only one of the symptoms. Senescence started somewhere else and involved the sex mechanism along with the rest of the body. Hormone treatments were just palliatives and pick-me-ups. Helped you for a time, but didn’t prevent your growing old.

Jeremy stifled a yawn.

For example, Dr. Obispo went on, why should some animals live much longer than human beings and yet show no signs of old age? Somehow, somewhere we had made a biological mistake. Crocodiles had avoided that mistake; so had tortoises. The same was true of certain species of fish.

‘Look at this,’ he said; and, crossing the room, he drew back a rubber curtain, revealing as he did so the glass front of a large aquarium recessed into the wall. Jeremy approached and looked in.

In the green and shadowy translucence, two huge fish hung suspended, their snouts almost touching, motionless except for the occasional ripple of a fin and the rhythmic panting of their gills. A few inches from their staring eyes a rosary of bubbles streamed ceaselessly up towards the light, and all around them the water was spasmodically silver with the dartings of smaller fish. Sunk in their mindless ecstasy, the monsters paid no attention.

Carp, Dr. Obispo explained; carp from the fishponds of a castle in Franconia — he had forgotten the name; but it was somewhere near Bamberg. The family was impoverished; but the fish were heirlooms, unpurchasable. Jo Stoyte had had to spend a lot of money to have these two stolen and smuggled out of the country in a specially constructed automobile with a tank under the back seats. Sixty-pounders they were; over four feet long; and those rings in their tails were dated 1761.

‘The beginning of my period,’ Jeremy murmured in a sudden access of interest. 1761 was the year of Fingal. He smiled to himself; the juxtaposition of carp and Ossian, carp and Napoleon’s favourite poet, carp and the first premonitions of the Celtic Twilight, gave him a peculiar pleasure. What a delightful subject for one of his little essays! Twenty pages of erudition and absurdity — of sacrilege in lavender — of a scholar’s delicately canaille irreverence for the illustrious or unillustrious dead.

But Dr. Obispo would not allow him to think his thoughts in peace. Indefatigably riding his own hobby, he began again. There they were, he said, pointing at the huge fish; nearly two hundred years old; perfectly healthy; no symptoms of senility; no apparent reason why they shouldn’t go on for another three or four centuries. There they were; and there were you. He turned back accusingly towards Jeremy. Here were you; no more than middle-aged, but already bald, already long-sighted and short-winded; already more or less edentate; incapable of prolonged physical exertion; chronically constipated (could you deny it?); your memory already not so good as it was; your digestion capricious; your potency falling off — if it hadn’t, indeed, already disappeared for good.

Jeremy forced himself to smile, and at every fresh item nodded his head in what was meant to look like an amused assent. Inwardly, he was writhing with a mixture of distress at this all too truthful diagnosis and anger against the diagnostician for the ruthlessness of his scientific detachment. Talking with a humorous self-deprecation about one’s own advancing senility was very different from being bluntly told about it by someone who took no interest in you except as an animal that happened to be unlike a fish. Nevertheless, he continued to nod and smile.

Here you were, Dr. Obispo repeated at the end of his diagnosis, and there were the carp. How was it that you didn’t manage your physiological affairs as well as they did? Just where and how and why did you make the mistake that had already robbed you of your teeth and hair and would bring you in a very few years to the grave?

Old Metchnikoff had asked those questions and made a bold attempt to answer. Everything he said happened to be wrong: phagocytosis didn’t occur; intestinal autointoxication wasn’t the sole cause of senility; neuronophags were mythological monsters; drinking sour milk didn’t materially prolong life; whereas the removal of the large gut did materially shorten it. Chuckling, he recalled those operations that were so fashionable just before the War! Old ladies and gentlemen with their colons cut out, and in consequence being forced to evacuate every few minutes, like canaries! All to no purpose, needless to say; because of course the operation that was meant to make them live to a hundred killed them all off within a year or two. Dr. Obispo threw back his glossy head and uttered one of those peals of brazen laughter which were his regular response to any tale of human stupidity resulting in misfortune. Poor old Metchnikoff, he went on, wiping the tears of merriment from his eyes. Consistently wrong. And yet almost certainly not nearly so wrong as people had thought. Wrong, yes, in supposing that it was all a matter of intestinal stasis and autointoxication. But probably right in thinking that the secret was somewhere down there, in the gut. Somewhere in the gut, Dr. Obispo repeated; and, what was more, he believed that he was on its track.

He paused and stood for a moment in silence, drumming with his fingers on the glass of the aquarium. Poised between mud and air, the two obese and aged carps hung in their greenish twilight, serenely unaware of him. Dr. Obispo shook his head at them. The worst experimental animals in the world,

he said in a tone of resentment mingled with a certain gloomy pride. Nobody had a right to talk about technical difficulties who hadn't tried to work with fish. Take the simplest operation; it was a nightmare. Had you ever tried to keep its gills properly wet while it was anaesthetized on the operating-table? Or, alternatively, to do your surgery under water? Had you ever set out to determine a fish's basal metabolism, or take an electro-cardiograph of its heart action, or measure its blood-pressure? Had you ever wanted to analyse its excreta? And, if so, did you know how hard it was even to collect them; Had you ever attempted to study the chemistry of a fish's digestion and assimilation? To determine its blood pressure under different conditions? To measure the speed of its nervous reactions?

No, you had not, said Dr. Obispo contemptuously. And until you had, you had no right to complain about anything.

He drew the curtain on his fish, took Jeremy by the arm and led him back to the mice.

'Look at those,' he said, pointing to a batch of cages on an upper shelf.

Jeremy looked. The mice in question were exactly like all other mice. 'What's wrong with them?' he asked.

Dr. Obispo laughed. 'If those animals were human beings,' he said dramatically, 'they'd all be over a hundred years old.'

And he began to talk, very rapidly and excitedly, about fatty alcohols and the intestinal flora of carp. For the secret was there, the key to the whole problem of senility and longevity. There, between the sterols and the peculiar flora of the carp's intestine.

Those sterols! (Dr. Obispo frowned and shook his head over them.) Always linked up with senility. The most obvious case, of course, was cholesterol. A senile animal might be defined as one with an accumulation of cholesterol in the walls of its arteries. Potassium thiocyanate seemed to dissolve those accumulations. Senile rabbits would show signs of rejuvenation under a treatment with potassium thiocyanate. So would senile humans. But, again, not for very long. Cholesterol in the arteries was evidently only one of the troubles. But then cholesterol was only one of the sterols. They were a closely related group, those fatty alcohols. It didn't take much to transform one into another. But if you'd read old Schneeglock's work and the stuff they'd been publishing at Upsala, you'd know that some of the sterols were definitely poisonous — much more than cholesterol, even in large accumulations. Longbotham had even suggested a connection between fatty alcohols and neoplasms. In other words, cancer might be regarded, in a final analysis, as a symptom of sterol-poisoning. He himself would go even further and say that such sterol-poisoning was responsible for the entire degenerative process of senescence in man and the other mammals. What nobody had done hitherto was to look into the part played by fatty alcohols in the life of such animals as carp. That was the work he had been doing for the last year. His researches had convinced him of two or three things: first, that the fatty alcohols in carp did not accumulate in excessive quantity; second, that they did not undergo transformation into the more poisonous sterols; and third, that both these immunities were due to the peculiar nature of the carp's intestinal flora. What a flora! Dr. Obispo cried enthusiastically. So rich, so wonderfully varied! He had not yet succeeded in isolating the organism responsible for the carp's immunity to old age, nor did he fully understand the nature of the chemical mechanisms involved. Nevertheless, the main fact was certain. In one way or another, in combination or in isolation, these organisms contrived to keep the fish's sterols from turning into poisons. That was why a carp could live a couple of hundred years and show no signs of senility.

Could the intestinal flora of a carp be transferred to the gut of a mammal? And, if transferable, would it achieve the same chemical and biological results? That was what he had been trying, for the past few months, to discover. With no success, to begin with. Recently, however, they had experimented with a new technique — a technique that protected the flora from the process of digestion, gave it time to adapt itself to the unfamiliar conditions. It had taken root. The effect on the mice had been immediate and significant. Senescence had been halted, even reversed. Physiologically, the animals were younger than they had been for at least eighteen months — younger at the equivalent of a hundred than they had been at the equivalent of sixty.

Outside in the corridor an electric bell began to ring. It was lunch-time. The two men left the room and walked towards the elevator. Dr. Obispo went on talking. Mice, he said, were apt to be a bit deceptive. He had now begun to try the thing out on larger animals. If it worked all right on dogs and baboons, it ought to work on Uncle Jo.

Chapter Six

IN THE SMALL dining-room, most of the furnishings came from the Pavilion at Brighton. Four gilded dragons supported the red lacquered table, and two more served as caryatids on either side of a chimney-piece in the same material. It was the Regency's dream of the Gorgeous East. The kind of thing, Jeremy reflected, as he sat down on his scarlet and gold chair, the kind of thing that the word 'Cathay' would have conjured up in Keats's mind, for example, or Shelley's, or Lord Byron's — just as that charming 'Leda' by Etty, over there, next to the Fra Angelico's 'Annunciation,' was an accurate embodiment of their fancies on the subject of pagan mythology; was an authentic illustration (he chuckled inwardly at the thought) to the Odes to Psyche and the Grecian Urn, to Endymion and Prometheus Unbound. An age's habits of thought and feeling and imagination are shared by all who live and work within that age — by all, from the journeyman up to the genius. Regency is always Regency, whether you take your sample from the top of the basket or from the bottom. In 1820, the man who shut his eyes and tried to visualize magic casements opening on the foam of faery seas would see — what? The turrets of Brighton Pavilion. At the thought, Jeremy smiled to himself with pleasure. Etty and Keats, Brighton and Percy Bysshe Shelley — what a delightful subject! Much better than carp and Ossian; better inasmuch as Nash and the Prince Regent were funnier than even the most aged fish. But for conversational purposes and at the luncheon-table, even the best of subjects is worthless if there is nobody to discuss it with. And who was there, Jeremy asked himself, who was there in this room desirous or capable of talking with him on such a theme? Not Mr. Stoyte; not, certainly, Miss Maunciple, nor the two young women who had come over from Hollywood to have lunch with her; not Dr. Obispo, who cared more for mice than books; nor Peter Boone, who probably didn't even know that there were any books to care for. The only person who might conceivably be expected to take an interest in the manifestations of the later-Georgian time spirit was the individual who had been introduced to him as Dr. Herbert Mulge, Ph.D., D.D., Principal of Tarzana College. But at the moment Dr. Mulge was talking in a rich vein of something that sounded almost like pulpit eloquence about the new Auditorium which Mr. Stoyte had just presented to the College and which was shortly to be given its formal opening. Dr. Mulge was a large and handsome man with a voice to match — a voice at once sonorous and suave, unctuous and ringing. The flow of his language was slow, but steady and apparently stanchless. In phrases full of the audible equivalents of Capital Letters, he now went on to assure Mr. Stoyte and anyone else who cared to listen that it would be a Real Inspiration for the boys and girls of Tarzana to come together in the beautiful new building for their Community Activities. For Non-Denominational Worship, for example; for the Enjoyment of the Best in Drama and Music. Yes, what an inspiration! The name of Stoyte would be remembered with love and reverence by successive generations of the College's Alumni and Alumnae, — would be remembered, he might say, for ever; for the Auditorium was a monumentum aere perennius, a Footprint on the Sand of Time — definitely a Footprint. And now, Dr. Mulge continued, between the mouthfuls of creamed chicken, now Tarzana's Crying Need was for a new Art School. Because, after all, Art, as we were now discovering, was one of the most potent of educational forces. Art was the aspect under which, in this twentieth century of ours, the Religious Spirit most clearly manifested itself. Art was the means by which Personalities could best achieve Creative Self-Expression and ...

'Cripes!' Jeremy said to himself; and then: 'Golly!' He smiled ruefully at the thought that he hoped to talk to this imbecile about the relation between Keats and Brighton Pavilion.

Peter Boone found himself separated from Virginia by the blonder of her two young friends from Hollywood, so that he could only look at her past a foreground of rouge and eyelashes, of golden curls and a thick, almost visible perfume of gardenias. To anyone else, this foreground might have seemed a bit distracting; but for Pete it was of no more significance than the equivalent amount of mud. He was interested only in what was beyond the foreground — in that exquisitely abbreviated upper lip, in the little nose that made you want to cry when you looked at it, it was so elegant and impertinent, so ridiculous and angelic; in that long Florentine bob of lustrous auburn hair; in those wide-set, widely opened eyes with their twinkling surface of humour and their dark blue depths of what he was sure was an infinite tenderness, a plumbless feminine wisdom. He loved her so much that, where his heart should have been he could feel only an aching breathlessness, a cavity which she alone could fill.

Meanwhile, she was talking to the blonde Foreground about that new job which the Foreground had landed with the Cosmopolitan-Perlmutter Studio. The picture was called 'Say it with Stockings,' and the Foreground was to play the part of a rich debutante who runs away from home to make a career of her own, becomes a strip-tease dancer in a Western mining-camp and finally marries a cow-puncher, who turns out to be the son of a millionaire.

'Sounds like a swell story,' said Virginia. 'Don't you think so, Pete?'

Pete thought so; he was ready to think almost anything if she wanted him to.

'That reminds me of Spain,' Virginia announced. And while Jeremy, who had been eavesdropping on the conversation, frantically tried to imagine what train of associations had taken her from 'Say it with Stockings' to the civil war — whether it had been Cosmopolitan-Perlmutter, Anti-Semitism, Nazis, Franco; or *débutante*, class war, Moscow, Negrin; or strip-tease, modernity, radicalism, Republicans — while he was vainly speculating thus, Virginia went on to ask the young man to tell them about what he had done in Spain; and when he demurred, insisted — because it was so thrilling, because the Foreground had never heard about it, because, finally, she wanted him to.

Pete obeyed. Only half-articulately, in a vocabulary composed of slang and clichés, and adorned by expletives and grunts — the vocabulary, Jeremy reflected as he listened surreptitiously through the booming of Dr. Mulge's eloquence, the characteristically squalid and poverty-stricken vocabulary to which the fear of being thought unsocially different or undemocratically superior, or unsportingly highbrow, condemns most young Englishmen and Americans — he began to describe his experiences as a volunteer in the International Brigade during the heroic days of 1937. It was a touching narrative. Through the hopelessly inadequate language, Jeremy could divine the young man's enthusiasm for liberty and justice; his courage; his love for his comrades; his nostalgia, even in the neighbourhood of that short upper lip, even in the midst of an absorbing piece of scientific research, for the life of men united in devotion to a cause, made one in the face of hardship and shared danger and impending death.

'Gee,' he kept repeating, 'they were swell guys.'

They were all swell — Knud, who had saved his life one day, up there in Aragon; Anton and Mack and poor little Dino, who had been killed; André, who had lost a leg; Jan, who had a wife and two children; Fritz, who'd had six months in a Nazi concentration camp; and all the others — the finest bunch of boys in the world. And what did he do, but go and get rheumatic fever on them, and then myocarditis — which meant no more active service; no more anything except sitting around. That was why he was here, he explained apologetically. But, gee, it had been good while it lasted! That time, for example, when he and Knud had gone out at night and climbed a precipice in the dark and taken a whole platoon of Moors by surprise and killed half a dozen of them and come back with a machine-gun and three prisoners....

'And what is your opinion of Creative Work, Mr. Pordage?'

Surprised in flagrant inattention, Jeremy started guiltily. 'Creative work?' he mumbled, trying to gain a little time. 'Creative work? Well, of course one's all for it. Definitely,' he insisted.

'I'm glad to hear you say so,' said Dr. Mulge. 'Because that's what I want at Tarzana. Creative work — ever more and more Creative. Shall I tell you what is my highest ambition?' Neither Mr. Stoyte nor Jeremy made any reply. But Dr. Mulge proceeded, nevertheless, to tell them. 'It is to make of Tarzana

the living Centre of the New Civilization that is coming to blossom here in the West.’ He raised a large fleshy hand in solemn asseveration. ‘The Athens of the twentieth century is on the point of emerging here, in the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area. I want Tarzana to be its Parthenon and its Academe, its Stoa and its Temple of the Muses. Religion, Art, Philosophy, Science — I want them all to find their home in Tarzana, to radiate their influence from our campus, to ...’

In the middle of his story about the Moors and the precipice, Pete became aware that only the Foreground was listening to him. Virginia’s attention had wandered, surreptitiously at first, then frankly and avowedly — had wandered to where, on her left, the less blonde of her two friends was having something almost whispered to her by Dr. Obispo.

‘What’s that?’ Virginia asked.

Dr. Obispo leaned towards her and began again. The three heads, the oil-smooth black, the elaborately curly brown, the lustrous auburn, were almost touching. By the expression on their faces Pete could see that the doctor was telling one of his dirty stories. Alleviated for a moment by the smile she had given him when she asked him to tell them about Spain, the anguish in that panting void where his heart ought to have been came back with redoubled intensity. It was a complicated pain, made up of jealousy and a despairing sense of loss and personal unworthiness, of a fear that his angel was being corrupted and another, deeper fear, which his conscious mind refused to formulate, a fear that there wasn’t much further corruption to be done, that the angel was not as angelic as his love had made him assume. The flow of his narrative suddenly dried up. He was silent.

‘Well, what happened then?’ the Foreground enquired with an eagerness and an expression of hero-worshipping admiration that any other young man would have found delightfully flattering.

He shook his head. ‘Oh, nothing much.’

‘But those Moors ...’

‘Hell!’ he said impatiently. ‘What does it matter, anyhow?’

His words were drowned by a violent explosion of laughter that sent the three conspiratorial heads, the black, the brown, the lovely auburn, flying apart from one another. He looked up at Virginia and saw a face distorted with mirth. At what? he asked himself in agony, trying to measure the extent of her corruption; and a kind or telescoped and synthetic memory of all the schoolboy stories, all the jokes and limericks he had ever heard, rushed in upon him.

Was it at that one that she was laughing? Or at that? Or, God, perhaps at that? He hoped and prayed it wasn’t at that; and the more he hoped and prayed, the more insanely sure he became that that was the one it had been.

‘... above all,’ Dr. Mulge was saying, ‘Creative Work in the Arts. Hence the crying need for a new Art School, an Art School worthy of Tarzana, worthy of the highest traditions of ...’

The girls’ shrill laughter exploded with a force of hilarity proportionate to the strength of the surrounding social taboos. Mr. Stoyte turned sharply in the direction from which the noise had come.

‘What’s the joke?’ he asked suspiciously. He wasn’t going to have his Baby listen to smut. He disapproved of smut in mixed company almost as whole-heartedly as his grandmother, the Plymouth Sister, had done. ‘What’s all that noise about?’

It was Dr. Obispo who answered. He’d been telling them a funny story he’d heard over the radio, he explained with that suave politeness that was like a sarcasm. Something delightfully amusing. Perhaps Mr. Stoyte would like to have him repeat it.

Mr. Stoyte grunted ferociously and turned away.

A glance at his host’s scowling face convinced Dr. Mulge that it would be better to postpone discussion of the Art School to another, more propitious occasion. It was disappointing; for it seemed to him that he had been making good progress. But, there! such things would happen. Dr. Mulge was a college president chronically in quest of endowments; he knew all about the rich. Knew, for example, that they were like gorillas, creatures not easily domesticated, deeply suspicious, alternately bored and bad-tempered. You had to approach them with caution, to handle them gently and with a boundless cunning. And even then they might suddenly turn savage on you and show their teeth. Half a lifetime

of experience with bankers and steel-magnates and retired meat-packers had taught Dr. Mulge to take such little setbacks as to-day's with a truly philosophic patience. Brightly, with a smile on his large, imperial-Roman face, he turned to Jeremy. 'And what do you think of our Californian weather, Mr. Pordage?' he asked.

Meanwhile, Virginia had noticed the expression on Pete's face and immediately divined the causes of his misery. Poor Pete! But really, if he thought she had nothing better to do than always be listening to his talk about that silly old war in Spain — or if it wasn't Spain, it was the laboratory; and they did vivisection there, which was just awful; because, after all, when you were hunting, the animals had a chance of getting away, particularly if you were a bad shot, like she was; besides, hunting was full of thrills and you got such a kick from being up there in the mountains in the good air; whereas Pete cut them up underground in that cellar place.... No, if he thought she had nothing better to do than that, he made a big mistake. All the same, he was a nice boy; and talk about being in love! It was nice having people around who felt that way about you; made you feel kind of good. Though it could be rather a nuisance sometimes. Because they got to feel they had some claim on you; they figured they had a right to tell you things and interfere. Pete didn't do that in so many words; but he had a way of looking at you — like a dog would do if it suddenly started criticizing you for taking another cocktail. Saying it with eyes, like Hedy Lamarr — only it wasn't the same thing as Hedy was saying with her eyes; in fact, just the opposite. It was just the opposite now — and what had she done? Got bored with that silly old war and listened in to what Sig was saying to Mary Lou. Well, all she could say was that she wasn't going to have anyone interfering with the way she chose to live her own life. That was her business. Why, he was almost as bad, the way he looked at her, as Uncle Jo, or her mother, or Father O'Reilly. Only, of course, they didn't just look; they said things. Not that he meant badly, of course, poor Pete; he was just a kid, just unsophisticated and, on top of everything, in love the way a kid is — like the high-school boy in Deanna Durbin's last picture. Poor Pete, she thought again. It was tough luck on him; but the fact was she never had been attracted by that big, fair, Cary Grant sort of boy. They just didn't appeal to her; that was all there was to it. She liked him; and she enjoyed his being in love with her. But that was all.

Across the corner of the table she caught his eye, gave him a dazzling smile and invited him, if he had half an hour to spare after lunch, to come and teach her and the girls how to pitch horseshoes.

Chapter Seven

THE MEAL WAS over at last; the party broke up. Dr. Mulge had an appointment in Pasadena to see a rubber-goods manufacturer's widow, who might perhaps give thirty thousand dollars for a new girls' dormitory. Mr. Stoyte drove into Los Angeles for his regular Friday afternoon board meetings and business consultations. Dr. Obispo was going to operate on some rabbits and went down to the laboratory to prepare his instruments. Pete had a batch of scientific journals to look at, but gave himself, meanwhile, a few minutes of happiness in Virginia's company. And for Jeremy, of course, there were the Hauberk Papers. It was with a sense of almost physical relief, a feeling that he was going home to where he belonged, that he returned to his cellar. The afternoon slipped past — how delightfully, how profitably! Within three hours, another batch of letters from Molinos had turned up among the account books and the business correspondence. So had the third and fourth volumes of Félicia. So had an illustrated edition of *Le Portier des Carmes*; and, bound like a prayer-book, so had a copy of that rarest of all works of the Divine Marquis, *Les Cent-Vingt Jours de Sodome*. What a treasure! What unexpected fortune! Or perhaps, Jeremy reflected, not so unexpected if one remembered the history of the Hauberk family. For the date of the books made it likely that they had been the property of the Fifth Earl — the one who had held the title for more than half a century and died at more than ninety, under William IV, completely unregenerate. Given the character of that old gentleman, one had

no reason to feel surprised at the finding of a store of pornography — one had every reason, indeed, to hope for more.

Jeremy's spirits mounted with each new discovery. Always, with him, a sure sign of happiness, he began to hum the tunes that had been popular during his childhood. Molinos evoked 'Tara-rara Boom-de-ay!' Félicia and the Portier des Carmes shared the romantic lilt of 'The Honeysuckle and the Bee.' As for the 'Cent-Vingt Jours,' which he had never previously read or even seen a copy of — the finding of that delighted him so much that when, as a matter of bibliographical routine, he raised the ecclesiastical cover and, expecting the Anglican ritual, found instead the coldly elegant prose of the Marquis de Sade, he broke out into that rhyme from 'The Rose and the Ring,' the rhyme his mother had taught him to repeat when he was only three years old and which had remained with him as the symbol of childlike wonder and delight, as the only completely adequate reaction to any sudden blessing, any providentially happy surprise.

Oh, what fun to have a plum bun!

How I wish it never was done!

And fortunately it wasn't done, wasn't even begun; the book was still unread, the hours of entertainment and instruction still lay before him. Remembering that pang of jealousy he had felt up there, in the swimming-pool, he smiled indulgently. Let Mr. Stoyte have all the girls he wanted; a well-written piece of eighteenth-century pornography was better than any Maunciple. He closed the volume he was holding. The tooled morocco was austere elegant; on the back, the words 'The Book of Common Prayer' were stamped in a gold which the years had hardly tarnished. He put it down with the other curiosa on a corner of the table. When he had finished for the afternoon, he would take the whole collection up to his bedroom.

'Oh, what fun to have a plum bun!' he chanted to himself, as he opened another bundle of papers, and then, 'On a summer's afternoon, where the honeysuckles bloom and all Nature seems at rest.' That Wordsworthian touch about Nature always gave him a special pleasure. The new batch of papers turned out to be a correspondence between the Fifth Earl and a number of prominent Whigs regarding the enclosure, for his benefit, of three thousand acres of common land in Nottinghamshire. Jeremy slipped them into a file, wrote a brief preliminary description of the contents on a card, put the file in a cupboard and the card in its cabinet, and, dipping again into the bran pie, reached down for another bundle. He cut the string. 'You are my honey, honey, honeysuckle, I am the bee.' What would Dr. Freud have thought of that, he wondered? Anonymous pamphlets against deism were a bore; he threw them aside. But here was a copy of Law's Serious Call with manuscript notes by Edward Gibbon; and here were some accounts rendered to the Fifth Earl by Mr. Rogers of Liverpool: accounts of the expenses and profits of three slave-trading expeditions which the Earl had helped finance. The second voyage, it appeared, had been particularly auspicious; less than a fifth of the cargo had perished on the way, and the prices realized at Savannah were gratifyingly high. Mr. Rogers begged to enclose his draft for seventeen thousand two hundred and twenty-four pounds eleven shillings and fourpence. Written from Venice, in Italian, another letter announced to the same Fifth Earl the appearance upon the market of a half-length 'Mary Magdalen' by Titian, at a price which the Italian correspondent described as derisory. Other offers had already been made; but out of respect for the not less learned than illustrious English cognoscente, the vendor would wait until a reply had been received from his lordship. In spite of which, his lordship would be well advised not to delay too long; for otherwise ...

It was five o'clock; the sun was low in the sky. Dressed in white shoes and socks, white shorts, a yachting-cap and a pink silk sweater, Virginia had come to see the feeding of the baboons.

Its engine turned off, her rose-coloured motor-scooter stood parked at the side of the road thirty or forty feet above the cage. In company with Dr. Obispo and Pete, she had gone down to have a closer look at the animals.

Just opposite the point at which they were standing, on a shelf of artificial rock, sat a baboon mother, holding in her arms the withered and disintegrating corpse of the baby she would not abandon even though it had been dead for a fortnight. Every now and then, with an intense, automatic affection, she

would lick the little cadaver. Tufts of greenish fur and even pieces of skin detached themselves under the vigorous action of her tongue. Delicately, with black fingers, she would pick the hairs out of her mouth, then begin again. Above her, at the mouth of a little cave, two young males suddenly got into a fight. The air was filled with screams and barks and the gnashing of teeth. Then one of the two combatants ran away and, in a moment, the other had forgotten all about the fight and was searching for pieces of dandruff on his chest. To the right, on another shelf of rock, a formidable old male, leather-snouted, with the grey bobbed hair of a seventeenth-century Anglican divine, stood guard over his submissive female. It was a vigilant watch; for if she ventured to move without his leave, he turned and bit her; and meanwhile the small black eyes, the staring nostrils at the end of the truncated snout, kept glancing this way and that with an unsleeping suspicion. From the basket he was carrying, Pete threw a potato in his direction, then a carrot and another potato. With a vivid flash of magenta buttocks the old baboon darted down from his perch on the artificial mountain, seized the carrot and, while he was eating it, stuffed one potato into his left cheek, the other into the right; then, still biting at the carrot, advanced toward the wire and looked up for more. The coast was clear. The young male who had been looking for dandruff suddenly saw his opportunity. Chattering with excitement, he bounded down to the shelf on which, too frightened to follow her master, the little female was still squatting. Within ten seconds they had begun to copulate.

Virginia clapped her hands with pleasure. 'Aren't they cute!' she cried. 'Aren't they human!'

Another burst of screaming and barking almost drowned her words.

Pete interrupted his distribution of food to say that it was a long while since he had seen Mr. Propter. Why shouldn't they all go down the hill and pay a call on him.

'From the monkey cage to the Propter paddock,' said Dr. Obispo, 'and from the Propter paddock back to the Stoyte house and the Maunciple kennel. What do you say, angel?'

Virginia was throwing potatoes to the old male — throwing them in such a way as to induce him to turn, to retrace his steps towards the shelf on which he had left his female. Her hope was that, if she got him to go back far enough, he'd see how the girl friend passed the time when he was away. 'Yes, let's go and see old Proppey,' she said, without turning round. She tossed another potato into the enclosure. With a flutter of grey bobbed hair the baboon pounced on it; but instead of looking up and catching Mrs. B. having her romance with the ice-man, the exasperating animal immediately turned round towards the wire, asking for more. 'Stupid old fool!' Virginia shouted, and this time threw the potato straight at him, it caught him on the nose. She laughed and turned towards the others. 'I like old Proppey,' she said. 'He scares me a bit; but I like him.'

'All right then,' said Dr. Obispo, 'let's go and rout out Mr. Pordage while we're about it.'

'Yes, let's go and fetch old Ivory,' Virginia agreed, patting her own auburn curls in reference to Jeremy's baldness. 'He's kind of cute, don't you think?'

Leaving Pete to go on with the feeding of the baboons, they climbed back to the road and up a flight of steps on the further side, leading directly to the rock-cut windows of Jeremy's room. Virginia pushed open the glass door.

'Ivory,' she called, 'we've come to disturb you.'

Jeremy began to murmur something humorously gallant; then broke off in the middle of a sentence. He had suddenly remembered that pile of curious literature on the corner of the table. To get up and put the books into a cupboard would be to invite attention to them; he had no newspaper with which to cover them, no other books to mix them up with. There was nothing to be done. Nothing, except to hope for the best. Fervently he hoped for it; and almost immediately the worst happened. Idly, out of the need to perform some muscular action, however pointless, Virginia picked up a volume of Nerciat, opened it at one of its conscientiously detailed engravings, looked, then with wider eyes looked again and let out a whoop of startled excitement. Dr. Obispo glanced and yelled in turn; then both broke out into enormous laughter.

Jeremy sat in a misery of embarrassment, sickly smiling, while they asked him if that was how he spent his time, if this was the sort of thing he was studying. If only people weren't so wearisome, he was thinking, so deplorably unsubtle!

Virginia turned over the pages until she found another illustration. Once more there was an outcry of delight, astonishment and, this time, incredulity. Was it possible? Could it really be done? She spelled out the caption under the engraving: 'La volupté frappait à toutes les portes'; then petulantly shook her head. It was no good; she couldn't understand it. Those French lessons at High School — just lousy; that was all you could say about them. They hadn't taught her anything except a lot of nonsense about *le crayon de mon oncle* and *savez-vous planter le chou*. She'd always said that studying was mostly a waste of time; this proved it. And why did they have to print this stuff in French anyhow? At the thought that the deficiencies in the educational system of the State of Oregon might for ever prevent her from reading André de Nerciat, the tears came into Virginia's eyes. It was really too bad!

A brilliant idea occurred to Jeremy. Why shouldn't he offer to translate the book for her — viva voce and sentence by sentence, like an interpreter at a Council Meeting of the League of Nations? Yes, why not? The more he thought of it, the better the idea seemed to him to be. His decision was made and he had begun to consider how most felicitously to phrase his offer, when Dr. Obispo quietly took the volume Virginia was holding, picked up the three companion volumes from the table, along with *Le Portier des Carmes* and the *Cent-Vingt Jours de Sodome*, and slipped the entire collection into the side-pocket of his jacket.

'Don't worry,' he said to Virginia. 'I'll translate them for you. And now let's go back to the baboons. Pete'll be wondering what's happened to us. Come on, Mr. Pordage.'

In silence, but boiling inwardly with self-reproach for his own inefficiency and indignation at the doctor's impudence, Jeremy followed them out of the french window and down the steps.

Pete had emptied his basket and was leaning against the wire, intently following with his eyes the movements of the animals within. At their approach he turned towards them. His pleasant young face was bright with excitement.

'Do you know, doc,' he said, 'I believe it's working.'

'What's working?' asked Virginia.

Pete's answering smile was beautiful with happiness. For, oh, how happy he was! Doubly and trebly happy. By the sweetness of her subsequent behaviour, Virginia had more than made up for the pain she had inflicted by turning away to listen to that smutty story. And after all it probably wasn't a smutty story; he had been maligning her, thinking gratuitous evil of her. No, it certainly hadn't been a smutty story — not smutty because, when she turned back to him, her face had looked like the face of that child in the illustrated Bible at home, that child who was gazing so innocently and cutely while Jesus said, 'Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.' And that was not the only reason for his happiness. He was happy, too, because it looked as though those cultures of the carp's intestinal flora were really having an effect on the baboons they had tried them on.

'I believe they're livelier,' he explained. 'And their fur — it's kind of glossier.'

The fact gave him almost as great a satisfaction as did Virginia's presence here in the transfiguring richness of the evening sunlight, as did the memory of her sweetness, the uplifting conviction of her essential innocence. Indeed, in some obscure way, the rejuvenation of the baboons and Virginia's adorableness seemed to him to have a profound connection — a connection not only with one another, but also and at the same time with Loyalist Spain and anti-fascism. Three separate things, and yet one thing ... There was a bit of poetry he had been made to learn at school — how did it go?

I could not love thee, dear, so much,

Loved I not something or other (he could not at the moment remember what) more.

He did not love anything more than Virginia. But the fact that he cared so enormously much for science and justice, for this research and the boys back in Spain, did something to make his love for her more profound and, though it seemed a paradox, more whole-hearted.

'Well, what about moving on?' he suggested at last.

Dr. Obispo looked at his wrist-watch. 'I'd forgotten,' he said. 'I've got some letters I ought to write before dinner. Guess I'll have to see Mr. Propter some other time.'

'That's too bad!' Pete did his best to impart to his tone and expression the cordiality of regret he did not feel. In fact, he was delighted. He admired Dr. Obispo, thought him a remarkable research worker — but not the sort of person a young innocent girl like Virginia ought to associate with. He dreaded for her the influence of so much cynicism and hardboiledness. Besides, so far as his own relations to Virginia were concerned, Dr. Obispo was always in the way. 'That's too bad!' he repeated, and the intensity of his pleasure was such that he fairly ran up the steps leading from the baboon-enclosure to the drive — ran so fast that his heart began palpitating and missing beats. Damn that rheumatic fever!

Dr. Obispo stepped back to allow Virginia to pass and, as he did so, gave a little tap to the pocket containing *Les Cent-Vingt Jours de Sodome* and tipped her a wink. Virginia winked back and followed Pete up the steps.

A few moments later, Dr. Obispo was walking up the drive, the others down. Or, to be more exact, Pete and Jeremy were walking, while Virginia, to whom the idea of using one's legs to get from anywhere to anywhere else was practically unthinkable, sat on her strawberry-and-cream coloured scooter and, with one hand affectionately laid on Pete's shoulder, allowed herself to be carried down by the force of gravity.

The noise of the baboons faded behind them, and at the next turn of the road there was Giambologna's nymph, still indefatigably spouting from her polished breasts. Virginia suddenly interrupted a conversation about Clark Gable to say, in the righteously indignant tone of a vice crusader, 'I just can't figure why Uncle Jo allows that thing to stand there. It's disgusting!'

'Disgusting?' Jeremy echoed in astonishment.

'Disgusting!' she repeated emphatically.

'Do you object to her not having any clothes on?' he asked, remembering, as he did so, those two little satin asymptotes to nudity which she herself had worn up there, in the swimming-pool.

She shook her head impatiently. 'It's the way the water comes out.' She made the grimace of one who had tasted something revolting. 'I think it's horrible.'

'But why?' Jeremy insisted.

'Because it's horrible,' was all the explanation she could give. A child of her age, which was the age, in this context, of bottle-feeding and contraception, she felt herself outraged by this monstrous piece of indelicacy from an earlier time. It was just horrible; that was all that could be said about it. Turning back to Pete, she went on talking about Clark Gable.

Opposite the entrance to the Grotto, Virginia parked her scooter. The masons had finished their work on the tomb and were gone; the place was empty. Virginia straightened her rakishly tilted yachting-cap as a sign of respect; then ran up the steps, paused on the threshold to cross herself and, entering, knelt for a few moments before the image. The others waited silently, in the roadway.

'Our Lady was so wonderful to me when I had sinus trouble last summer,' Virginia explained to Jeremy when she emerged again. 'That's why I got Uncle Jo to make this grotto for her. Wasn't it gorgeous when the Archbishop came for the consecration?' she added, turning to Pete.

Pete nodded affirmatively.

'I haven't even had a cold since She's been here,' Virginia went on, as she took her seat on the scooter. Her face fairly shone with triumph; every victory for the Queen of Heaven was also a personal success for Virginia Maunciple. Then abruptly and without warning, as though she were doing a screen test and had received the order to register fatigue and self-pity, she passed a hand across her forehead, sighed profoundly and, in a tone of utter dejection and discouragement, said, 'All the same, I'm feeling pretty tired this evening. Guess I was in the sun too much right after lunch. Maybe I'd better go and lie down a bit.' And affectionately but very firmly rejecting Pete's offer to go back with her to the castle, she wheeled her scooter round, so that it faced uphill, gave the young man a last, particularly charming, almost amorous smile and look, said, 'Good-bye, Pete darling,' and, opening the throttle of the engine, shot off with gathering momentum and an accelerating roll of explosions up the steep

curving road, out of sight. Five minutes later she was in her boudoir, fixing a chocolate-and-banana split at the soda-fountain. Seated in a gilded armchair upholstered in satin couleur fesse de nymphe, Dr. Obispo was reading aloud and translating as he went along from the first volume of *Les Cent-Vingt Jours*.

Chapter Eight

MS. PROPTER WAS SITTING on a bench under the largest of his eucalyptus trees. To the west the mountains were already a flat silhouette against the evening sky, but in front of him, to the north, the upper slopes were still alive with light and shadow, with rosy gold and depths of indigo. In the foreground, the castle had put on a garment of utterly improbable splendour and romance. Mr. Propter looked at it and at the hills and up through the motionless leaves of the eucalyptus at the pale sky; then closed his eyes and noiselessly repeated Cardinal Bérulle's answer to the question: 'What is man?' It was more than thirty years before, when he was writing his study of the Cardinal, that he had first read those words. They had impressed him even then by the splendour and precision of their eloquence. With the lapse of time and the growth of his experience they had come to seem more than eloquent, had come to take on ever richer connotations, ever profounder significances. 'What is man?' he whispered to himself. 'C'est un néant environné de Dieu, indigent de Dieu, capable de Dieu, et rempli de Dieu, s'il veut.' 'A nothingness surrounded by God, indigent and capable of God, filled with God, if he so desires.' And what is this God of which men are capable? Mr. Propter answered with the definition given by John Tauler in the first paragraph of his *Following of Christ*: 'God is a being withdrawn from creatures, a free power, a pure working.' Man, then, is as nothingness surrounded by, and indigent of, a being withdrawn from creatures, a nothingness capable of free power, filled with a pure working if he so desires. If he so desires, Mr. Propter was distracted into reflecting with a sudden, rather bitter sadness. But how few men ever do desire or, desiring, ever know what to wish for or how to get it! Right knowledge is hardly less rare than the sustained good-will to act on it. Of those few who look for God, most find, through ignorance, only such reflections of their own self-will as the God of battles, the God of the chosen people, the Prayer-Answerer, the Saviour.

Having deviated thus far into negativity, Mr. Propter was led on, through a continuing failure of vigilance, into an even less profitable preoccupation with the concrete and particular miseries of the day. He remembered his interview that morning with Hansen, who was the agent for Jo Stoyte's estates in the valley. Hansen's treatment of the migrants who came to pick the fruit was worse even than the average. He had taken advantage of their number and their desperate need to force down wages. In the groves he managed, young children were being made to work all day in the sun at the rate of two or three cents an hour. And when the day's work was finished, the homes to which they returned were a row of verminous sties in the waste land beside the bed of the river. For these sties, Hansen was charging a rent of ten dollars a month. Ten dollars a month for the privilege of freezing or suffocating; of sleeping in a filthy promiscuity; of being eaten up by bed-bugs and lice; of picking up ophthalmia and perhaps hookworm and amoebic dysentery. And yet Hansen was a very decent, kindly man: one who would be shocked and indignant if he saw you hurting a dog; one who would fly to the protection of a maltreated woman or a crying child. When Mr. Propter drew this fact to his attention, Hansen had flushed darkly with anger.

'That's different,' he had said.

Mr. Propter had tried to find out why it was different.

It was his duty, Hansen had said.

But how could it be his duty to treat children worse than slaves and inoculate them with hookworm?

It was his duty to the estates. He wasn't doing anything for himself.

But why should doing wrong for someone else be different from doing wrong on your own behalf; The results were exactly the same in either case. The victims didn't suffer any less when you were doing what you called your duty than when you were acting in what you imagined might be your own interests.

This time the anger had exploded in violent abuse. It was the anger, Mr. Propter had perceived, of the well-meaning but stupid man who is compelled against his will to ask himself indiscreet questions about what he has been doing as a matter of course. He doesn't want to ask these questions, because he knows that if he does he will be forced either to go on with what he is doing, but with the cynic's awareness that he is doing wrong, or else, if he doesn't want to be a cynic, to change the entire pattern of his life so as to bring his desire to do right into harmony with the real facts as revealed in the course of self-interrogation. To most people any radical change is even more odious than cynicism. The only way between the horns of the dilemma is to persist at all costs in the ignorance which permits one to go on doing wrong in the comforting belief that by doing so one is accomplishing one's duty — one's duty to the company, to the shareholders, to the family, the city, the state, the fatherland, the church. For, of course, poor Hansen's case wasn't in any way unique; on a smaller scale, and therefore with less power to do evil, he was acting like all those civil servants and statesmen and prelates who go through life spreading misery and destruction in the name of their ideals and under orders from their categorical imperatives.

Well, he hadn't got very far with Hansen, Mr. Propter sadly concluded. He'd have to try again with Jo Stoyte. In the past, Jo had always refused to listen, on the ground that the estates were Hansen's business. The alibi was so convenient that it would be hard, he foresaw, to break it down.

From Hansen and Jo Stoyte his thoughts wandered to that newly arrived family of transients from Kansas, to whom he had given one of his cabins. The three undernourished children, with the teeth already rotting in their mouths; the woman, emaciated by God knew what complication of diseases, deep-sunken already in apathy and weakness; the husband, alternately resentful and self-pitying, violent and morose.

He had gone with the man to get some vegetables from the garden plots and a rabbit for the family supper. Sitting there, skinning the rabbit, he had had to listen to outbursts of incoherent complaint and indignation. Complaint and indignation against the wheat market, which had broken each time he had begun to do well. Against the banks he had borrowed money from and been unable to repay. Against the droughts and winds that had reduced his farm to a hundred and sixty acres of dust and wilderness. Against the luck that had always been against him. Against the folks who had treated him so meanly, everywhere, all his life.

Dismally familiar story! With inconsiderable variations, he had heard it a thousand times before. Sometimes they were share-croppers from further south, dispossessed by the owners in a desperate effort to make the farming pay. Sometimes, like this man, they had owned their own place and been dispossessed, not by financiers, but by the forces of nature — forces of nature which they themselves had made destructive by tearing up the grass and planting nothing but wheat. Sometimes they had been hired men, displaced by the tractors. All of them had come to California as to a promised land; and California had already reduced them to a condition of wandering peonage and was fast transforming them into Untouchables. Only a saint, Mr. Propter reflected, only a saint, could be a peon and a pariah with impunity, because only a saint would accept the position gladly and as though he had chosen it of his own free will. Poverty and suffering ennoble only when they are voluntary. By involuntary poverty and suffering men are made worse. It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for an involuntarily poor man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Here, for example, was this poor devil from Kansas. How had he reacted to involuntary poverty and suffering? So far as Mr. Propter could judge, he was compensating himself for his misfortunes by brutality to those weaker than himself. The way he yelled at the children.... It was an all too familiar symptom.

When the rabbit was skinned and gutted, Mr. Propter had interrupted his companion's monologue. 'Do you know which is the stupidest text in the Bible?' he had suddenly asked.

Startled, and evidently a bit shocked, the man from Kansas had shaken his head.

‘It’s this,’ Mr. Propter had said, as he got up and handed him the carcass of the rabbit. “‘They hated me without a cause.’”

Under the eucalyptus tree, Mr. Propter wearily sighed. Pointing out to unfortunate people that, in part at any rate, they were pretty certainly responsible for their own misfortunes; explaining to them that ignorance and stupidity are no less severely punished by the nature of things than deliberate malice — these were never agreeable tasks. Never agreeable, but, so far as he could see, always necessary. For what hope, he asked himself, what faintest glimmer of hope is there for a man who really believes that ‘they hated me without a cause’ and that he had no part in his own disasters? Obviously, no hope whatever. We see, as matter of brute fact, that disasters and hatreds are never without causes; we also see that some at least of those causes are generally under the control of the people who suffer the disasters or are the object of the hatred. In some measure they are directly or indirectly responsible. Directly, by the commission of stupid or malicious acts. Indirectly, by the omission to be as intelligent and compassionate as they might be. And if they make this omission, it is generally because they choose to conform unthinkingly to local standards, and the current way of living. Mr. Propter’s thoughts returned to the poor fellow from Kansas. Self-righteous, no doubt disagreeable to the neighbours, an incompetent farmer; but that wasn’t the whole story. His gravest offence had been to accept the world in which he found himself as normal, rational and right. Like all the others, he had allowed the advertisers to multiply his wants; he had learned to equate happiness with possessions, and prosperity with money to spend in a shop. Like all the others, he had abandoned any idea of subsistence farming to think exclusively in terms of a cash crop; and he had gone on thinking in those terms, even when the crop no longer gave him any cash. Then, like all the others, he had got into debt with the banks. And finally, like all the others, he had learned that what the experts had been saying for a generation was perfectly true: in a semi-arid country it is grass that holds down the soil; tear up the grass, the soil will go. In due course, it had gone.

The man from Kansas was now a peon and a pariah; and the experience was making a worse man of him.

St. Peter Claver was another of the historical personages to whom Mr. Propter had devoted a study. When the slave-ships came into the harbour of Cartagena, Peter Claver was the only white man to venture down into the holds. There, in the unspeakable stench and heat, in the vapours of pus and excrement, he tended the sick, he dressed the ulcers of those whom their manacles had wounded, he held in his arms the men who had given way to despair and spoke to them words of comfort and affection — and in the intervals talked to them about their sins. Their sins! The modern humanitarian would laugh, if he were not shocked. And yet — such was the conclusion to which Mr. Propter had gradually and reluctantly come — and yet St. Peter Claver was probably right. Not completely right, of course; for, acting on wrong knowledge, no man, however well-intentioned, can be more than partially right. But as nearly right, at any rate, as a good man with a counter-Reformation Catholic philosophy could expect to be. Right in insisting that, whatever the circumstances in which he finds himself, a human being always has omissions to make good, commissions whose effects must, if possible, be neutralized. Right in believing that it is well even for the most brutally sinned against to be reminded of their own shortcomings.

Peter Claver’s conception of the world had the defect of being erroneous, but the merit of being simple and dramatic. Given a personal God, dispenser of forgiveness, given heaven and hell and the absolute reality of human personalities, given the meritoriousness of mere good intentions and of unquestioning faith in a set of incorrect opinions, given the one true church, the efficacy of priestly mediation, the magic of sacraments — given all these, it was really quite easy to convince even a newly imported slave of his sinfulness and to explain exactly what he ought to do about it. But if there is no single inspired book, no uniquely holy church, no mediating priesthood nor sacramental magic, if there is no personal God to be placated into forgiving offences, if there are, even in the moral world, only causes and effects and the enormous complexity of inter-relationships — then, clearly the task of telling people what to

do about their shortcomings is much more difficult. For every individual is called upon to display not only unsleeping good-will but also unsleeping intelligence. And this is not all. For, if individuality is not absolute, if personalities are illusory figments of a self-will disastrously blind to the reality of a more-than-personal consciousness, of which it is the limitation and denial, then all of every human being's efforts must be directed, in the last resort, to the actualization of that more-than-personal consciousness. So that even intelligence is not sufficient as an adjunct to good-will; there must also be the recollection which seeks to transform and transcend intelligence. Many are called, but few are chosen — because few even know in what salvation consists. Consider again this man from Kansas.... Mr. Propter sadly shook his head. Everything was against the poor fellow — his fundamentalist orthodoxy, his wounded and inflamed egotism, his nervous irritability, his low intelligence. The first three disadvantages might perhaps be removed. But could anything be done about the fourth? The nature of things is implacable towards weakness. 'From him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.' And what were those words of Spinoza's? 'A man may be excusable and nevertheless be tormented in many ways. A horse is excusable for not being a man; but nevertheless he must needs be a horse, and not a man.' All the same, there must surely be something to be done for people like the man from Kansas — something that didn't entail telling harmful untruths about the nature of things. The untruth, for example, that there is a person up aloft, or the other more modern untruth to the effect that human values are absolute and that God is the nation or the party or the human race as a whole. Surely, Mr. Propter insisted, surely there was something to be done for such people. The man from Kansas had begun by resenting what he had said about the chain of cause and effect, the network of relationships — resenting it as a personal insult. But afterwards, when he saw that he was not being blamed, that no attempt was being made to come it over him, he had begun to take an interest, to see that after all there was something in it. Little by little it might be possible to make him think a bit more realistically, at least about the world of everyday life, the outside world of appearances. And when he had done that, then it mightn't be so overwhelmingly difficult for him to think a bit more realistically about himself — to conceive of that all-important ego of his as a fiction, a kind of nightmare, a frantically agitated nothingness capable, when once its frenzy had been quieted, of being filled with God, with a God conceived and experienced as a more than personal consciousness, as a free power, a pure working, a being withdrawn.... Suddenly, as he thus returned to his starting-point, Mr. Propter became aware of the long, circuitous, unprofitable way he had travelled in order to reach it. He had come to this bench under the eucalyptus tree in order to recollect himself, in order to realize for a moment the existence of that other consciousness behind his private thoughts and feelings, that free, pure power greater than his own. He had come for this; but memories had slipped in while he was off his guard; speculations had started up, cloud upon cloud, like seabirds rising from their nesting-place to darken and eclipse the sun. Bondage is the life of personality, and for bondage the personal self will fight with tireless resourcefulness and the most stubborn cunning. The price of freedom is eternal vigilance; and he had failed to be vigilant. It wasn't a case, he reflected ruefully, of the spirit being willing and the flesh weak. That was altogether the wrong antithesis. The spirit is always willing; but the person, who is a mind as well as a body, is always unwilling — and the person, incidentally, is not weak but extremely strong.

He looked again at the mountains, at the pale sky between the leaves, at the soft russet pinks and purples and greys of the eucalyptus trunks; then shut his eyes once more.

'A nothingness surrounded by God, indigent of God, capable of God and filled with God if man so desires. And what is God? A being withdrawn from creatures, a free power, a pure working.' His vigilance gradually ceased to be an act of the will, a deliberate thrusting back of irrelevant personal thoughts and wishes and feelings. For little by little these thoughts and wishes and feelings had settled like a muddy sediment in a jar of water, and as they settled, his vigilance was free to transform itself into a kind of effortless unattached awareness, at once intense and still, alert and passive — an awareness whose object was the words he had spoken and at the same time that which surrounded the words. But that which surrounded the words was the awareness itself; for this vigilance which was now an effortless awareness — what was it but an aspect, a partial expression, of that impersonal and untroubled consciousness into

which the words had been dropped and through which they were slowly sinking? And as they sank they took a new significance for the awareness that was following them down into the depths of itself — a significance new not in respect to the entities connoted by the words, but rather in the mode of their comprehension, which, from being intellectual in character, had become intuitive and direct, so that the nature of man in his potentiality and of God in actuality were realized by an analogue of sensuous experience, by a kind of unmediated participation.

The busy nothingness of his being experienced itself as transcended in the felt capacity for peace and purity, for the withdrawal from revulsion and desires, for the blissful freedom from personality....

The sound of approaching footsteps made him open his eyes. Peter Boone and that Englishman he had sat with in the car were advancing up the path towards his seat under the eucalyptus trees. Mr. Propter raised his hand in welcome and smiled. He was fond of young Pete. There was native intelligence there and native kindness; there was sensitiveness, generosity, a spontaneous decency of impulse and reaction. Charming and beautiful qualities! The pity was that by themselves, and undirected as they were by a right knowledge of the nature of things, they should be so impotent for good, so inadequate to anything a reasonable man could call salvation. Fine gold, but still in the ore, unsmelted, unworked. Some day, perhaps, the boy would learn to use his gold. He would have to wish to learn first — and wish also to unlearn a lot of the things he now regarded as self-evident and right. It would be hard for him — as hard, but for other reasons, as it would be for that poor fellow from Kansas.

‘Well, Pete,’ he called, ‘come and sit with me here. And you’ve brought Mr. Pordage; that’s good.’ He moved to the middle of the bench so that they could sit, one on either side of him. ‘And did you meet the Ogre?’ he said to Jeremy, pointing in the direction of the castle.

Jeremy made a grimace and nodded. ‘I remembered the name you used to call him at school,’ he said. ‘That made it a little easier.’

‘Poor Jo,’ said Mr. Propter. ‘Fat people are always supposed to be so happy. But who ever enjoyed being laughed at? That jolly manner they sometimes have, and the jokes they make at their own expense — it’s just a case of alibis and prophylactics. They vaccinate themselves with their own ridicule so that they shan’t react too violently to other people’s.’

Jeremy smiled. He knew all about that. ‘It’s a good way out of an unpleasant predicament,’ he said.

Mr. Propter nodded. ‘But unfortunately,’ he said, ‘it didn’t happen to be Jo’s way. Jo was the kind of a fat boy who bluffs it out. The kind that fights. The kind that bullies or patronizes. The kind that boasts and shows off. The kind that buys popularity by treating the girls to ice-creams, even if he has to steal a dime from his grandmother’s purse to do it. The kind that goes on stealing even if he’s found out and gets beaten and believes it when they tell him he’ll go to hell. Poor Jo, he’s been that sort of fat boy all his life.’ He pointed once again in the direction of the castle. ‘That’s his monument to a faulty pituitary. And talking of pituitaries,’ he went on, turning to Pete, ‘how’s the work been going?’

Pete had been thinking gloomily of Virginia — wondering for the hundredth time why she had left them, whether he had done anything to offend her, whether she was really tired or if there might be some other reason. At Mr. Propter’s mention of work he looked up, and his face brightened. ‘It’s going just fine,’ he answered, and, in quick, eager phrases, strangely compounded of slang and technical terms, he told Mr. Propter about the results they had already got with their mice and were beginning to get, so it seemed, with the baboons and the dogs.

‘And if you succeed,’ Mr. Propter asked, ‘what happens to your dogs?’

‘Why, their life’s prolonged,’ Pete answered triumphantly.

‘Yes, yes, I know that,’ said the older man. ‘What I meant to ask was something different. A dog’s a wolf that hasn’t fully developed. It’s more like the foetus of a wolf than an adult wolf; isn’t that so.’

Pete nodded.

‘In other words,’ Mr. Propter went on, ‘it’s a mild, tractable animal because it has never grown up into savagery. Isn’t that supposed to be one of the mechanisms of evolutionary development?’

Pete nodded again. ‘There’s a kind of glandular equilibrium,’ he explained. ‘Then a mutation comes along and knocks it sideways. You get a new equilibrium that happens to retard the development

rate. You grow up; but you do it so slowly that you're dead before you've stopped being like your great-great-grandfather's foetus.'

'Exactly,' said Mr. Propter. 'So what happens if you prolong the life of an animal that has evolved that way?'

Pete laughed and shrugged his shoulders. 'Guess we'll have to wait and see,' he said.

'It would be a bit disquieting,' said Mr. Propter, 'if your dogs grew back in the process of growing up.'

Pete laughed again delightedly. 'Think of the dowagers being chased by their own Pekingese,' he said.

Mr. Propter looked at him curiously and was silent for a moment, as though waiting to see whether Pete would make any further comment. The comment did not come. 'I'm glad you feel so happy about it,' he said. Then, turning to Jeremy, "'It is not," if I remember rightly, Mr. Pordage,' he went on, "'it is not growing like a tree in bulk doth make men better be.'"

"Or standing long an oak, three hundred years,'" said Jeremy, smiling with the pleasure which an apt quotation always gave him.

'What shall we all be doing at three hundred?' Mr. Propter speculated. 'Do you suppose you'd still be a scholar and a gentleman;'

Jeremy coughed and patted his bald head. 'One will certainly have stopped being a gentleman,' he answered. 'One's begun to stop even now, thank heaven.'

'But the scholar will stay the course?'

'There's a lot of books in the British Museum.'

'And you, Pete?' said Mr. Propter. 'Do you suppose you'll still be doing scientific research?'

'Why not? What's to prevent you from going on with it for ever?' the young man answered emphatically.

'For ever?' Mr. Propter repeated. 'You don't think you'd get a bit bored? One experiment after another. Or one book after another,' he added in an aside to Jeremy. 'In general, one damned thing after another. You don't think that would prey on your mind a bit?'

'I don't see why,' said Pete.

'Time doesn't bother you, then?'

Pete shook his head. 'Why should it?'

'Why shouldn't it?' said Mr. Propter, smiling at him with an amused affection. 'Time's a pretty bothersome thing, you know.'

'Not if you aren't scared of dying or growing old.'

'Yes, it is,' Mr. Propter insisted; 'even if you're not scared. It's nightmarish in itself — intrinsically nightmarish, if you see what I mean.'

'Intrinsically?' Pete looked at him perplexed. 'I don't get it,' he said. 'Intrinsically nightmarish ...?'

'Nightmarish in the present tense, of course,' Jeremy put in. 'But if one takes it in the fossil state — in the form of the Hauberk Papers, for example ...' He left the sentence unfinished.

'Oh, pleasant enough,' said Mr. Propter, agreeing with his implied conclusion. 'But, after all, history isn't the real thing. Past time is only evil at a distance; and, of course, the study of past time is itself a process in time. Cataloguing bits of fossil evil can never be more than an Ersatz for the experience of eternity.' He glanced curiously at Pete, wondering how the boy would respond to what he was saying. Plunging like this into the heart of the matter, beginning at the very core and centre of the mystery — it was risky; there was a danger of evoking nothing but bewilderment, or alternatively nothing but angry derision. Pete's, he could see, was more nearly the first reaction; but it was a bewilderment that seemed to be tempered by interest; he looked as though he wanted to find out what it was all about.

Meanwhile, Jeremy had begun to feel that this conversation was taking a most undesirable turn. 'What precisely are we supposed to be talking about?' he asked acidulously. 'The New Jerusalem?'

Mr. Propter smiled at him good-humouredly. 'It's all right,' he said. 'I won't say a word about harps or wings.'

‘Well, that’s something,’ said Jeremy.

‘I never could get much satisfaction out of meaningless discourse,’ Mr. Propter continued. ‘I like the words I use to bear some relation to facts. That’s why I’m interested in eternity — psychological eternity. Because it’s a fact.’

‘For you, perhaps,’ said Jeremy in a tone which implied that more civilized people didn’t suffer from these hallucinations.

‘For anyone who chooses to fulfil the conditions under which it can be experienced.’

‘And why should anyone choose to fulfil them?’

‘Why should anyone choose to go to Athens to see the Parthenon? Because it’s worth the bother. And the same is true of eternity. The experience of timeless good is worth all the trouble it involved.’

‘“Timeless good,”’ Jeremy repeated with distaste. ‘I don’t know what the words mean.’

‘Why should you?’ said Mr. Propter. ‘One doesn’t know the full meaning of the word “Parthenon” until one has actually seen the thing.’

‘Yes, but at least I’ve seen photographs of the Parthenon; I’ve read descriptions.’

‘You’ve read descriptions of timeless good,’ Mr. Propter answered. ‘Dozens of them. In all the literatures of philosophy and religion. You’ve read them; but you’ve never bought your ticket for Athens.’

In a resentful silence, Jeremy had to admit to himself that this was true. The fact that it was true made him disapprove of the conversation even more profoundly than he had done before.

‘As for time,’ Mr. Propter was saying to Pete, ‘what is it, in this particular context, but the medium in which evil propagates itself, the element in which evil lives and outside of which it dies?. Indeed, it’s more than the element of evil, more than merely its medium. If you carry your analysis far enough, you’ll find that time is evil. One of the aspects of its essential substance.’

Jeremy listened with growing discomfort and a mounting irritation. His fears had been justified; the old boy was launching out into the worst kind of theology. Eternity, timeless experience of good, time as the substance of evil — it was bad enough, God knew, in books; but, fired at you like this, point-blank, by somebody who really took it seriously, why, it was really frightful. Why on earth couldn’t people live their lives in a rational, civilized way? Why couldn’t they take things as they came? Breakfast at nine, lunch at one-thirty, tea at five. And conversation. And the daily walk with Mr. Gladstone, the Yorkshire terrier. And the library; the Works of Voltaire in eighty-three volumes; the inexhaustible treasure of Horace Walpole; and for a change the Divine Comedy; and then, in case you might be tempted to take the Middle Ages too seriously, Salimbene’s autobiography and the Miller’s Tale. And sometimes calls in the afternoon — the Rector, Lady Fredegond with her ear-trumpet, Mr. Veal. And political discussions — except that in these last months, since the Anschluss and Munich, one had found that political discussion was one of the unpleasant things it was wise to avoid. And the weekly journey to London, with lunch at the Reform, and always dinner with old Thripp of the British Museum; and a chat with one’s poor brother Tom at the Foreign Office (only that too was rapidly becoming one of the things to be avoided). And then, of course, the London library; and Vespers at Westminster Cathedral, if they happened to be singing Palestrina; and every alternate week, between five and six-thirty, an hour and a half with Mae or Doris in their flat in Maida Vale. Infinite squalor in a little room, as he liked to call it; abysmally delightful. Those were the things that came; why couldn’t they take them, quietly and sensibly? But no, they had to gibber about eternity and all the rest. That sort of stuff always made Jeremy want to be blasphemous — to ask whether God had a boyau rectum, to protest, like the Japanese in the anecdote, that he was altogether flummoxed and perplexed by position of Honourable Bird. But, unfortunately, the present was one of those peculiarly exasperating cases where such reactions were out of place. For, after all, old Propter had written Short Studies; what he said couldn’t just be dismissed as the vapourings of a deficient mind. Besides, he hadn’t talked Christianity, so that jokes about anthropomorphism were beside the point. It was really too exasperating! He assumed an expression of haughty detachment and even started to hum ‘The Honeysuckle and the Bee.’ The impression he wanted to give was that of a superior being who really couldn’t be expected to waste his time listening to stuff like this.

A comic spectacle, Mr. Propter reflected as he looked at him; except, of course, that it was so extremely depressing.

Chapter Nine

‘TIME AND CRAVING,’ said Mr. Propter, ‘craving and time — two aspects of the same thing; and that thing is the raw material of evil. So you see, Pete,’ he added in another tone, ‘you see what a queer sort of present you’ll be making us, if you’re successful in your work. Another century or so of time and craving. A couple of extra lifetimes of potential evil.’

‘And potential good,’ the young man insisted with a note of protest in his voice.

‘And potential good,’ Mr. Propter agreed. ‘But only at a far remove from that extra time you’re giving us.’

‘Why do you say that?’ Pete asked.

‘Because potential evil is in time; potential good isn’t. The longer you live, the more evil you automatically come into contact with. Nobody comes automatically into contact with good. Men don’t find more good by merely existing longer. It’s curious,’ he went on reflectively, ‘that people should always have concentrated on the problem of evil. Exclusively. As though the nature of good were something self-evident. But it isn’t self-evident. There’s a problem of good at least as difficult as the problem of evil.’

‘And what’s the solution?’ Pete asked.

‘The solution is very simple and profoundly unacceptable. Actual good is outside time.’

‘Outside time?. But then how ...?’

‘I told you it was unacceptable,’ said Mr. Propter.

‘But if it’s outside time, then ...’

‘... then nothing within time can be actual good. Time is potential evil, and craving converts the potentiality into actual evil. Whereas a temporal act can never be more than potentially good, with a potentiality, what’s more, that can’t be actualized except out of time.’

‘But inside time, here — you know, just doing the ordinary things — hell! we do sometimes do right. What acts are good?’

‘Strictly speaking, none,’ Mr. Propter answered. ‘But, in practice, I think one’s justified in applying the word to certain acts. Any act that contributes towards the liberation of those concerned in it — I’d call it a good act.’

‘Liberation?’ the young man repeated dubiously. The words, in his mind, carried only economic and revolutionary connotations. But it was evident that Mr. Propter wasn’t talking about the necessity for getting rid of capitalism. ‘Liberation from what?’

Mr. Propter hesitated before replying. Should he go on with this? he wondered. The Englishman was hostile; the time short; the boy himself entirely ignorant. But it was an ignorance evidently mitigated by good-will and a touching nostalgia for perfection. He decided to take a chance and go on.

‘Liberation from time,’ he said. ‘Liberation from craving and revulsions. Liberation from personality.’

‘But heck,’ said Pete, ‘you’re always talking about democracy. Doesn’t that mean respecting personality?’

‘Of course,’ Mr. Propter agreed. ‘Respecting it in order that it may be able to transcend itself. Slavery and fanaticism intensify the obsession with time and evil and the self. Hence the value of democratic institutions and a sceptical attitude of mind. The more you respect a personality, the better its chance of discovering that all personality is a prison. Potential good is anything that helps you to get out of prison. Actualized good lies outside the prison, in timelessness, in the state of pure, disinterested consciousness.’

'I'm not much good at abstractions,' said the young man. 'Let's take some concrete examples. What about science, for instance? Is that good?'

'Good, bad and indifferent, according to how it's pursued and what it's used for. Good, bad and indifferent, first of all, for the scientists themselves — just as art and scholarship may be good, bad or indifferent for artists and scholars. Good if it facilitates liberation; indifferent if it neither helps nor hinders; bad if it makes liberation more difficult by intensifying the obsession with personality. And, remember, the apparent selflessness of the scientist, or the artist, is not necessarily a genuine freedom from the bondage of personality. Scientists and artists are men devoted to what we vaguely call an ideal. But what is an ideal? An ideal is merely the projection, on an enormously enlarged scale, of some aspect of personality.'

'Say that again,' Pete requested, while even Jeremy so far forgot his pose of superior detachment to lend his most careful attention.

Mr. Propter said it again. 'And that's true,' he went on, 'of every ideal except the highest, which is the ideal of liberation — liberation from personality, liberation from time and craving, liberation into union with God, if you don't object to the word, Mr. Pordage. Many people do,' he added. 'It's one of the words that the Mrs. Grundys of the intellect find peculiarly shocking. I always try to spare their sensibilities, if I can. Well, to return to our idealist,' he continued, glad to see that Jeremy had been constrained, in spite of himself, to smile. 'If he serves any ideal except the highest — whether it's the artist's ideal of beauty, or the scientist's ideal of truth, or the humanitarian's ideal of what currently passes for goodness — he's not serving God; he's serving a magnified aspect of himself. He may be completely devoted; but in the last analysis his devotion turns out to be directed towards an aspect of his own personality. His apparent selflessness is really not a liberation from his ego, but merely another form of bondage. This means that science may be bad for scientists, even when it appears to be a deliverer. And the same holds good of art, of scholarship, of humanitarianism.'

Jeremy thought nostalgically of his library at The Araucarias. Why couldn't this old madman be content to take things as they came?

'And what about other people?' Pete was saying. 'People who aren't scientists. Hasn't it helped to set them free?'

Mr. Propter nodded. 'And it has also helped to tie them more closely to themselves. And what's more, I should guess that it has increased bondage more than it has diminished it — and will tend to go on increasing it, progressively.'

'How do you figure that out?'

'Through its applications,' Mr. Propter answered. 'Applications to warfare, first of all. Better planes, better explosives, better guns and gases — every improvement increases the sum of fear and hatred, widens the incidence of nationalistic hysteria. In other words, every improvement in armaments makes it more difficult for people to escape from their egos, more difficult to forget those horrible projections of themselves they call their ideals of patriotism, heroism, glory and all the rest. And even the less destructive applications of science aren't really much more satisfactory. For what do such applications result in? The multiplication of possessable objects; the invention of new instruments of stimulation; the disseminations of new wants through propaganda aimed at equating possession with well-being and incessant stimulation with happiness.'

'But incessant stimulation from without is a source of bondage; and so is the preoccupation with possessions. And now you're threatening to prolong our lives, so that we can go on being stimulated, go on desiring possessions, go on waving flags and hating our enemies and being afraid of air attack — go on and on, generation after generation, sinking deeper and deeper into the stinking slough of our personality.' He shook his head. 'No, I can't quite share your optimism about science.'

There was a silence while Pete debated with himself whether to ask Mr. Propter about love. In the end he decided he wouldn't. Virginia was too sacred. (But why, why had she turned back at the Grotto? What could he have said or done to offend her? As much to prevent himself from brooding over these problems as because he wanted to know the old man's opinions on the last of the three

things that seemed to him supremely valuable, he looked up at Mr. Propter and asked, 'What about social justice? I mean, take the French Revolution. Or Russia. And what about this Spanish business — fighting for liberty and democracy against fascist aggression?' He had tried to remain perfectly calm and scientific about the whole thing; but his voice trembled a little as he spoke the last words. In spite of their familiarity (perhaps because of their familiarity), phrases like 'fascist aggression' still had power to move him to the depths.

'Napoleon came out of the French Revolution,' said Mr. Propter, after a moment's silence. 'German nationalism came out of Napoleon. The war of 1870 came out of German nationalism. The war of 1914 came out of the war of 1870. Hitler came out of the war of 1914. Those are the bad results of the French Revolution. The good results were the enfranchisement of the French peasants and the spread of political democracy. Put the good results in one scale of your balance and the bad ones in the other, and try which set is the heavier. Then perform the same operation with Russia. Put the abolition of tsardom and capitalism in one scale; and in the other put Stalin, put the secret police, put the famines, put twenty years of hardship for a hundred and fifty, million people, put the liquidation of intellectuals and kulaks and old bolsheviks, put the hordes of slaves in prison camps; put the military conscription of everybody, male and female, from childhood to old age, put the revolutionary propaganda which spurred the bourgeoisie to invent fascism.' Mr. Propter shook his head. 'Or take the fight for democracy in Spain,' he went on. 'There was a fight for democracy all over Europe not so long ago. Rational prognosis can only be based on past experience. Look at the results of 1914 and then ask yourself what chance the loyalists ever had of establishing a liberal régime at the end of a long war. The others are winning; so we shall never have the opportunity of seeing what circumstances and their own passions would have driven those well-intentioned liberals to become.'

'But, hell!' Pete broke out, 'what do you expect people to do when they're attacked by the fascists? Sit down and let their throats be cut?'

'Of course not,' said Mr. Propter. 'I expect them to fight. And the expectation is based on my previous knowledge of human behaviour. But the fact that people generally do react to that kind of situation in that kind of way doesn't prove that it's the best way of reacting. Experience makes me expect that they'll behave like that. But experience also makes me expect that, if they do behave like that, the results will be disastrous.'

'Well, how do you want us to act? Do you want us to sit still and do nothing?'

'Not nothing,' said Mr. Propter. 'Merely something appropriate.'

'But what is appropriate?'

'Not war, anyhow. Nor violent revolution. Nor yet politics, to any considerable extent, I should guess.'

'Then what?'

'That's what we've got to discover. The main lines are clear enough. But there's still a lot of work to be done on the practical details.'

Pete was not listening. His mind had gone back to that time in Aragon when life had seemed supremely significant. 'But those boys, back there in Spain,' he burst out. 'You didn't know them, Mr. Propter. They were wonderful, really they were. Never mean to you, and brave, and loyal and ... and everything.' He wrestled with the inadequacies of his vocabulary, with the fear of making an exhibition of himself by talking big, like a highbrow. 'They weren't living for themselves, I can tell you that, Mr. Propter.' He looked into the old man's face almost supplicatingly, as though imploring him to believe. 'They were living for something much bigger than themselves — like what you were talking about just now; you know, something more than just personal.'

'And what about Hitler's boys?' Mr. Propter asked. 'What about Mussolini's boys? What about Stalin's boys? Do you suppose they're not just as brave, just as kind to one another, just as loyal to their cause and just as firmly convinced that it's the cause of justice, truth, freedom, right and honour?' He looked at Pete enquiringly; but Pete said nothing. 'The fact that people have a lot of virtues,' Mr. Propter went on, 'doesn't prove anything about the goodness of their actions. You can have all the

virtues — that's to say, all except the two that really matter, understanding and compassion — you can have all the others, I say, and be a thoroughly bad man. Indeed, you can't be really bad unless you do have most of the virtues. Look at Milton's Satan for example. Brave, strong, generous, loyal, prudent, temperate, self-sacrificing. And let's give the dictators the credit that's due to them; some of them are nearly as virtuous as Satan. Not quite, I admit, but nearly. That's why they can achieve so much evil.'

His elbows on his knees, Pete sat in silence, frowning. 'But that feeling,' he said at last. 'That feeling there was between us. You know — the friendship; only it was more than just ordinary friendship. And the feeling of being there all together — fighting for the same thing — and the thing being worth while — and then the danger, and the rain, and that awful cold at nights, and the heat in summer, and being thirsty, and even those lice and the dirt — share and share alike in everything bad or good — and knowing that to-morrow it might be your turn, or one of the other boys — your turn for the field hospital (and the chances were they wouldn't have enough anaesthetics, except maybe for an amputation or something like that), or your turn for the burial-party. All those feelings, Mr. Propter — I just can't believe they didn't mean something.'

'They meant themselves,' said Mr. Propter.

Jeremy saw the opportunity for a counter-attack and, with a promptitude unusual in him, immediately took it. 'Doesn't the same thing apply to your feelings about eternity, or whatever it is he asked.

'Of course it does,' said Mr. Propter.

'Well, in that case, how can you claim any validity for it? The feeling means itself, and that's all there is to it.'

'It means itself,' Mr. Propter agreed. 'But what precisely is this "itself"? In other words, what is the nature of the feeling?'

'Don't ask me,' said Jeremy with a shake of the head and a comically puzzled lift of the eyebrows. 'I really don't know.'

Mr. Propter smiled. 'I know you don't want to know,' he said. 'And I won't ask you. I'll just state the facts. The feeling in question is a non-personal experience of timeless peace. Accordingly, non-personality, timelessness and peace are what it means. Now let's consider the feeling that Pete had been talking about. These are all personal feelings, evoked by temporal situations, and characterized by a sense of excitement. Intensification of the ego within the world of time and craving — that's what these feelings meant.'

'But you can't call self-sacrifice an intensification of the ego,' said Pete.

'I can and I do,' Mr. Propter insisted. 'For the good reason that it generally is. Self-sacrifice to any but the highest cause is sacrifice to an ideal, which is simply a projection of the ego. What is commonly called self-sacrifice is the sacrifice of one part of the ego to another part, one set of personal feelings and passions for another set — as when the feelings connected with money or sex are sacrificed in order that the ego may have the feelings of superiority, solidarity and hatred which are associated with patriotism, or any kind of political or religious fanaticism.'

Pete shook his head. 'Sometimes,' he said, with a smile of rueful perplexity, 'sometimes you almost talk like Dr. Obispo. You know — cynically.'

Mr. Propter laughed. 'It's good to be cynical,' he said. 'That is, if you know when to stop. Most of the things that we're all taught to respect and reverence — they don't deserve anything but cynicism. Take your own case. You've been taught to worship ideals like patriotism, social justice, science, romantic love. You've been told that such virtues as loyalty, temperance, courage and prudence are good in themselves, in any circumstances. You've been assured that self-sacrifice is always splendid and fine feelings invariably good. And it's all nonsense, all a pack of lies that people have made up in order to justify themselves in continuing to deny God and wallow in their own egotism. Unless you're steadily and unflinchingly cynical about the solemn twaddle that's talked by bishops and bankers and professors and politicians and all the rest of them, you're lost. Utterly lost. Doomed to perpetual imprisonment in your ego — doomed to be a personality in a world of personalities; and a world of personalities is this

world, the world of greed and fear and hatred, of war and capitalism and dictatorship and slavery. Yes, you've got to be cynical, Pete. Specially cynical about all the actions and feelings you've been taught to suppose were good. Most of them are not good. They're merely evils which happen to be regarded as creditable. But, unfortunately, creditable evil is just as bad as discreditable evil. Scribes and Pharisees aren't any better, in the last analysis, than publicans and sinners. Indeed, they're often much worse. For several reasons. Being well thought of by others, they think well of themselves; and nothing so confirms an egotism as thinking well of oneself. In the next place, publicans and sinners are generally just human animals, without enough energy or self-control to do much harm. Whereas the Scribes and Pharisees have all the virtues, except the only two which count, and enough intelligence to understand everything except the real nature of the world. Publicans and sinners merely fornicate and overeat, and get drunk. The people who make wars, the people who reduce their fellows to slavery, the people who kill and torture and tell lies in the name of their sacred causes, the really evil people, in a word — these are never the publicans and the sinners. No, they're the virtuous, respectable men, who have the finest feelings, the best brains, the noblest ideals.'

'So what it all boils down to,' Pete concluded in a tone of angry despair, 'is that there just isn't anything you can do. Is that it?'

'Yes and no,' said Mr. Propter, in his quiet judicial way. 'On the strictly human level, the level of time and craving, I should say that it's quite true: in the last resort, there isn't anything you can do.'

'But that's just defeatism!' Pete protested.

'Why is it defeatism to be realistic?'

'There must be something to do!'

'I see no "must" about it.'

'Then what about the reformers and all those people? If you're right, they're just wasting their time.'

'It depends what they think they're doing,' said Mr. Propter. 'If they think they're just temporarily palliating particular distresses, if they see themselves as people engaged in laboriously deflecting evil from old channels into new and slightly different channels, then they can justifiably claim to be successful. But if they think they're making good appear where evil was before, why, then, all history clearly shows that they are wasting their time.'

'But why can't they make good appear where evil was before?'

'Why do we fall when we jump out of a tenth-story window? Because the nature of things happens to be such that we do fall. And the nature of things is such that, on the strictly human level of time and craving, you can't achieve anything but evil. If you choose to work exclusively on that level, and exclusively for the ideals and causes that are characteristic of it, then you're insane if you expect to transform evil into good. You're insane, because experience should have shown you that, on that level, there doesn't happen to be any good. There are only different degrees and different kinds of evil.'

'Then what do you want people to do?'

'Don't talk as though it were all my fault,' said Mr. Propter. 'I didn't invent the universe.'

'What ought they to do, then?'

'Well, if they want fresh varieties of evil, let them go on with what they're doing now. But if they want good, they'll have to change their tactics. And the encouraging thing,' Mr. Propter added in another tone, 'the encouraging thing is that there are tactics which will produce good. We've seen that there's nothing to be done on the strictly human level — or rather there are millions of things to be done, only none of them will achieve any good. But there is something effective to be done on the levels where good actually exists. So you see, Pete, I'm not a defeatist. I'm a strategist. I believe that if a battle is to be fought, it had better be fought under conditions in which there's at least some chance of winning. I believe that, if you want the golden fleece, it's more sensible to go to the place where it exists than to rush round performing prodigies of valour in a country where all the fleeces happen to be coal-black.'

'Then where ought we to fight for good?'

'Where good is.'

‘But where is it?’

‘On the level below the human and on the level above. On the animal level and on the level ... well, you can take your choice of names: the level of eternity; the level, if you don’t object, of God; the level of the spirit — only that happens to be about the most ambiguous word in the language. On the lower level, good exists as the proper functioning of the organism in accordance with the laws of its own being. On the higher level, it exists in the form of a knowledge of the world without desire or aversion; it exists as the experience of eternity, as the transcendence of personality, the extension of consciousness beyond the limits imposed by the ego. Strictly human activities are activities that prevent the manifestation of good on the other two levels. For, in so far as we’re human, we’re obsessed with time, we’re passionately concerned with our personalities and with those magnified projections of our personalities which we call our policies, our ideals, our religions. And what are the results? Being obsessed with time and our egos, we are for ever craving and worrying. But nothing impairs the normal functioning of the organism like craving and revulsion, like greed and fear and worry. Directly or indirectly, most of our physical ailments and disabilities are due to worry and craving. We worry and crave ourselves into high blood-pressure, heart disease, tuberculosis, peptic ulcer, low resistance to infection, neurasthenia, sexual aberrations, insanity, suicide. Not to mention all the rest.’ Mr. Propter waved his hand comprehensively. ‘Craving even prevents us from seeing properly,’ he went on. ‘The harder we try to see, the graver our error of accommodation. And it’s the same with bodily posture: the more we worry about doing the thing immediately ahead of us in time, the more we interfere with our correct body posture and the worse, in consequence, becomes the functioning of the entire organism. In a word, in so far as we’re human beings, we prevent ourselves from realizing the physiological and instinctive good that we’re capable of as animals. And, *mutatis mutandis*, the same thing is true in regard to the sphere above. In so far as we’re human beings, we prevent ourselves from realizing the spiritual and timeless good that we’re capable of as potential inhabitants of eternity, as potential enjoyers of the beatific vision. We worry and crave ourselves out of the very possibility of transcending personality and knowing, intellectually at first and then by direct experience, the true nature of the world.’

Mr. Propter was silent for a moment; then, with a sudden smile, ‘Luckily,’ he went on, ‘most of us don’t manage to behave like human beings all the time. We forget our wretched little egos and those horrible great projections of our egos in the ideal world — forget them and relapse for a while into harmless animality. The organism gets a chance to function according to its own laws; in other words, it gets a chance to realize such good as it’s capable of. That’s why we’re as healthy and sane as we are. Even in great cities, as many as four persons out of five manage to go through life without having to be treated in a lunatic asylum. If we were consistently human, the percentage of mental cases would rise from twenty to a hundred. But fortunately most of us are incapable of consistency — the animal always resuming its rights. And to some people fairly frequently, perhaps occasionally to all, there come little flashes of illumination — momentary glimpses into the nature of the world as it is for a consciousness liberated from appetite and time, of the world as it might be if we didn’t choose to deny God by being our personal selves. Those flashes come to us when we’re off our guards; then craving and worry come rushing back and the light is eclipsed once more by our personality and its lunatic ideals, its criminal policies and plans.’

There was silence. The sun had gone. Behind the mountains to the west, a pale yellow light faded through green into a blue that deepened as it climbed. At the zenith, it was all night.

Pete sat quite still, staring into the dark, but still transparent sky above the northern peaks. That voice, so calm at first and then at the end so powerfully resonant, those words, now mercilessly critical of all the things to which he had given his allegiance, now charged with the half-comprehended promise of things incommensurably worthier of loyalty, had left him profoundly moved and at the same time perplexed and at a loss. Everything, he saw, would have to be thought out again, from the beginning — science, politics, perhaps even love, even Virginia. He was appalled by the prospect and yet, in another part of his being, attracted; he felt resentful at the thought of Mr. Propter, but at the same time loved the disquieting old man; loved him for what he did and, above all, for what he so admirably and, in

Pete's own experience, uniquely was — disinterestedly friendly, at once serene and powerful, gentle and strong, self-effacing and yet intensely there, more present, so to speak, radiating more life than anyone else.

Jeremy Pordage had also found himself taking an interest in what the old man said, had even, like Pete, experienced the stirrings of a certain disquiet — a disquiet none the less disquieting for having stirred in him before. The substance of what Mr. Propter had said was familiar to him. For, of course, he had read all the significant books on the subject — would have thought himself barbarously uneducated if he hadn't — had read Sankara and Eckhart, the Pali texts and John of the Cross, Charles de Condran and the Bardo, and Patanjali and the Pseudo-Dionysius. He had read them and been moved by them into wondering whether he oughtn't to do something about them; and, because he had been moved in this way, he had taken the most elaborate pains to make fun of them, not only to other people, but also and above all to himself. 'You've never bought your ticket to Athens,' the man had said — damn his eyes! Why did he want to go putting these things over on one? All one asked was to be left in peace, to take things as they came. Things as they came — one's books, one's little articles, and Lady Fredegond's ear-trumpet, and Palestrina, and steak-and-kidney pudding at the Reform, and Mae and Doris. Which reminded him that to-day was Friday; if he were in England it would be his afternoon at the flat in Maida Vale. Deliberately he turned his attention away from Mr. Propter and thought instead of those alternate Friday afternoons; of the pink lampshades; the smell of talcum powder and perspiration; the Trojan women, as he called them because they worked so hard, in their kimonos from Marks and Spencer's; the framed reproductions of pictures by Poynter and Alma Tadema (delicious irony, that works which the Victorians had regarded as art should have come to serve, a generation later, as pornography in a trollop's bedroom!); and, finally, the erotic routine, so matter-of-factly sordid, so conscientiously and professionally low, with a lowness and a sordidness that constituted, for Jeremy, their greatest charm, that he prized more highly than any amount of moonlight and romance, any number of lyrics and Liebestods. Infinite squalor in a little room! It was the apotheosis of refinement, the logical conclusion of good taste.

Chapter Ten

THIS FRIDAY, MR. STOYTE'S afternoon in town had been exceptionally uneventful. Nothing untoward had occurred during the preceding week. In the course of his various meetings and interviews nobody had said or done anything to make him lose his temper. The reports on business conditions had been very satisfactory. The Japs had bought another hundred thousand barrels of oil. Copper was up two cents. The demand for bentonite was definitely increasing. True, applications for bank credit had been rather disappointing; but the influenza epidemic had raised the weekly turnover of the Pantheon to a figure well above the average.

Things went so smoothly that Mr. Stoyte was through with all his business more than an hour before he had expected. Finding himself with time to spare, he stopped on the way home at his agent's, to find out what was happening on the estate. The interview lasted only a few minutes — long enough, however, to put Mr. Stoyte in a fury that sent him rushing out to the car.

'Drive to Mr. Propter's,' he ordered with a peremptory ferocity as he slammed the door.

What the hell did Bill Propter think he was doing? he kept indignantly asking himself. Shoving his nose into other people's business. And all on account of those lousy bums who had come to pick the oranges! All for those tramps, those stinking, filthy hobos! Mr. Stoyte had a peculiar hatred for the ragged hordes of transients on whom he depended for the harvesting of his crops, a hatred that was more than the rich man's ordinary dislike of the poor. Not that he didn't experience that complex mixture of fear and physical disgust, of stifled compassion and shame transformed by repression into chronic exasperation. He did. But over and above this common and generic dislike for poor people,

he was moved by other hatreds of his own. Mr. Stoyte was a rich man who had been poor. In the six years between the time when he ran away from his father and grandmother in Nashville and the time when he had been adopted by the black sheep of the family, his Uncle Tom, in California, Jo Stoyte had learned, as he imagined, everything there was to be known about being poor. Those years had left him with an ineradicable hatred for the circumstances of poverty and at the same time an ineradicable contempt for all those who had been too stupid, or too weak, or too unlucky, to climb out of the hell into which they had fallen or been born. The poor were odious to him, not only because they were potentially a menace to his position in society, not only because their misfortunes demanded a sympathy he did not wish to give, but also because they reminded him of what he himself had suffered in the past, and at the same time because the fact that they were still poor was a sufficient proof of their contemptibleness and his own superiority. And since he had suffered what they were now suffering, it was only right that they should go on suffering what he had suffered. Also, since their continued poverty proved them contemptible, it was proper that he, who was now rich, should treat them in every way as the contemptible creatures they had shown themselves to be. Such was the logic of Mr. Stoyte's emotions. And here was Bill Propter, running counter to this logic by telling the agent that they oughtn't to take advantage of the glut of transient labour to force down wages; that they ought, on the contrary, to raise them — raise them, if you please, at a time when these bums were swarming over the State like a plague of Mormon crickets! And not only that; they ought to build accommodation for them — cabins, like the ones that crazy fool Bill had built for them himself; two-roomed cabins at six or seven hundred dollars apiece — for bums like that, and their women, and those disgusting children who were so filthy dirty he wouldn't have them in his hospital; not unless they were really dying of appendicitis or something — you couldn't refuse them then, of course. But meanwhile, what the hell did Bill Propter think he was doing? And it wasn't the first time either that he'd tried to interfere. Gliding through the twilight of the orange groves, Mr. Stoyte kept striking the palm of his left hand with his clenched right fist.

'I'll let him have it,' he whispered to himself. 'I'll let him have it.'

Fifty years before, Bill Propter had been the only boy in the school who, even though he was the older and stronger, didn't make fun of him for being fat. They had met again when Bill was teaching at Berkeley and he himself had made good in the real estate game and had just gone into oil. Partly in gratitude for the way Bill Propter had acted when they were boys, partly also in order to display his power, to redress the balance of superiority in his own favour, Jo Stoyte had wanted to do something handsome for the young assistant professor. But in spite of his modest salary and the two or three miserable thousand dollars a year his father had left him, Bill Propter hadn't wanted anything done for him. He had seemed genuinely grateful, he had been perfectly courteous and friendly; but he just didn't want to come in on the ground floor of Consol Oil — didn't want to because, as he kept explaining, he had all he needed and preferred not to have anything more. Jo's effort to redress the balance of superiority had failed. Failed disastrously, because, by refusing his offer, Bill had done something which, though he called him a fool for doing it, compelled Jo Stoyte secretly to admire him more than ever. Extorted against his will, this admiration bred a corresponding resentment towards its object. Jo Stoyte felt aggrieved that Bill had given him so many reasons for liking him. He would have preferred to like him without a reason, in spite of his shortcomings. But Bill had few shortcomings and many merits, merits which Jo himself did not have and whose presence in Bill he therefore regarded as an affront. Thus it was that all the reasons for liking Bill Propter were also, in Jo's eyes, equally valid reasons for disliking him. He continued to call Bill a fool; but he felt him as a standing reproach. And yet the nature of this standing reproach was such that he liked to be in Bill's company. It was because Bill had settled down on a ten-acre patch of land in this part of the valley that Mr. Stoyte had decided to build his castle on the site where it now stood. He wanted to be near Bill Propter, even though, in practice, there was almost nothing that Bill could do or say that didn't annoy him. To-day, this chronic exasperation had been fanned by Mr. Stoyte's hatred of the transients into a passion of fury.

'I'll let him have it,' he repeated again and again.

The car came to a halt, and before the chauffeur could open the door for him, Mr. Stoyte had darted out and was hurrying in his determined way, looking neither to right nor left, up the path that led from the road to his old friend's bungalow.

'Hullo, Jo,' a familiar voice called from the shadow under the eucalyptus trees.

Mr. Stoyte turned, peered through the twilight, then, without a word, hurried towards the bench on which the three men were sitting. There was a chorus of 'Good evenings,' and, as he approached, Pete rose politely and offered him his place. Ignoring his gesture and his very presence, Mr. Stoyte addressed himself immediately to Bill Propter.

'Why the hell can't you leave my man alone?' he almost shouted.

Mr. Propter looked at him with only a moderate astonishment. He was used to these outbursts from poor Jo; he had long since divined their fundamental cause and knew by experience how to deal with them.

'Which man, Jo?' he asked.

'Bob Hansen, of course. What do you mean by going to him behind my back?'

'When I went to you,' said Mr. Propter, 'you told me it was Hansen's business. So I went to Hansen.'

This was so infuriatingly true that Mr. Stoyte could only resort to roaring. He roared. 'Interfering with him in his work! What's the idea?'

'Pete's offering you a seat,' Mr. Propter put in. 'Or, if you prefer it, there's an iron chair behind you. You'd better sit down, Jo.'

'I'm not going to sit down,' Mr. Stoyte bellowed. 'And I want an answer. What's the idea?'

'The idea?' Mr. Propter repeated in his slow quiet way. 'Well, it's quite an old one, you know. I didn't invent it.'

'Can't you answer me?'

'It's the idea that men and women are human beings. Not vermin.'

'Those bums of yours!'

Mr. Propter turned to Pete. 'You may as well sit down again,' he said.

'Those lousy bums! I tell you I won't stand it.'

'Besides,' Mr. Propter went on, 'I'm a practical man. You're not.'

'Me not practical?' Mr. Stoyte echoed with indignant amazement. 'Not practical? Well, look at the place I live in and then look at this dump of yours.'

'Exactly. That proves the point. You're hopelessly romantic, Jo; so romantic, you think people can work when they haven't had enough to eat.'

'You're trying to make communists of them.' The word 'communist' renewed Mr. Stoyte's passion and at the same time justified it; his indignation ceased to be merely personal and became righteous. 'You're nothing but a communist agitator.' His voice trembled, Mr. Propter sadly noticed, just as Pete's had trembled half an hour before at the words 'fascist aggression.' He wondered if the boy had noticed or, having noticed, would take the hint. 'Nothing but a communist agitator,' Mr. Stoyte repeated with a crusader's zeal.

'I thought we were talking about eating,' said Mr. Propter.

'You're stalling!'

'Eating and working — wasn't that it?'

'I've put up with you all these years,' Mr. Stoyte went on. 'For old times' sake. But now I'm through. I'm sick of you. Talking communism to those bums! Making the place dangerous for decent people to live in.'

'Decent?' Mr. Propter echoed, and was tempted to laugh, but immediately checked the impulse. Being laughed at in the presence of Pete and Mr. Pordage might goad the poor fellow into doing something irreparably stupid.

'I'll have you run out of the valley,' Mr. Stoyte was roaring. 'I'll see that you're ...' He broke off in the middle of the sentence and stood there for a few seconds in silence, his mouth still open and working, his eyes staring. That drumming in the ears, that tingling heat in the face — they had suddenly reminded

him of his blood-pressure, of Dr. Obispo, of death. Death and that flame-coloured text in his bedroom at home. Terrible to fall into the hands of the living God — not Prudence's God, of course; the other one, the real one, the God of his father and his grandmother.

Mr. Stoyte drew a deep breath, pulled out his handkerchief, wiped his face and neck, then, without uttering another word, turned and began to walk away.

Mr. Propter got up, hurried after him and, in spite of the other's angry motion of recoil, took Mr. Stoyte's arm and walked along beside him.

'I want to show you something, Jo,' he said. 'Something that'll interest you, I think.'

'I don't want to see it,' said Mr. Stoyte between his false teeth.

Mr. Propter paid no attention, but continued to lead him towards the back of the house. 'It's a gadget that Abbot of the Smithsonian has been working on for some time,' he continued. 'A thing for making use of solar energy.' He interrupted himself for a moment to call back to the others to follow him; then turned again to Mr. Stoyte and resumed the conversation. 'Much more compact than anything of the kind that's ever been made before,' he said. 'Much more efficient, too.' And he went on to describe the system of trough-shaped reflectors, the tubes of oil heated to a temperature of four or five hundred degrees Fahrenheit; the boiler for raising steam, if you wanted to run a low-pressure engine; the cooking-range and water-heater, if you were using it only for domestic purposes. 'Pity the sun's down,' he said, as they stood in front of the machine. 'I'd have liked to show you the way it works the engine. I've had two horse-power, eight hours a day, ever since I got the thing working last week. Not bad considering we're still in January. We'll have her working overtime all summer.'

Mr. Stoyte had intended to persist in his silence — just to show Bill that he was still angry, that he hadn't forgiven him; but his interest in the machine and, above all, his exasperated concern with Bill's idiotic, crackpot notions were too much for him. 'What the hell do you want with two horse-power, eight hours a day?' he asked.

'To run my electric generator.'

'But what do you want with an electric generator? Haven't you got your current wired in from the city?'

'Of course. And I'm trying to see how far I can be independent of the city.'

'But what for?'

Mr. Propter uttered a little laugh. 'Because I believe in Jeffersonian democracy.'

'What the hell has Jeffersonian democracy got to do with it?' said Mr. Stoyte with mounting irritation. 'Can't you believe in Jefferson and have your current wired in from the city?'

'That's exactly it,' said Mr. Propter; 'you almost certainly can't.'

'What do you mean?'

'What I say,' Mr. Propter answered mildly.

'I believe in democracy too,' Mr. Stoyte announced with a look of defiance.

'I know you do. And you also believe in being the undisputed boss in all your businesses.'

'I should hope so!'

'There's another name for an undisputed boss,' said Mr. Propter. "'Dictator.'"

'What are you trying to get at?'

'Merely at the facts. You believe in democracy; but you're at the head of businesses which have to be run dictatorially. And your subordinates have to accept your dictatorship because they're dependent on you for their living. In Russia they'd depend on government officials for their living. Perhaps you think that's an improvement,' he added, turning to Pete.

Pete nodded. 'I'm all for the public ownership of the means of production,' he said. It was the first time he had openly confessed his faith in the presence of his employer; he felt happy at having dared to be a Daniel.

"'Public ownership of the means of production,'" Mr. Propter repeated. 'But unfortunately governments have a way of regarding the individual producers as being parts of the means. Frankly, I'd rather have Jo Stoyte as my boss than Jo Stalin. This Jo' (he laid his hand on Mr. Stoyte's shoulder), 'this Jo

can't have you executed; he can't send you to the Arctic; he can't prevent you from getting a job under another boss. Whereas the other Jo ...' he shook his head. 'Not that,' he added, 'I'm exactly longing to have even this Jo as my boss.'

'You'd be fired pretty quick,' growled Mr. Stoyte.

'I don't want any boss,' Mr. Propter went on. 'The more bosses, the less democracy. But unless people can support themselves, they've got to have a boss who'll undertake to do it for them. So the less self-support, the less democracy. In Jefferson's day, a great many Americans did support themselves. They were economically independent. Independent of government and independent of big business. Hence the Constitution.'

'We've still got the Constitution,' said Mr. Stoyte.

'No doubt,' Mr. Propter agreed. 'But if we had to make a new Constitution to-day, what would it be like? A Constitution to fit the facts of New York and Chicago and Detroit; of United States Steel and the Public Utilities and General Motors and the C.I.O. and the government departments. What on earth would it be like?' he repeated. 'We respect our old Constitution, but in fact we live under a new one. And if we want to live under the first, we've got to re-create something like the conditions under which the first was made. That's why I'm interested in this gadget.' He patted the frame of the machine. 'Because it may help to give independence to anyone who desires independence. Not that many do desire it,' he added parenthetically. 'The propaganda in favour of dependence is too strong. They've come to believe that you can't be happy unless you're entirely dependent on government or centralized business. But for the few who do care about democracy, who really want to be free in the Jeffersonian sense, this thing may be a help. If it makes them independent of fuel and power, that's already a great deal.'

Mr. Stoyte looked anxious. 'Do you really think it'll do that?'

'Why not?' said Mr. Propter. 'There's a lot of sunshine running to waste in this part of the country.'

Mr. Stoyte thought of his presidency of the Consol Oil Company. 'It won't be good for the oil business,' he said.

'I should hate it to be good for the oil business,' Mr. Propter answered cheerfully.

'And what about coal?' He had an interest in a group of West Virginia mines. 'And the railroads?' There was that big block of Union Pacific shares that had belonged to Prudence. 'The railroads can't get on without long hauls. And steel,' he added disinterestedly; for his holdings in Bethlehem Steel were almost negligible. 'What happens to steel if you hurt the railroads and cut down trucking? You're going against progress,' he burst out in another access of righteous indignation. 'You're turning back the clock.'

'Don't worry, Jo,' said Mr. Propter. 'It won't affect your dividends for quite a long while. There'll be plenty of time to adjust to the new conditions.'

With an admirable effort, Mr. Stoyte controlled his temper. 'You seem to figure I can't think of anything but money,' he said with dignity. 'Well, it may interest you to know that I've decided to give Dr. Mulge another thirty thousand dollars for his Art School.' (The decision had been made there and then, for the sole purpose of serving as a weapon in the perennial battle with Bill Propter.) 'And if you think,' he added as an afterthought, 'if you think I'm only concerned with my own interests, read the special World's Fair number of the New York Times. Read that,' he insisted with the solemnity of a fundamentalist recommending the Book of Revelation. 'You'll see that the most forward-looking men in the country think as I do.' He spoke with unaccustomed and incongruous unction, in the phraseology of after-dinner eloquence. 'The way of progress is the way of better organization, more service from business, more goods for the consumer!' Then, incoherently, 'Look at the way a housewife goes to her grocer,' he added, 'and buys a package of some nationally advertised cereal or something. That's progress. Not your crackpot idea of doing everything at home with this idiotic contraption.' Mr. Stoyte had reverted completely to his ordinary style. 'You always were a fool, Bill, and I guess you always will be. And remember what I told you about interfering with Bob Hansen. I won't stand for it.' In dramatic silence he walked away; but after taking a few steps he halted and called back over his shoulder, 'Come up to dinner, if you feel like it.'

'Thanks,' said Mr. Propter. 'I will.'

Mr. Stoyte walked briskly towards his car. He had forgotten about high blood-pressure and the living God and felt all of a sudden unaccountably and unreasonably happy. It was not that he had scored any notable success in his battle with Bill Propter. He hadn't; and, what was more, in the process of not scoring a success he had made, and was even half aware that he had made, a bit of a fool of himself. The source of his happiness was elsewhere. He was happy, though he would never have admitted the fact, because, in spite of everything, Bill seemed to like him.

In the car, as he drove back to the castle, he whistled to himself.

Entering (with his hat on, as usual; for even after all these years he still derived a childish pleasure from the contrast between the palace in which he lived and the proletarian manners he affected), Mr. Stoyte crossed the great hall, stepped into the elevator and, from the elevator, walked directly into Virginia's boudoir.

When he opened the door, the two were sitting at least fifteen feet apart. Virginia was at the soda-counter, pensively eating a chocolate-and-banana split; seated in an elegant pose on one of the pink satin armchairs, Dr. Obispo was in process of lighting a cigarette.

On Mr. Stoyte the impact of suspicion and jealousy was like the blow of a fist directed (for the shock was physical and localized in the midriff) straight to the solar plexus. His face contracted as though with pain. And yet he had seen nothing; there was no apparent cause for jealousy, no visible reason, in their attitudes, their actions, their expressions, for suspicion. Dr. Obispo's manner was perfectly easy and natural; and the Baby's smile of startled and delighted welcome was angelic in its candour.

'Uncle Jo!' She ran to meet him and threw her arms round his neck.' 'Uncle Jo!'

The warmth of her tone, the softness of her lips, had a magnified effect on Mr. Stoyte. Moved to a point at which he was using the word to the limit of its double connotation, he murmured, 'My Baby!' with a lingering emphasis. The fact that he should have felt suspicious, even for a moment, of this pure and adorable, this deliciously warm, resilient and perfumed child, filled him with shame. And even Dr. Obispo now heaped coals of fire on his head.

'I was a bit worried,' he said, as he got up from his chair, 'by the way you coughed after lunch. That's why I came up here, to make sure of catching you the moment you got in.' He put a hand in his pocket and, after half drawing out and immediately replacing a little leather-bound volume, like a prayer-book, extracted a stethoscope. 'Prevention's better than cure,' he went on. 'I'm not going to let you get influenza if I can help it.'

Remembering what a good week they had had at the Beverly Pantheon on account of the epidemic, Mr. Stoyte felt alarmed. 'I don't feel bad,' he said. 'I guess that cough wasn't anything. Only my old — you know: the chronic bronchitis.'

'Maybe it was only that. But all the same, I'd like to listen in.' Briskly professional, Dr. Obispo hung the stethoscope round his neck.

'He's right, Uncle Jo,' said the Baby.

Touched by so much solicitude, and at the same time rather disturbed by the thought that it might perhaps be influenza, Mr. Stoyte took off his coat and waistcoat and began to undo his tie. A moment later he was standing stripped to the waist under the crystals of the chandelier. Modestly, Virginia retired again to her soda-fountain. Dr. Obispo slipped the ends of the curved nickel tubes of the stethoscope into his ears. 'Take a deep breath,' he said as he pressed the muzzle against Mr. Stoyte's chest. 'Again,' he ordered. 'Now cough.' Looking past that thick barrel of hairy flesh, he could see, on the wall behind the inhabitants of Watteau's mournful paradise as they prepared to set sail for some other paradise, doubtless yet more heartbreaking.

'Say ninety-nine,' Dr. Obispo commanded, returning from the embarkation for Cythera to a near view of Mr. Stoyte's thorax and abdomen.

'Ninety-nine,' said Mr. Stoyte. 'Ninety-nine. Ninety-nine.'

With professional thoroughness, Dr. Obispo shifted the muzzle of his stethoscope from point to point on the curving barrel of flesh before him. There was nothing wrong, of course, with the old buzzard. Just

the familiar set of râles and wheezes he always had. Perhaps it would make things a bit more realistic if he were to take the creature down to his office and stick him up in front of the fluoroscope. But, no; he really couldn't be bothered. And, besides, this farce would be quite enough.

'Cough again,' he said, planting his instrument among the grey hairs on Mr. Stoyte's left pap. And among other things, he went on to reflect, while Mr. Stoyte forced out a succession of artificial coughs, among other things, these old sacks of guts didn't smell too good. How any young girl could stand it, even for money, he really couldn't imagine. And yet the fact remained that there were thousands of them who not only stood it, but actually enjoyed it. Or, perhaps, 'enjoy' was the wrong word. Because in most cases there probably wasn't any question of enjoyment in the proper, physiological sense of the word. It all happened in the mind, not in the body. They loved their old gut-sacks with their heads; loved them because they admired them, because they were impressed by the gut-sack's position in the world, or his knowledge, or his celebrity. What they slept with wasn't the man; it was a reputation, it was the embodiment of a function. And then, of course, some of the girls were future models for Mother's Day advertisements; some were little Florence Nightingales, on the look-out for a Crimean War. In those cases, the very infirmities of their gut-sacks were added attractions. They had the satisfaction of sleeping not only with a reputation or a stock of wisdom, not only with a federal judgeship, for example, or the presidency of a chamber of commerce, but also and simultaneously with a wounded soldier, with an imbecile child, with a lovely stinking little baby who still made messes in its bed. Even this cutie (Dr. Obispo shot a sideways glance in the direction of the soda-fountain), even this one had something of the Florence Nightingale in her, something of the Gold Star Mother. (And that in spite of the fact that, with her conscious mind, she felt a kind of physical horror of physical maternity.) Jo Stoyte was a little bit her baby and her patient; and at the same time, of course, he was a great deal her own private Abraham Lincoln. Incidentally, he also happened to be the man with the cheque-book. Which was a consideration, of course. But if he were only that, Virginia wouldn't have been so nearly happy as she obviously was. The cheque-book was made more attractive by being in the hands of a demi-god who had to have a nanny to change his diapers.

'Turn round, please.'

Mr. Stoyte obeyed. The back, Dr. Obispo reflected, was perceptibly less revolting than the front. Perhaps because it was less personal.

'Take a deep breath,' he said; for he was going to play the farce all over again on this new stage. 'Another.'

Mr. Stoyte breathed enormously, like a cetacean.

'And another,' said Dr. Obispo. 'And again,' said Dr. Obispo, reflecting as the old man snorted that his own chief asset was a refreshing unlikeness to this smelly old gut-sack. She would take him, and take him, what was more, on his own terms. No Romeo-and-Juliet acts, no nonsense about Love with a large L, none of that popular-song claptrap with its skies of blue, dreams come true, heaven with you. Just sensuality for its own sake. The real, essential concrete thing; no less, it went without saying, but also (and this most certainly didn't go without saying; for the bitches were always trying to get you to stick them on pedestals, or be their soul-mates), also no more. No more, to begin with, out of respect for scientific truth. He believed in scientific truth. Facts were facts; accept them as such. It was a fact, for example, that young girls in the pay of rich old men could be seduced without much difficulty. It was also a fact that rich old men, however successful at business, were generally so frightened, ignorant and stupid that they could be bamboozled by any intelligent person who chose to try.

'Say ninety-nine again,' he said aloud.

'Ninety-nine. Ninety-nine.'

Ninety-nine chances out of a hundred that they would never find out anything. That was the fact about old men. The fact about love was that it consisted essentially of tumescence and detumescence. So why embroider the fact with unnecessary fictions? Why not be realistic? why not treat the whole business scientifically?

'Ninety-nine,' Mr. Stoyte went on repeating, 'Ninety-nine.'

And then, Dr. Obispo went on to reflect, as he listened without interest to the whisperings and crepitations inside the warm, smelly barrel before him, then there were the more personal reasons for preferring to take love unadorned, in the chemically pure condition. Personal reasons that were also, of course, a fact that had to be accepted. For it was a fact that he personally found an added pleasure in the imposition of his will upon the partner he had chosen. To be pleasurable, this imposition of will must never be too easy, too much a matter of course. Which ruled out all professionals. The partner had to be an amateur and, like all amateurs, committed to the thesis that tumescence and detumescence should always be associated with LOVE, PASSION, SOUL-MATING — all in upper-case letters. In imposing his will, he imposed the contradictory doctrine, the doctrine of tumescence and detumescence for tumescence's and detumescence's sake. All he asked was that a partner should give the thesis a practical try-out — however reluctantly, however experimentally, for just this once only; he didn't care. Just a single try-out. After that it was up to him. If he couldn't make a permanent and enthusiastic convert of her, at any rate so far as he was concerned, then the fault was his.

'Ninety-nine, ninety-nine,' said Mr. Stoyte with exemplary patience.

'You can stop now,' Dr. Obispo told him graciously.

Just one try-out; he could practically guarantee himself success. It was a branch of applied physiology; he was an expert, a specialist. The Claude Bernard of the subject. And talk of imposing one's will! You began by forcing the girl to accept a thesis that was in flat contradiction to all the ideas she had been brought up with, all the dreams-come-true rigmarole of popular ideology. Quite a pleasant little victory, to be sure. But it was only when you got down to the applied physiology that the series of really satisfying triumphs began. You took an ordinarily rational human being, a good hundred-percent. American with a background, a position in society, a set of conventions, a code of ethics, a religion (Catholic in the present instance, Dr. Obispo remembered parenthetically); you took this good citizen, with rights fully and formally guaranteed by the Constitution, you took her (and perhaps she had come to the place of assignation in her husband's Packard limousine and direct from a banquet, with speeches in honour, say, of Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler or the retiring Archbishop of Indianapolis), you took her and you proceeded, systematically and scientifically, to reduce this unique personality to a mere epileptic body, moaning and gibbering under the excruciations of a pleasure for which you, the Claude Bernard of the subject, were responsible and of which you remained the enjoying, but always detached, always ironically amused, spectator.

'Just a few more deep breaths, if you don't mind.'

Wheezily Mr. Stoyte inhaled, then with a snorting sigh emptied his lungs.

Chapter Eleven

THERE WAS SILENCE after Mr. Stoyte's departure. A long silence, while each of the three men thought his own private thoughts. It was Pete who spoke first.

'Things like that,' he said gloomily, 'they get me kind of wondering if I ought to go on taking his money. What would you do, Mr. Propter, if you were me?'

'What would I do?' Mr. Propter reflected for a moment. 'I'd go on working in Jo's laboratory,' he said. 'But only so long as I felt fairly certain that what I was doing wouldn't cause more harm than good. One has to be a utilitarian in these matters. A utilitarian with a difference,' he qualified. 'Bentham crossed with Eckhart, say, or Nagarjuna.'

'Poor Bentham!' said Jeremy, horrified by the thought of what was being done to his namesake.

Mr. Propter smiled. 'Poor Bentham, indeed! Such a good, sweet, absurd, intelligent man! So nearly right; but so enormously wrong! Deluding himself with the notion that the greatest happiness of the greatest number could be achieved on the strictly human level — the level of time and evil, the level

of the absence of God. Poor Bentham!' he repeated. 'What a great man he would have been if only he could have grasped that good can't be had except where it exists!'

'That sort of utilitarian you're talking about,' said Pete, 'what would he feel about the job I'm doing now?'

'I don't know,' Mr. Propter answered. 'I haven't thought about it enough to guess what he'd say. And, anyhow, we haven't yet got the empirical material on which a reasonable judgment could be based. All I know is that if I were in on this I'd be cautious. Infinitely cautious,' he insisted.

'And what about the money?' Pete went on. 'Seeing where it comes from and who it belongs to, do you think I ought to take it?'

'All money's pretty dirty,' said Mr. Propter. 'I don't know that poor Jo's is appreciably dirtier than anyone else's. You may think it is; but that's only because, for the first time, you're seeing money at its source — its personal, human source. You're like one of these city children who have been used to getting their milk in sterilized bottles from a shiny white delivery wagon. When they go into the country and see it being pumped out of a big, fat, smelly old animal, they're horrified, they're disgusted. It's the same with money. You've been used to getting it from behind a bronze grating in a magnificent marble bank. Now you've come out into the country and are living in the cowshed with the animal that actually secretes the stuff. And the process doesn't strike you as very savoury or hygienic. But the same process was going on, even when you didn't know about it. And if you weren't working for Jo Stoyte, you'd probably be working for some college or university. But where do colleges and universities get their money from? From rich men. In other words, from people like Jo Stoyte. Again it's dirt served out in sterile containers — by a gentleman in a cap and gown this time.'

'So you figure it's all right for me to go on like I am now?' said Pete.

'All right,' Mr. Propter answered, 'in the sense that it's not conspicuously worse than anything else.' Suddenly smiling, 'I was glad to hear that Dr. Mulge had got his Art School,' he said in another, lighter tone. 'Immediately after the Auditorium, too. It's a lot of money. But I suppose the prestige of being a patron of learning is worth it. And, of course, there's an enormous social pressure on the rich to make them become patrons of learning. They're being pushed by shame as well as pulled by the longing to believe they're the benefactors of humanity. And, happily, with Dr. Mulge a rich man can have his kudos with safety. No amount of art schools at Tarzana will ever disturb the status quo. Whereas if I were to ask Jo for fifty thousand dollars to finance research into the technique of democracy, he'd turn me down flat. Why? Because he knows that sort of thing is dangerous. He likes speeches about democracy. (Incidentally, Dr. Mulge is really terrific on the subject.) But he doesn't approve of the coarse materialists who try to find out how to put those ideals into practice. You saw how angry he got about my poor little sun-machine. Because, in its tiny way, it's a menace to the sort of big business he makes his money from. And it's the same with these other little gadgets that I've talked to him about from time to time. Come and look, if it doesn't bore you.'

He took them into the house. Here was the little electric mill, hardly larger than a coffee-machine, in which he ground his own flour as he needed it. Here was the loom at which he had learnt and was now teaching others to weave. Next he took them out to the shed in which, with a few hundred dollars' worth of electrically operated tools, he was equipped to do any kind of carpentry and even some light metal-work. Beyond the shed were the still unfinished greenhouses; for the vegetable plots weren't adequate to supply the demands of his transients. There they were, he added, pointing through the increasing darkness to the lights of a row of cabins. He could put up only a few of them; the rest had to live in a sort of garbage-heap down in the dry bed of the river — paying rent to Jo Stoyte for the privilege. Not the best material to work with, of course. But such misery as theirs left one no choice. They simply had to be attended to. A few had come through undemoralized; and, of these, a few could see what had to be done, what you had to aim at. Two or three were working with him here; and he had been able to raise money to settle two or three more on some land near Santa Suzanna. Mere beginning — unsatisfactory at that. Because, obviously, you could not even start experimenting properly until you had a full-fledged community working under the new conditions. But to set a community on its

feet would require money. A lot of money. But rich men wouldn't touch the work; they preferred art schools at Tarzana. The people who were interested had no money; that was one of the reasons why they were interested. Borrowing at the current commercial rates was dangerous. Except in very favourable circumstances, the chances were that you'd merely be selling yourself into slavery to a bank.

'It isn't easy,' said Mr. Propter, as they walked back to the house. 'But the great point is that, easy or not easy, it's there, waiting to be done. Because, after all, Pete, there is something to do.'

Mr. Propter went into the bungalow for a moment to turn out the lights, then emerged again on to the porch. Together, the three men walked down the path to the road. Before them the castle was a vast black silhouette punctured by occasional lights.

'There is something you can do,' Mr. Propter resumed; 'but only on condition that you know what the nature of the world happens to be. If you know that the strictly human level is the level of evil, you won't waste your time trying to produce good on that level. Good manifests itself only on the animal level and on the level of eternity. Knowing that, you'll realize that the best you can do on the human level is preventive. You can see that purely human activities don't interfere too much with the manifestation of good on the other levels. That's all. But politicians don't know the nature of reality. If they did, they wouldn't be politicians. Reactionary or revolutionary, they're all humanists, all romantics. They live in a world of illusion, a world that's a mere projection of their own human personalities. They act in ways which would be appropriate if such a world as they think they live in really existed. But, unfortunately, it doesn't exist except in their imaginations. Hence nothing that they do is appropriate to the real world. All their actions are the actions of lunatics, and all, as history is there to demonstrate, are more or less completely disastrous. So much for the romantics. The realists, who have studied the nature of the world, know that an exclusively humanistic attitude towards life is always fatal, and that all strictly human activities must therefore be made instrumental to animal and spiritual good. They know, in other words, that men's business is to make the human world safe for animals and spirits. Or perhaps,' he added, turning to Jeremy, 'perhaps, as an Englishman, you prefer Lloyd George's phrase to Wilson's: "A home fit for heroes to live in" — wasn't that it? A home fit for animals and spirits, for physiology and disinterested consciousness. At present, I'm afraid, it's profoundly unfit. The world we've made for ourselves is a world of sick bodies and insane or criminal personalities. How shall we make this world safe for ourselves as animals and as spirits? If we can answer that question, we've discovered what to do.'

Mr. Propter halted at what appeared to be a wayside shrine, opened a small steel door with a key he carried in his pocket, and, lifting the receiver of the telephone within, announced their presence to an invisible porter, somewhere on the other side of the moat. They walked on.

'What are the things that make the world unsafe for animals and spirits?' Mr. Propter continued. 'Obviously greed and fear, lust for power, hatred, anger ...'

At this moment, a dazzling light struck them full in the face and was almost immediately turned out.

'What in heaven's name ...?' Jeremy began.

'Don't worry,' said Peter. 'They only want to make sure it's us, not a set of gangsters. It's just the searchlight.'

'Just our old friend Jo expressing his personality,' said Mr. Propter, taking Jeremy's arm. 'In other words, proclaiming to the world that he's afraid because he's been greedy and domineering. And he's been greedy and domineering, among other reasons, because the present system puts a premium on those qualities. Our problem is to find a system that will give the fewest possible opportunities for unfortunate people, like Jo Stoyte, to realize their potentialities.'

The bridge had swung down as they approached the moat, and now the boards rang hollow under their feet.

'You'd like socialism, Pete,' Mr. Propter continued. 'But socialism seems to be fatally committed to centralization and standardized urban mass production all round. Besides, I see too many occasions for

bullying there — too many opportunities for bossy people to display their bossiness, for sluggish people to sit back and be slaves.’

The portcullis rose, the gates slid back to receive them.

‘If you want to make the world safe for animals and spirits, you must have a system that reduces the amount of fear and greed and hatred and domineering to their minimum. Which means that you must have enough economic security to get rid at least of that source of worry. Enough personal responsibility to prevent people from wallowing in sloth. Enough property to protect them from being bullied by the rich, but not enough to permit them to bully. And the same thing with political rights and authority — enough of the first for the protection of the many, too little of the second for domination by the few.’

‘Sounds like peasants to me,’ said Pete dubiously.

‘Peasants plus small machines and power. Which means that they’re no longer peasants, except in so far as they’re largely self-sufficient.’

‘And who makes the machines? More peasants?’

‘No; the same sort of people as make them now. What can’t be made satisfactorily except by mass-production methods, obviously has to go on being made that way. About a third of all production — that’s what it seems to amount to. The other two-thirds are more economically produced at home or in a small workshop. The immediate, practical problem is to work out the technique of that small-scale production. At present, all the research is going to the discovery of new fields for mass production.’

In the Grotto a row of twenty-five-foot electric candles burned in perpetual adoration before the Virgin. Above, on the tennis-court, the second butler, two maids and the head electrician were playing mixed doubles by the light of arc lamps.

‘And do you figure people will want to leave the cities and live the way you’re telling us, on little farms?’

‘Ah, now you’re talking, Pete!’ said Mr. Propter approvingly. ‘Frankly, then, I don’t expect them to leave the cities, any more than I expect them to stop having wars and revolutions. All I expect is that, if I do my work and it’s reasonably good, there’ll be a few people who will want to collaborate with me. That’s all.’

‘But if you’re not going to get more than just a few, what’s the point. Why not try to do something with the cities and the factories, seeing that that’s where most people are going to stay? Wouldn’t that be more practical?’

‘It depends how one defines the word,’ said Mr. Propter. ‘For example, you seem to think that it’s practical to help a great many people to pursue a policy which is known to be fatal; but that it isn’t practical to help a very few people to pursue a policy which there is every reason to regard as sound. I don’t agree with you.’

‘But the many are there. You’ve got to do something about them.’

‘You’ve got to do something about them,’ Mr. Propter agreed. ‘But at the same time there are circumstances when you can’t do anything. You can’t do anything effective about anyone if he doesn’t choose or isn’t able to collaborate with you in doing the right thing. For example, you’ve got to help people who are being killed off by malaria. But in practice you can’t help them if they refuse to screen their windows and insist on taking walks near stagnant water in the twilight. It’s exactly the same with the diseases of the body politic. You’ve got to help people if they’re faced by war or ruin or enslavement, if they’re under the menace of sudden revolution or slow degeneration. You’ve got to help. But the fact remains, nevertheless, that you can’t help if they persist in the course of behaviour which originally got them into their trouble. For example, you can’t preserve people from the horrors of war if they won’t give up the pleasures of nationalism. You can’t save them from slumps and depressions so long as they go on thinking exclusively in terms of money and regarding money as the supreme good. You can’t avert revolution and enslavement if they will identify progress with the increase of centralization and prosperity with the intensifying of mass production. You can’t preserve them from collective madness and suicide if they persist in paying divine honours to ideals which are merely projections of their own personalities — in other words, if they persist in worshipping themselves rather than God. So much

for conditional clauses. Now let's consider the actual facts of the present situation. For our purposes, the most significant facts are these: the inhabitants of every civilized country are menaced; all desire passionately to be saved from impending disaster; the overwhelming majority refuse to change the habits of thought, feeling and action which are directly responsible for their present plight. In other words, they can't be helped, because they are not prepared to collaborate with any helper who proposes a rational and realistic course of action. In these circumstances, what ought the would-be helper to do?

'He's got to do something', said Pete.

'Even if he thereby accelerates the process of destruction?' Mr. Propter smiled sadly. 'Doing for doing's sake,' he went on. 'I prefer Oscar Wilde. Bad art can't do so much harm as ill-considered political action. Doing good on any but the tiniest scale requires more intelligence than most people possess. They ought to be content with keeping out of mischief; it's easier and it doesn't have such frightful results as trying to do good in the wrong way. Twiddling the thumbs and having good manners are much more helpful, in most cases, than rushing about with good intentions, doing things.'

Floodlighted, Giambologna's nymph was still indefatigably spouting away against the velvet background of the darkness. Electricity and sculpture, Jeremy was thinking as he looked at her — predestined partners. The things that old Bernini could have done with a battery of projectors! The startling lights, the rich fantastic shadows! The female mystics in orgasm, the conglobulated angels, the skeletons whizzing up out of papal tombs like sky-rockets, the saints in their private hurricane of flapping draperies and wind-blown marble curls! What fun! What splendour! What self-parodying emphasis! What staggering beauty! What enormous bad taste! And what a shame that the man should have had to be content with mere daylight and tallow candles!

'No,' Mr. Propter was saying in answer to a protesting question from the young man, 'no, I certainly wouldn't advise their abandonment. I'd advise the constant reiteration of the truths they've been told again and again during the past three thousand years. And, in the intervals, I'd do active work on the technics of a better system, and active collaboration with the few who understand what the system is and are ready to pay the price demanded for its realization. Incidentally, the price, measured in human terms, is enormously high. Though, of course, much lower than the price demanded by the nature of things from those who persist in behaving in the standard human way. Much lower than the price of war, for example — particularly war with contemporary weapons. Much lower than the price of economic depression and political enslavement.'

'And what happens,' Jeremy asked in a fluting voice, 'what happens when you've had your war? Will the few be any better off than the many?'

'Oddly enough,' Mr. Propter answered, 'there's just a chance they may be. For this reason. If they've learnt the technique of self-sufficiency they'll find it easier to survive a time of anarchy than the people who depend for their livelihood on a highly centralized and specialized organization. You can't work for the good without incidentally preparing yourself for the worst.'

He stopped speaking, and they walked on through a silence broken only by the sound, from somewhere high overhead in the castle, of two radios tuned to different stations. The baboons, on the contrary, were already asleep.

Chapter Twelve

IN THE COLUMNED Lady Chapel, with its hat-racks and its Magnascos, its Brancusi and its Etruscan sarcophagus used as an umbrella-stand, Jeremy Pordage began, all of a sudden, to feel himself more cheerful and at home.

'It's as though one were walking into the mind of a lunatic,' he said, smiling happily, as he hung up his hat and followed the others into the great hall. 'Or, rather, an idiot,' he qualified. 'Because I suppose a lunatic's a person with a one-track mind. Whereas this ...' — he made a circular gesture — 'this is a

no-track mind. No-track because infinity-track. It's the mind of an idiot of genius. Positively stuffed with the best that has been thought and said.' He pronounced the phrase with a kind of old-maidish precision that made it sound entirely ludicrous. 'Greece, Mexico, backsides, crucifixions, machinery, George IV, Amida Buddha, science, Christian Science, Turkish baths — anything you like to mention. And every item is perfectly irrelevant to every other item.' He rubbed his hands together, he twinkled delightedly through his bifocals. 'Disquieting at first. But, do you know? I'm beginning to enjoy it. I find I really rather like living inside an idiot.'

'I don't doubt it,' said Mr. Propter, matter-of-factly. 'It's a common taste.'

Jeremy was offended. 'One wouldn't have thought this sort of thing was very common,' he said, nodding in the direction of the Greco.

'It isn't,' Mr. Propter agreed. 'But you can live in an idiot-universe without going to the expense of actually constructing it out of ferro-concrete and filling it with works of art.'

There was a pause while they entered the lift.

'You can live inside a cultural idiot,' Mr. Propter went on. 'Inside a patchwork of mutually irrelevant words and bits of information. Or, if you're a lowbrow, you can live in the idiot world of the *homme moyen sensuel* — the world where the irrelevances consist of newspapers and baseball, of sex and worry, of advertising and money and halitosis and keeping up with the Joneses. There's a hierarchy of idiocies. Naturally, you and I prefer the classiest variety.'

The elevator came to a halt. Pete opened the gate, and they stepped out into the whitewashed corridor of the sub-sub-basement.

'Nothing like an idiot-universe if you want a quiet irresponsible life. That is, provided you can stand the idiocy,' Mr. Propter added. 'A lot of people can't. After a time, they get tired of their no-track world. They feel the need of being concentrated and directed. They want their lives to have some sense. That's when they go communist, or join the Church of Rome, or take up with the Oxford Group. Anything, provided it will make them one-trackers. And, of course, in the overwhelming majority of cases they choose the wrong track. Inevitably. Because there are a million wrong tracks and only one right — a million ideals, a million projections of personality, and only one God and one beatific vision. From no-track idiocy most of them pass on to some one-track lunacy, generally criminal. It makes them feel better, of course; but, pragmatically, the last state is always worse than the first. If you don't want the only thing worth having, my advice is: Stick to idiocy. — Is this where you work?' he went on in another tone, as Jeremy opened the door of his vaulted study. 'And those are the Hauberk Papers, I take it. Plenty of them. The title's extinct, isn't it?'

Jeremy nodded. 'And so's the family — or very nearly. Nothing left but two old maids in a haunted house without any money.' He twinkled, uttered his little preparatory cough and, patting his bald crown, said with an exaggerated precision: 'Decayed gentlewomen.' Exquisite locution! It was one of his favourites. 'And the decay must have gone pretty far,' he added. 'Otherwise they wouldn't have sold the papers. They've refused all previous offers.'

'How fortunate one is, not to belong to an ancient family!' said Mr. Propter. 'All those inherited loyalties to bricks and mortar, all those obligations to tombstones and bits of paper and painted canvases!' He shook his head. 'What a dismal form of compulsory idolatry.' Jeremy, meanwhile, had crossed the room, opened a drawer and returned with a file of papers which he handed to Mr. Propter. 'Look at these.'

Mr. Propter looked. 'From Molinos!' he said in surprise.

'I thought that would be your cup of tea,' said Jeremy, deriving a sly pleasure from talking about mysticism in the most absurdly inappropriate language.

Mr. Propter smiled. 'My cup of tea,' he repeated. 'But not my favourite blend. There was something not quite right about poor Molinos. A strain of — how shall I put it? — of negative sensuality. He enjoyed suffering. Mental suffering, the dark night of the soul — he really wallowed in it. No doubt, poor fellow, he sincerely believed he was destroying self-will; but, without his being aware of it, he was always turning the process of destruction into another affirmation of self-will. Which was a pity,' Mr.

Propter added, taking the letters to the light, to look at them more closely. 'Because he certainly did have some first-hand experience of reality. Which only shows that you're never certain of getting there, even when you've come near enough to see what sort of thing you're going to. Here's a fine sentence,' he put in parenthetically. "'Ame a Dios,'" he read aloud, "'como es en sí y no como se lo dice y forma su imaginación.'"

Jeremy almost laughed. The coincidence that Mr. Propter should have picked on the same passage as had caught Dr. Obispo's eye that morning gave him a peculiar satisfaction. 'Pity he couldn't have read a little Kant,' he said. 'Dios en si seems to be much the same as Ding an sich. Unknowable by the human mind.'

'Unknowable by the personal human mind,' Mr. Propter agreed, 'because personality is self-will, and self-will is the negation of reality, the denial of God. So far as the ordinary human personality is concerned, Kant is perfectly right in saying that the thing in itself is unknowable. Dios en sí can't be comprehended by a consciousness dominated by an ego. But now suppose there were some way of eliminating the ego from consciousness. If you could do this, you'd get close to reality, you'd be in a position to comprehend Dios en sí. Now, the interesting thing is that, as a matter of brute fact, this thing can be done, has been done again and again. Kant's blind alley is for people who choose to remain on the human level. If you choose to climb on to the level of eternity, the impasse no longer exists.'

There was a silence. Mr. Propter turned over the sheets, pausing every now and then to decipher a line or two of the fine calligraphy. "'Tres maneras hay de silencio,'" he read aloud after a moment. "'El primero es de palabras, el segundo de deseos y el tercero de pensamientos.'" He writes nicely, don't you think? Probably that had a lot to do with his extraordinary success. How disastrous when a man knows how to say the wrong things in the right way! Incidentally,' he added, looking up with a smile into Jeremy's face, 'how few great stylists have ever said any of the right things. That's one of the troubles about education in the humanities. The best that has been thought and said. Very nice. But best in which way?. Alas, only in form. The content is generally deplorable.' He turned back to the letters. After a moment, another passage caught his attention. "'Oirá y leera el hombre racional estas espirituales materias, pero no leggera, dice San Pablo, a comprenderlas: Animalis homo non percipit ea quae sunt spiritus.'" And not merely animalis homo,' Mr. Propter commented. 'Also humanus homo. Indeed, above all humanus homo. And you might even add that humanus homo non percipit ea quae sunt animalis. In so far as we think as strictly human beings, we fail to understand what is below us no less than what is above. And then there's a further trouble. Suppose we stop thinking in a strictly human fashion; suppose we make it possible for ourselves to have direct intuitions of the non-human realities in which, so to speak, we're imbedded. Well and good. But what happens when we try to pass on the knowledge so acquired? We're floored. The only vocabulary at our disposal is a vocabulary primarily intended for thinking strictly human thoughts about strictly human concerns. But the things we want to talk about are non-human realities and nonhuman ways of thinking. Hence the radical inadequacy of all statements about our animal nature and, even more, of all statements about God or spirit, or eternity.'

Jeremy uttered a little cough. 'I can think of some pretty adequate statements about ...' he paused, beamed, caressed his polished scalp; 'well, about the more intimate aspects of our animal nature,' he concluded demurely. His face suddenly clouded; he had remembered his treasure-trove and Dr. Obispo's impudent theft.

'But what does their adequacy depend on?' Mr. Propter asked. 'Not so much on the writer's skill as the reader's response. The direct, animal intuitions aren't rendered by words; the words merely remind you of your memories of similar experiences. Notus calor is what Virgil says when he's talking about the sensations experienced by Vulcan in the embrace of Venus. Familiar heat. No attempt at description or analysis; no effort to get any kind of verbal equivalence to the facts. Just a reminder. But that reminder is enough to make the passage one of the most voluptuous affairs in Latin poetry. Virgil left the work to his readers. And, by and large, that's what most erotic writers are content to do. The few who try to do the work themselves have to flounder about with metaphors and similes and analogies. You know the sort of stuff: fire, whirlwinds, heaven, darts.'

“The vale of lilies,” Jeremy quoted. “And the bower of bliss.”

‘Not to mention the expense of spirit in a waste of shame,’ said Mr. Propter; ‘and all the other figures of speech. An endless variety, with only one feature in common — they’re all composed of words which don’t connote any aspect of the subject they’re supposed to describe.’

‘Saying one thing in order to mean another,’ Jeremy put in. ‘Isn’t that one of the possible definitions of imaginative literature?’

‘Maybe,’ Mr. Propter answered. ‘But what chiefly interests me at the moment is the fact that our immediate animal intuitions have never been given any but the most summary and inadequate labels. We say “red,” for example, or “pleasant,” and just leave it at that, without trying to find verbal equivalents for the various aspects of perceiving redness or experiencing pleasure.’

‘Well, isn’t that because you can’t go beyond “red” or “pleasant”?’ said Pete. ‘They’re just facts, ultimate facts.’

‘Like giraffes,’ Jeremy added. “There ain’t no such animal” is what the rationalist says, when he’s shown its portrait. And then in it walks, neck and all!

‘You’re right,’ said Mr. Propter. ‘A giraffe is an ultimate fact. You’ve got to accept it, whether you like it or not. But accepting the giraffe doesn’t prevent you from studying and describing it. And the same applies to redness or pleasure or *notus calor*. They can be analysed, and the results of the analysis can be described by means of suitable words. But as a matter of historical fact, this hasn’t been done.’

Pete nodded slowly. ‘Why do you figure that should be?’ he asked.

‘Well,’ said Mr. Propter, ‘I should say it’s because men have always been more interested in doing and feeling than in understanding. Always too busy making good and having thrills and doing what’s “done” and worshipping the local idols — too busy with all this even to feel any desire to have an adequate verbal instrument for elucidating their experiences. Look at the languages we’ve inherited — incomparably effective in rousing violent and exciting emotions; an ever-present help for those who want to get on in the world; worse than useless for anyone who aspires to disinterested understanding. Hence, even on the strictly human level, the need for special impersonal languages like mathematics and technical vocabularies of the various sciences. Wherever men have felt the wish to understand, they’ve given up the traditional language and substituted for it another special language, more precise and, above all, less contaminated with self-interest. Now, here’s a very significant fact. Imaginative literature deals mainly with the everyday life of men and women; and the everyday life of men and women consists, to a large extent, of immediate animal experiences. But the makers of imaginative literature have never forged an impersonal, uncontaminated language for the elucidation of immediate experiences. They’re content to use the bare, unanalysed names of experiences as mere aids to their own and their reader’s memory. Every direct intuition is *notus calor*, with the connotation of the words left open, so to speak, for each individual reader to supply according to the nature of his or her particular experiences in the past. Simple, but not exactly scientific. But then people don’t read literature in order to understand; they read it because they want to re-live the feelings and sensations which they found exciting in the past. Art can be a lot of things; but in actual practice most of it is merely the mental equivalent of alcohol and cantharides.’

Mr. Propter looked down again at the close-set lines of Molinos’s epistle. “Oirá y leerá el hombre racional estas espirituales materias,” he read out once more. “Pero non llegará a comprenderlas.” He’ll hear and read these things, but he won’t succeed in understanding them. And he won’t succeed,’ said Mr. Propter, closing the file and handing it back to Jeremy, ‘he won’t succeed for one of two excellent reasons. Either he has never seen the giraffes in question, and so, being an *hombre racional*, knows quite well that there ain’t no such animal. Or else he has had glimpses of the creatures, or has some other reason for believing in their existence, but can’t understand what the experts say about them; can’t understand because of the inadequacy of the language in which the fauna of the spiritual world is ordinarily described. In other words, he either hasn’t had the immediate experience of eternity and so has no reason to believe that eternity exists; or else he does believe that eternity exists, but can’t make head or tail of the language in which it’s talked about by those who have had experience of it.

Furthermore, when he wants to talk about eternity himself — and he may wish to do so, either in order to communicate his own experiences to others or to understand them better, from the human point of view, himself — he finds himself on the horns of a dilemma. For either he recognizes that the existing language is unsuitable — in which case he has only two rational choices: to say nothing at all, or to invent a new and better technical language of his own, a calculus of eternity, so to speak, a special algebra of spiritual experience — and if he does invent it, nobody who hasn't learnt it will know what he's talking about. So much for the first horn of the dilemma. The second horn is reserved for those who don't recognize the inadequacy of the existing language; or else who do recognize it, but are irrationally hopeful enough to take a chance with an instrument which they know to be worthless. These people will write in the existing language, and their writing will be, in consequence, more or less completely misunderstood by most of their readers. Inevitably, because the words they use don't correspond to the things they're talking about. Most of them are words taken from the language of everyday life.... But the language of everyday life refers almost exclusively to strictly human affairs. What happens when you apply words derived from that language to experiences on the plane of the spirit, the plane of timeless experience? Obviously, you create a misunderstanding; you say what you didn't mean to say.'

Pete interrupted him. 'I'd like an example, Mr. Propter,' he said.

'All right,' the other answered. 'Let's take the commonest word in all religious literature: "love." Love on the human level means — what: Practically everything from Mother to the Marquis de Sade.'

The name reminded Jeremy yet again of what had happened to the Cent-Vingt Jours de Sodome. Really it was too insufferable! the impudence of it ...!

'We don't even make the simple Greek distinction between *erai* and *philo*, *eros* and *agape*. With us everything is just love, whether it's self-sacrificing or possessive, whether it's friendship or lust or homicidal lunacy. It's all just love,' he repeated. 'Idiotic word! Even on the human level it's hopelessly ambiguous. And when you begin using it in relation to experiences on the level of eternity — well, it's simply disastrous. "The love of God." "God's love for us." "The saint's love for his fellows." What does the word stand for in such phrases? And in what way is this related to what it stands for when it's applied to a young mother suckling her baby? or to Romeo climbing into Juliet's bedroom? or to Othello as he strangles Desdemona? or to the research worker who loves his science? or to the patriot who's ready to die for his country — to die and, in the meantime, to kill, steal, lie, swindle and torture for it? Is there really anything in common between what the word stands for in these contexts and what it stands for when one talks, let us say, of the Buddha's love for all sentient beings? Obviously, the answer is: No, there isn't. On the human level, the word stands for a great many different states of mind and ways of behaving. Dissimilar in many respects, but alike at least in this: they're all accompanied by emotional excitement and they all contain an element of craving. Whereas the most characteristic features of the enlightened person's experience are serenity and disinterestedness. In other words, the absence of excitement and the absence of craving.'

"The absence of excitement and the absence of craving," Pete said to himself, while the image of Virginia in her yachting-cap, riding her pink scooter, kneeling in her shorts under the arch of the grotto, swam before his inward eye.

'Distinctions in fact ought to be represented by distinctions in language,' Mr. Propter was saying. 'If they're not, you can't expect to talk sense. In spite of which, we insist on using one word to connote entirely different things. "God is love," we say. The word's the same as the one we use when we talk about "being in love," or "loving one's children," or "being inspired by love of country." Consequently we tend to think that the thing we're talking about must be more or less the same. We imagine in a vague, reverential way, that God is composed of a kind of immensely magnified yearning.' Mr. Propter shook his head. 'Creating God in our own image. It flatters our vanity, and of course we prefer vanity to understanding. Hence those confusions of language. If we wanted to understand the word, if we wanted to think about it realistically, we should say that we were in love, but that God was x-love. In this way, people who had never had any first-hand experience on the level of eternity would at least be given a chance of knowing intellectually that what happens on that level is not the same as what happens

on the strictly human level. They'd know, because they'd seen it in print, that there was some kind of difference between love and x-love. Consequently, they'd have less excuse than people have to-day for imagining that God was like themselves, only a bit more so on the side of respectability and a bit less so, of course, on the other side. And, naturally, what applies to the word "love," applies to all the other words taken over from the language of everyday life and used to describe spiritual experience. Words like "knowledge," wisdom, power, mind, peace, joy, freedom," "good." They stand for certain things on the human level. But the things that writers force them to stand for when they describe events on the level of eternity are quite different. Hence the use of them merely confuses the issue. They just make it all but impossible for anyone to know what's being talked about. And, meanwhile, you must remember that these words from the language of everyday life aren't the only troublemakers. People who write about experiences on the level of eternity also make use of technical phrases borrowed from various systems of philosophy.'

'Isn't that your algebra of spiritual experience?' said Pete. 'Isn't that the special, scientific language you've been talking about?'

'It's an attempt at such an algebra,' Mr. Propter answered. 'But, unfortunately, a very unsuccessful attempt. Unsuccessful because this particular algebra is derived from the language of metaphysics — bad metaphysics, incidentally. The people who use it are committing themselves, whether they like it or no, to an explanation of the facts as well as a description. An explanation of actual experiences in terms of metaphysical entities, whose existence is purely hypothetical and can't be demonstrated. In other words, they're describing the facts in terms of figments of the imagination; they're explaining the known in terms of the unknown. Take a few examples. Here's one: "ecstasy." It's a technical term that refers to the soul's ability to stand outside the body — and of course it carries the further implication that we know what the soul is and how it's related to the body and the rest of the universe. Or take another instance, a technical term that is essential to the Catholic theory of mysticism: "infused contemplation." Here the implication is that there's somebody outside us who pours a certain kind of psychological experience into our minds. The further implication is that we know who that somebody is. Or consider even "union with God." What it means depends on the upbringing of the speaker. It may mean "union with the Jehovah of the Old Testament." Or it may mean "union with the personal deity of orthodox Christianity." It may mean what it probably would have meant, say, to Eckhart, "union with the impersonal Godhead of which the God of orthodoxy is an aspect and a particular limitation." Similarly, if you were an Indian, it may mean "union with Isvara" or "union with Brahman." In every case, the term implies a previous knowledge about the nature of things which are either completely unknowable, or at best only to be inferred from the nature of the experiences which the term is supposed to describe. So there,' Mr. Propter concluded, 'you have the second horn of the dilemma — the horn on which all those who use the current religious vocabulary to describe their experiences on the level of eternity inevitably impale themselves.'

'And the way between the horns?' Jeremy questioned. 'Isn't it the way of the professional psychologists who have written about mysticism? They've evolved a pretty sensible language. You haven't mentioned them.'

'I haven't mentioned them,' said Mr. Propter, 'for the same reason as in talking about beauty I shouldn't mention professional aestheticians who had never been inside a picture gallery.'

'You mean, they don't know what they're talking about?'

Mr. Propter smiled. 'I'd put it another way,' he said. 'They talk about what they know. But what they know isn't worth talking about. For what they know is only the literature of mysticism — not the experience.'

'Then there's no way between the horns,' Jeremy concluded. His eyes twinkled behind his spectacles; he smiled like a child, taking a sly triumph in some small consummation of naughtiness. 'What fun it is when there isn't a way between!' he went on. 'It makes the world seem so deliciously cosy, when all the issues are barred and there's nowhere to go to with all your brass bands and shining armour. Onward, Christian soldiers! Forward, the Light Brigade! Excelsior! And all the time you're just going round and

round — head to tail, follow-my-fuehrer — like Fabre's caterpillars. That really gives me a great deal of pleasure!

This time Mr. Propter laughed outright. 'I'm sorry to have to disappoint you,' he said. 'But unfortunately there is a way between the horns. The practical way. You can go and find out what it means for yourself, by first-hand experience. Just as you can find out what El Greco's "Crucifixion of St. Peter" looks like by taking the elevator and going up to the hall. Only, in this case, I'm afraid, there isn't any elevator. You have to go up on your own legs. And make no mistakes,' he added, turning to Pete, 'there's an awful lot of stairs.'

Dr. Obispo straightened himself up, took the tubes of the stethoscope out of his ears and stowed the instrument away in his pocket along with the *Cent-Vingt Jours de Sodome*.

'Anything bad?' Mr. Stoyte asked anxiously.

Dr. Obispo shook his head and gave him a smile of reassurance. 'No influenza anyhow,' he said. 'Just a slight intensification of the bronchial condition. I'll give you something for it to-night before you go to bed.'

Mr. Stoyte's face relaxed into cheerfulness. 'Glad it was only a false alarm,' he said, and turned away to get his clothes, which were lying in a heap on the sofa, under the *Watteau*.

From her seat at the soda-counter, Virginia let out a whoop of triumph. 'Isn't that just swell!' she cried. Then, in another, graver tone: 'You know, Uncle Jo,' she added, 'he'd got me panicked about that cough of yours. Panicked,' she repeated.

Uncle Jo grinned triumphantly and slapped his chest so hard that its hairy, almost female accumulations of flesh shivered like jellies under the blow. 'Nothing wrong with me,' he boasted.

Virginia watched him over the top of her glass, as he got into his shirt and knotted his tie. The expression on her innocent young face was one of perfect serenity. But behind those limpid blue eyes her mind was simmering with activity. "Was that a close call!" she kept saying to herself. 'Gee, was it close!' At the recollection of that sudden violent start at the sound of the elevator gate being opened, of that wild scramble as the footsteps approached along the corridor, she felt herself tingling with a delicious mixture of fear and amusement, of apprehension and triumph. It was the sensation she used to have as a child, playing hide-and-seek in the dark. A close call! And hadn't Sig been wonderful! What presence of mind! And that stethoscope thing he pulled out of his pocket — what a brain-wave! That had saved the situation. Because, without the stethoscope, Uncle Jo would have put on one of his jealousy acts. Though what right he had to be jealous, Virginia went on to reflect, with a strong sense of injury, she really didn't know. Seeing that nothing had happened except just a little reading aloud. And, anyhow, why shouldn't a girl be allowed to read that sort of thing if she wanted to? Especially as it was in French. And, besides, who was Uncle Jo to be prudish, she'd like to know? Getting mad with people only for telling you a funny story, when just look what he himself was doing all the time — and then expecting you to talk like Louisa M. Alcott, and thinking you ought to be protected from hearing so much as a dirty word! And the way he simply wouldn't allow her to tell the truth about herself, even if she had wanted to. Making a build-up of her as somebody quite different from what she really was. Acting almost as though she were Daisy Mae in the comic strip and he a sort of Little Abner rescuing her in the nick of time. Though, of course, she had to admit that it had happened at least once before he came along, because if it hadn't, there'd have been no excuse for him. It had happened, but quite unwillingly — you know, practically a rape — or else some fellow taking advantage of her being so dumb and innocent — at Congo Club with nothing on but a G-string and some talcum powder. And naturally she was always supposed to have hated it; crying her eyes out all the time until Uncle Jo came along; and then everything was different. But in that case, it now suddenly occurred to Virginia, if that was the way he thought about her, what the hell did he mean by coming home like this at seven-fifteen, when he'd told her he wouldn't be back till eight? The old double-crosser! Was he trying to spy on her? Because, if so, she wasn't going to stand for it; if so, then it just served him right that that was what Sig had been reading to her. He was just getting what he deserved for snooping around, trying to catch her doing something that wasn't right. Well, if that was how he was going to act, she'd tell Sig to come

every day and read another chapter. Though how on earth the man who wrote the book was going to keep it up for a hundred and twenty days she really couldn't imagine. Considering what had happened already in the first week — and here was she, figuring that there wasn't anything she didn't know! Well, one lived and learned. Though there was some of it she really hadn't in the least wanted to learn. Things that made you feel sick to your stomach. Horrible! As bad as having babies! (She shuddered.) Not that there weren't a lot of funny things in the book too. The piece she had made Sig read over again — that was grand, that had given her a real kick. And that other bit where the girl ...

'Well, Baby,' said Mr. Stoyte, as he did up the last button of his waistcoat. 'You're not saying much, are you? A penny for your thoughts.'

Virginia raised that childishly short upper lip in a smile that made his heart melt with tenderness and desire. 'I was thinking about you, Uncle Jo,' she said.

Chapter Thirteen

IF THOU APPEAR untouch'd by solemn thought,
Thy nature is not therefore less divine;
Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;
And worship'st at the Temple's inner shrine,
God being with thee when we know it not.

'AND VERY NICE too,' Jeremy said aloud. Transparent was the word, he reflected. The meaning was there like a fly in amber. Or, rather, there was no fly; there was only the amber; and the amber was the meaning. He looked at his watch. Three minutes to midnight. He closed his Wordsworth — and to think, he went on bitterly to remind himself, to think that he might have been refreshing his memory of Félicia! — laid the volume down on the table beside his bed and took off his glasses. Deprived of their six and a half diopters of correction, his eyes were instantly reduced to a state of physiological despair. Curved crystal had become their element; unspectacled, they were like a pair of jellied sea-creatures suddenly taken out of water. Then the light went out; and it was as though the poor things had been mercifully dropped, for safe keeping, into an aquarium.

Jeremy stretched under the bedclothes and yawned. What a day! But now, thank God, the paradise of bed. The Blessed Damozel leaned out from the gold bed of heaven. But these sheets were cotton ones, not linen; which was really a bit discreditable in a house like this! A house full of Rubenses and Grecos — and your sheets were cotton! But that 'Crucifixion of St. Peter' — what a really staggering machine! At least as good as the 'Assumption' at Toledo. Which had probably been blown up by this time, incidentally. Just to demonstrate what happened when people took things too seriously. Not but that, he went on to reflect, there wasn't something rather impressive about that old Propter-Object. (For that was what he had decided to call the man in his own mind and when he wrote to his mother: the Propter-Object.) A bit of an Ancient Mariner, perhaps. The wedding guest, he beat his breast on occasions; ought perhaps to have beaten it more often than he had done, seeing what a frightful subversion of all the common decencies and, a fortiori, the common indecencies (such as Félicia, such as every other Friday afternoon in Maida Vale) the creature was inculcating. Not without a considerable persuasiveness, damn his glittering eyes! For this particular Mariner not only held you with that eye of his; he was also and simultaneously the loud bassoon you wanted to hear. One listened without reluctance — though, of course, one had no intention of permitting one's own particular little structures of decencies and indecencies to be subverted. One was not going to allow religion (of all things!) to invade the sanctities of private life. An Englishman's home is his castle; and, curiously enough, an American's castle, as he had discovered after the first shock began to wear off, was turning out to be this particular Englishman's home. His spiritual home. Because it was the embodiment of an imbecile's no-track mind. Because there were no issues and nothing led anywhere and the dilemmas had an infinity of horns and you went round

and round, like Fabre's caterpillars, in a closed universe of utter cosiness — round and round among the Hauberk Papers, from St. Peter to La Petite Morphil to Giambologna to the gilded Bodhisattvas in the cellar to the baboons to the Marquis de Sade to St. François de Sales to Félicia and round again in due course to St. Peter. Round and round, like caterpillars inside the mind of an imbecile; round and round in an infinite cosiness of issueless thoughts and feelings and actions, of hermetically bottled art and learning, of culture for its own sake, of self-sufficient little decencies and indecencies, of impassable dilemmas and moral questions sufficiently answered by the circumambient idiocy.

Round and round, round and round, from Peter's feet to Morphil's little buttocks to the baboon's, from the beautiful Chinese spiral of the folds in the Buddha's robe to the humming-bird drinking in mid-air to Peter's feet again with the nails in them ... His drowsiness darkened into sleep.

In another room on the same floor of the donjon Pete Boone was not even trying to get to sleep; he was trying, on the contrary, to figure things out. To figure out science and Mr. Propter, social justice and eternity and Virginia and anti-fascism. It wasn't easy. Because, if Mr. Propter was right, then you'd have to start thinking quite differently about almost everything. 'Disinterested quest for truth' — that was what you said (if you were ever forced to say anything so embarrassing about why you were a biologist). And in the case of socialism it was 'humanity,' it was 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number,' it was 'progress' — and, of course, that linked up with biology again: happiness and progress through science as well as socialism. And while happiness and progress were on the way there was loyalty to the cause. He remembered a piece about loyalty by Josiah Royce, a piece he had had to read in his sophomore year at college. Something about all loyal people grasping in their own way some form of religious truth — winning some kind of genuine religious insight. It had made a big impression on him at the time. He had just lost his faith in that old Blood-of-the-Lamb business he'd been brought up in, and this had come as a kind of reassurance, had made him feel that, after all, he was religious even if he didn't go to church any more — religious because he was loyal. Loyal to causes, loyal to friends. He had been religious, it had always seemed to him, over there in Spain. Religious, again, when he felt that way about Virginia. And yet, if Mr. Propter was right, old Royce's ideas about loyalty were all wrong. Being loyal didn't of itself give you religious insight. On the contrary, it might prevent you from having insight — indeed, was absolutely certain to prevent you, if you gave your loyalty to anything less than the highest cause of all; and the highest cause of all (if Mr. Propter was right) was almost terrible in its farness and strangeness. Almost terrible; and yet the more he thought about it, the more dubious he felt about everything else. Perhaps it really was the highest. But if it was, then socialism wasn't enough. And it wasn't enough, because humanity wasn't enough. Because the greatest happiness didn't happen to be in the place where people had thought it was, because you couldn't make it come by doing things in the sort of fields you worked in if you were a social reformer. The best you could do in those fields was to make it easier for people to go on to where the greatest happiness could be had. And, of course, what applied to socialism would apply to biology or any other science, if you thought of it as a means to progress. Because, if Mr. Propter was right, then what people called progress wasn't progress. That is, it wouldn't be progress unless it had made it easier for people to go on to where the greatest happiness actually was. Easier, in other words, to be loyal to the highest cause of all. And, obviously, if that was your standard, you had to think twice about using progress as a justification for science. And then there was that disinterested quest for truth. But again, if Mr. Propter was right, biology and the rest were the disinterested quest for only one aspect of truth. But a half-truth was a falsehood, and it remained a falsehood even when you'd told it in the belief that it was the whole truth. So it looked as though that justification wouldn't do either — or at any rate as though it wouldn't do unless you were at the same time disinterestedly trying to discover the other aspect of truth, the aspect you were looking for when you gave your loyalty to the highest cause of all. And meanwhile what about Virginia, he asked himself in mounting anguish, what about Virginia? For, if Mr. Propter were right, then even Virginia wasn't enough, even Virginia might actually be an obstacle to prevent him from giving his loyalty to the highest cause of all. Even those eyes and her innocence and that utterly adorable mouth; even what he felt about her; even love itself, even the best kind of love (for he could honestly say that he hated

the other kind — that dreadful brothel in Barcelona, for example, and here, at home, those huggings after the third or fourth cocktail, those gropings by the roadside in a parked car) — yes, even the best kind of love might be inadequate, might actually be worse than inadequate. ‘I could not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not something or other more.’ Hitherto, something or other had been his biology, his socialism. But now these had turned out to be inadequate, or even, taken as ends in themselves, worse than inadequate. No loyalty was good in itself, or brought religious insight except loyalty to the highest cause of all. ‘I could not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not the highest cause of all more.’ But the question, the agonizing question, was this: Could you love the highest cause of all and go on feeling as you did about Virginia? The worst love was obviously incompatible with loyalty to the highest cause of all. Obviously so; because the worst love was just being loyal to your own physiology, whereas, if Mr. Propter was right, you couldn’t be loyal to the highest cause of all without denying such loyalties to yourself. But was the best love so fundamentally different, after all, from the worst? The worst was being loyal to your physiology. It was hateful to admit it; but so too was the best: being loyal to your physiology and at the same time (which was its distinguishing mark) loyal also to your higher feelings — to that empty ache of longing, to that infinity of tenderness, to that adoration, that happiness, those pains, that sense of solitude, that longing for identity. You were loyal to these, and being loyal to these was the definition of the best kind of love, of what people called romance and praised as the most wonderful thing in life. But being loyal to these was being loyal to yourself; and you couldn’t be loyal to yourself and loyal at the same time to the highest cause of all. The practical conclusion was obvious. But Pete refused to draw it. Those eyes were blue and limpid, that mouth adorable in its innocence. And then, how sweet she was, how beautifully thoughtful! He remembered the conversation they had had on the way into dinner. He had asked her how her headache was. ‘Don’t talk about it,’ she had whispered; ‘it might upset Uncle Jo. Doc’s been going over him with his stethoscope; doesn’t think he’s so good this evening. I don’t want to have him worrying about me. And anyhow, what is a headache?’ Not only beautiful, not only innocent and sweet, but brave too, and unselfish. And how adorable she had been to him all the evening, asking him about his work, telling him about her home in Oregon, making him talk about his home down in El Paso. In the end, Mr. Stoyte had come and sat down beside them — in silence, and his face black as thunder. Pete had glanced enquiringly at Virginia, and she had given him a look that said, ‘Please go,’ and another when he rose to say good-night, so pleadingly apologetic, so full of gratitude, so understanding, so sweet and affectionate, that the recollection of it was enough to bring the tears into his eyes. Lying there in the darkness, he cried with happiness.

That niche in the wall between the windows in Virginia’s bedroom had been intended, no doubt, for a bookshelf. But Virginia was not very keen on books; the recess had been fitted up, instead, as a little shrine. You drew back a pair of short white velvet curtains (everything in the room was white), and there, in a bower of artificial flowers, dressed in real silk clothes, with the cutest little gold crown on her head and six strings of seed pearls round her neck, stood Our Lady, brilliantly illuminated by an ingenious system of concealed electric bulbs. Barefooted and in white satin pyjamas, Virginia was kneeling before this sacred doll’s house, saying her evening prayers. Our Lady, it seemed to her, was looking particularly sweet and kind to-night. To-morrow, she decided, while her lips pronounced the formulas of praise and supplications, to-morrow morning, first thing, she’d go right down to the sewing-room and get one of the girls to help her make a new mantle for Our Lady out of that lovely piece of blue brocade she had bought last week at the junk shop in Glendale. A blue brocade mantle, fastened in front with a gold button — or, better still, with a little gold cord that you could tie in a bow, with the ends hanging down, almost to Our Lady’s feet. Oh, that would be just gorgeous! She wished it were morning so that she could start right away.

The last prayer had been said; Virginia crossed herself and rose from her knees. Happening to look down as she did so, she saw to her horror that some of the cyclamen-coloured varnish had scaled off the nails of the second and third toes of her left foot. A minute later she was squatting on the floor beside the bed, the right leg outstretched, the other foot drawn across it, making ready to repair the damage. An open bottle stood beside her; she held a small paint-brush in her hand, and a horribly industrial aura

of acetone had enveloped the Schiaparelli 'Shocking' with which her body was impregnated. She started to work, and as she bent forward, two strands of auburn hair broke loose from their curly pattern and fell across her forehead. Under frowning brows, the large blue eyes intently stared. To aid concentration, the tip of a pink tongue was held between the teeth. 'Hell!' she suddenly said aloud, as the little brush made a false stroke. Then, immediately, the teeth clamped down again.

Interrupting her work to allow the first coat of varnish to dry, she shifted her scrutiny from the toes to the calf and shin of her left leg. The hairs were beginning to grow again, she noticed with annoyance; it would soon be time for another of those wax treatments. Still pensively caressing the leg, she let her mind travel back over the events of the day. The memory of that close call with Uncle Jo still gave her shivers of apprehensive excitement. Then she thought of Sig with his stethoscope, and the upper lip lifted ravishingly in a smile of amusement. And then there was that book, which it served Uncle Jo right that she should have had Sig read to her. And Sig getting fresh with her between the chapters and making passes: that also served Uncle Jo right for trying to spy on her. She remembered how mad she had got at Sig. Not so much for what he actually did; for besides serving Uncle Jo right (of course it was only afterwards that she discovered quite how right it served him), what he actually did had been rather thrilling than otherwise; because, after all, Sig was terribly attractive and in those ways Uncle Jo didn't hardly count — in fact, you might almost say that he counted the other way; in the red, so to speak; counted less than nobody, so that anybody else who was attractive seemed still more attractive when Uncle Jo had been around. No, it wasn't what he actually did that had made her mad at him. It was the way he did it. Laughing at her, like that. She didn't mind a bit of kidding at ordinary times. But kidding while he was actually making passes — that was treating her like she was a tart on Main Street. No romance, or anything; just that sniggering sort of laugh and a lot of dirty cracks. Maybe it was sophisticated; but she didn't like it. And didn't he see that it was just plain dumb to act that way? Because, after all, when you'd been reading that book with someone so attractive as Sig — well, you felt you'd like a bit of romance. Real romance, like in the pictures, with moonlight, and swing music, or perhaps a torch singer (because it was nice to feel sad when you were happy), and a boy saying lovely things to you, and a lot of kissing, and at the end of it, almost without your knowing it, almost as if it weren't happening to you, so that you never felt there was anything wrong, anything that Our Lady would really mind ... Virginia sighed deeply and shut her eyes; her face took on an expression of seraphic tranquillity. Then she sighed again, shook her head and frowned. Instead of that, she was thinking angrily, instead of that, Sig had to go and spoil it all by acting hard-boiled and sophisticated. It just shot all the romance to pieces and made you feel mad at him. And what was the sense in that? Virginia concluded resentfully. What was the sense in that, either from his point of view or from hers?

The first coat of varnish seemed to be dry. Bending over her foot, she blew on her toes for a little, then started to apply the second coat. Behind her, all of a sudden, the door of the bedroom was opened and as gently closed again.

'Uncle Jo?' she said enquiringly and with a note of surprise in her voice, but without looking up from her enamelling.

There was no answer, only the sound of an approach across the room.

'Uncle Jo?' she repeated and, this time, interrupted the painting of her toes to turn round.

Dr. Obispo was standing over her. 'Sig!' Her voice dropped to a whisper. 'What are you doing?'

Dr. Obispo smiled his smile of ironic admiration, of intense and at the same time amused and mocking concupiscence. 'I thought we might go on with our French lesson,' he said.

'You're crazy!' She looked apprehensively towards the door. 'He's just across the hall. He might come in....'

Dr. Obispo's smile broadened to a grin. 'Don't worry about Uncle Jo,' he said.

'He'd kill you if he found you here.'

'He won't find me here,' Dr. Obispo answered. 'I gave him a capsule of Nembutal before he went to bed. He'll sleep through the Last Trump.'

'I think you're awful!' said Virginia emphatically; but she couldn't help laughing, partly out of relief and partly because it really was rather funny to think of Uncle Jo snoring away next door while Sig read her that stuff.

Dr. Obispo pulled the Book of Common Prayer out of his pocket. 'Don't let me interrupt your labours,' he said with the parody of chivalrous politeness. "'A woman's work is never done.'" Just go on as though I weren't there. I'll find the place and start reading.' Smiling at her with imperturbable impudence, he sat down on the edge of the rococo bed and turned over the pages of the book.

Virginia opened her mouth to speak; then, catching hold of her left foot, closed it again under the compulsion of a need even more urgent than that of telling him exactly where he got off. The varnish was drying in lumps; her toes would look just awful if she didn't go on with them at once. Hastily dipping her little brush in the bottle of acetone enamel, she started painting again with the focussed intensity of a Van Eyck at work on the microscopic details of the 'Adoration of the Lamb.'

Dr. Obispo looked up from the book. 'I admired the way you acted with Pete this evening,' he said. 'Flirting with him all through dinner, so that you got the old man hopping jealous of him. That was masterly. Or should one say mistressly?'

Virginia released her tongue to say emphatically, 'Pete's a nice boy.'

'But dumb,' Dr. Obispo qualified, as he sprawled with conscious elegance and a maddeningly insolent assumption of being at home across the bed.

'Otherwise he wouldn't be in love with you the way he is.' He uttered a snort of laughter. 'The poor chump thinks you're an angel, a heavenly little angel, complete with wings, harp and genuine eighteen-carat, fully jewelled, Swiss-made virginity. Well, if that isn't being dumb ...'

'You just wait till I get time for you,' said Virginia menacingly, but without looking up; for she had reached a critical phase in the execution of her work of art.

Dr. Obispo ignored the remark. 'I used to underestimate the value of an education in the humanities,' he said after a little silence. 'Now, I make that mistake no longer.' In a tone of deep solemnity, a tone, one might imagine, like Whittier's in a reading from his own works. 'The lessons of great literature!' he went on. 'The deep truths! The gems of wisdom!'

'Oh, shut up!' said Virginia.

'When I think what I owe Dante and Goethe,' said Dr. Obispo in the same prophetic style. 'Take the case of Paolo reading aloud to Francesca. With the most fruitful results, if you remember. "Noi leggevamo un giorno, per diletto, di Lancilotto, come amor lo strinse. Soli eravamo e senz' alcun sospetto. Senz' alcun sospetto,'" Dr. Obispo repeated with emphasis, looking, as he did so, at one of the engravings in the Cent-Vingt Jours. 'Not the smallest suspicion, mark you, of what was going to happen.'

'Hell!' said Virginia, who had made another slip.

'No, not even a suspicion of hell,' Dr. Obispo insisted. 'Though, of course, they ought to have been on the look-out for it. They ought to have had the elementary prudence to guard against being sent there by the accident of sudden death. A few simple precautions, and they could have made the best of both worlds. Could have had their fun while the brother was out of the way and, when the time for having fun was over, could have repented and died in the odour of sanctity. But then it must be admitted that they hadn't the advantage of reading Goethe's Faust. They hadn't learnt that inconvenient relatives could be given sleeping-draughts. And even if they had learnt, they wouldn't have been able to go to the drug-store and buy a bottle of Nembutal. Which shows that education in the humanities isn't enough; there must also be education in science. Dante and Goethe to teach you what to do. And the professor of pharmacology to show you how to put the old buzzard into a coma with a pinch of barbiturate.'

The toes were finished. Still holding her left foot, so as to keep it from any damaging contact until the varnish should be entirely dry, Virginia turned on her visitor. 'I won't have you calling him an old buzzard,' she said hotly.

'Well, shall we say "bastard"?' Dr. Obispo suggested.

'He's a better man than you'll ever be!' Virginia cried; and her voice had the ring of sincerity. 'I think he's wonderful.'

‘You think he’s wonderful,’ Dr. Obispo repeated. ‘But all the same, in about fifteen minutes you’ll be sleeping with me.’ He laughed as he spoke and, leaning forward from his place on the bed, caught her two arms from behind, a little below the shoulders. ‘Look out for your toes,’ he said, as Virginia cried out and tried to wrench herself away from him.

The fear of ruining her masterpiece made her check the movement before it was more than barely initiated. Dr. Obispo took advantage of her hesitation to stoop down, through the aura of acetone towards the nape of that delicious neck, towards the perfume of ‘Shocking,’ towards a firm warmth against the mouth, a touch of hair like silk upon the cheeks. Swearing, Virginia furiously jerked her head away. But a fine tingling of agreeable sensation was running parallel, so to speak, with her indignation, was incorporating itself in it.

This time, Dr. Obispo kissed her behind the ear. ‘Shall I tell you,’ he whispered, ‘what I’m going to do to you?’ She answered by calling him a lousy ape-man. But he told her all the same, in considerable detail.

Less than fifteen minutes had elapsed when Virginia opened her eyes and, across the now darkened room, caught sight of Our Lady smiling benignantly from among the flowers of her illuminated doll’s house. With a cry of dismay she jumped up and, without waiting to put on any clothes, ran to the shrine and drew the curtains. The lights went out automatically. Stretching out her hands in the thick darkness, she groped her way cautiously back to bed.

Part Two

Chapter One

‘AGAIN, NO DEARTH of news,’ Jeremy wrote to his mother three weeks later. ‘News of every kind and from all the centuries. Here’s a bit of news, to begin with, about the Second Earl. In the intervals of losing battles for Charles I, the Second Earl was a poet. A bad poet, of course (for the chances are always several thousands to one against any given poet being good), but with occasional involuntary deviations into charm. What about this, for example, which I found in manuscript only yesterday?’

One taper burns, but ’tis too much;
Our loves demand complete eclipse.
Let sight give place to amorous touch,
And candle-light to limbs and lips!

Rather pretty, don’t you think? But, alas, almost the only nugget so far unearthed from the alluvium. If only the rest were silence! But that’s the trouble with poets, good no less than bad. They will not keep their traps shut, as we say in the Western hemisphere. What joy if the rest of Wordsworth had been silence, the rest of Coleridge, the rest of Shelley!

‘Meanwhile, the Fifth Earl sprang a surprise on me yesterday in the form of a notebook full of miscellaneous jottings. I have only just started on them (for I mustn’t spend all my time on any one item till I have the whole collection unpacked and roughly catalogued); but the fragments I’ve read are decidedly appetizing. I found this on the first page: “Lord Chesterfield writes to his Son that a Gentleman never speaks to his footman, nor even the beggar in the street, d’un ton brusque, but ‘corrects the one coolly and refuses the other with humanity....’ His lordship should have added that there is an Art by which such coolness may be rendered no less formidable than Anger and such humanity more wounding than Insult.

“Furthermore, footmen and beggars are not the only objects on whom this Art may be exercised. His lordship has been ungallant enough in this instance to forget the Sex, for there is also an Art of coolly outraging a devoted female, and of abusing her Person, with all the bienséance befitting the most accomplished Gentleman.”

‘Not a bad beginning! I will keep you posted of any subsequent discoveries in this field.

‘Meanwhile, contemporary news is odd, confused and a bit disagreeable. To begin with, Uncle Jo is chronically glum and ill-tempered these days. I suspect the green-eyed monster; for the blue-eyed monster (in other words, Miss Maunciple, the Baby) has been rolling them, for some time now, in the direction of young Pete. Whether she rolls more than the eyes, I don’t know; but suspect the fact; for she has that inward, dreamy look, that far-away sleep-walker’s expression, which one often remarks on the faces of young ladies who have been doing a lot of strenuous love-making. You know the expression I mean: exquisitely spiritual and pre-Raphaelitish. One has only to look at such a face to know that God Exists. The one incongruous feature in the present instance is the costume. A pre-Raphaelite expression demands pre-Raphaelite clothes: long sleeves, square yokes, yards and yards of Liberty velveteen. When you see it, as I did to-day, in combination with white shorts, a bandana and a cowboy hat, you’re disturbed, you’re all put out. Meanwhile, in defence of Baby’s Honour, I must insist that all this is mere hypothesis and guess-work. It may be, of course, that this new, spiritual expression of hers is not

the result of amorous fatigue. For all I know to the contrary, Baby may have been converted by the teachings of the Propter-Object and is now walking about in a state of perpetual samadhi. On the other hand, I do see her giving the glad eye to Pete. What's more, Uncle Jo exhibits all the symptoms of being suspicious of them and extremely cross with everybody else. With me among others, of course. Perhaps even more with me than with others, because I happen to have read more books than the rest and am therefore more of a symbol of Culture. And Culture, of course, is a thing for which he has positively a Tartar's hatred. Only, unlike the Tartars, he doesn't want to burn the monuments of Culture, he wants to buy them up. He expresses his superiority to talent and education by means of possession rather than destruction; by hiring and then insulting the talented and educated rather than by killing them. (Though perhaps he would kill them if he had the Tartar's opportunities and power.) All this means that, when I am not in bed or safely underground with the Hauberks, I spend most of my time grinning and bearing, thinking of Jelly-Belly and my nice salary, in order not to think too much of Uncle Jo's bad manners. It's all very unpleasant; but fortunately not unbearable — and the Hauberks are an immense consolation and compensation.

'So much for the erotic and cultural fronts. On the scientific front, the news is that we're all perceptibly nearer to living as long as crocodiles. At the time of writing, I haven't decided whether I really want to live as long as a crocodile.' (With the penning of the second 'crocodile,' Jeremy was seized by a sudden qualm. His mother would be seventy-seven in August. Under that urbanity of hers, under the crackled glaze of the admirable conversation, there was a passionate greed for life. She would talk matter-of-factly enough about her own approaching extinction; she would make little jokes about her death and funeral. But behind the talk and the little jokes there lurked, as Jeremy knew, a fierce determination to hold on to what was left, to go on doing what she had always done, in the teeth of death, in defiance of old age. This talk of crocodiles might give pain; this expression of doubt as to the desirability of prolonging life might be interpreted as an unfavourable criticism. Jeremy took a new sheet of paper and started the paragraph afresh.)

'So much for the erotic and cultural fronts,' he wrote. 'On the scientific front, rien de nouveau, except that the Obispo is being more bumptious than ever; which isn't news, because he's always more bumptious than ever. Not one of my favourite characters, I'm afraid: though not unamusing when one feels inclined for a few moments of ribaldry. Longevity, it appears, is making headway. Old Parr and the Countess of Desmond are on the march.

'And what of the religious front? Well, our Propter-Object has given up his attempts at edification, at any rate so far as I'm concerned. Thank heaven! for when he dismounts from his hobby-horse, what excellent company he is! A mind full of all kinds of oddments; and the oddments are pigeon-holed in apple-pie order. One rather envies him his intellectual coherence; but consoles oneself by thinking that, if one had them, they'd spoil one's own particular little trick. When one has a gift for standing gracefully on one's head, one is foolish and ungrateful to envy the Marathon-runner. A funny little literary article in the hand is worth at least three Critiques of Pure Reason in the bush.

'My final item is from the home front and refers to your last letter from Grasse. What a feast! Your account of Mme de Villemomble was really Proustian. And as for the description of your drive to Cap d'Ail and your day with what remains of the Princess and ce pauvre Hunyadi — well, all I can say is that it was worthy of Murasaki: the essence of all tragedy refined to a couple of tablespoonfuls of amber-coloured tea in a porcelain cup no bigger than a magnolia flower. What an admirable lesson in the art of literary chastity! My own tendencies — only in the world of letters, I am thankful to say — are towards a certain exhibitionism. This vestal prose of yours puts me to shame.

'Well, there is nothing more to say, as I used to write when I was at school — very large, do you remember? in an effort to make the words fill up half a page of note-paper. There is nothing more to say, except, of course, the unsayable, which I leave unsaid because you know it already.'

Jeremy sealed up his letter, addressed it — to The Araucarias, for his mother would be back from Grasse by the time it had crossed the Atlantic — and slipped the envelope into his pocket. All around him the Hauberk Papers clamoured for his attention; but for some time he remained idle. His elbow

on the desk, in an attitude of prayer, he meditatively scratched his head; scratched it with both hands where little spots had formed the dry scabs at the roots of the hair that still remained to him, scabs which it was an exquisite pleasure to prise up with the finger-nails and carefully detach. He was thinking of his mother and how curious it was, after all, that one should have read all the Freudian literature about the Oedipus business, all the novels, from *Sons and Lovers* downwards, about the dangers of too much filial devotion, the menace of excessive maternal love — that one should have read them all, and still, with one's eyes open, go on being what one was: the victim of a greedy, possessive mother. And perhaps even odder was the fact that this possessive mother had also read all the relevant literature and was also perfectly aware of what she was and what she had done to her son. And yet she too went on being and doing what she had always been and done, just as he did, and with eyes no less open than his own. (There! the scab under the right hand had come loose. He pulled it out through the thick tufted hair above his ears and, as he looked at the tiny desiccated shred of tissue, was suddenly reminded of the baboons. But, after all, why not? The most certain and abiding pleasures are the tiniest, the simplest, the rudimentarily animal — the pleasure of lying in a hot bath, for example, or under the bedclothes, between waking and sleeping, in the morning; the pleasure of answering the calls of nature, the pleasure of being rubbed by a good masseur, the pleasure finally of scratching when one itched. Why be ashamed? He dropped the scab into the waste-paper basket and continued to scratch with the left hand.)

Nothing like self-knowledge, he reflected. To know why you do a thing that is wrong or stupid is to have an excuse for going on doing it. Justification by psychoanalysis — the modern substitute for justification by faith. You know the distant causes which made you a sadist or a money-grubber, a mother-worshipper or a son-cannibal; therefore you are completely justified in continuing to be a son-cannibal, mother-worshipper, money-grubber or sadist. No wonder if whole generations had risen up to bless the name of Freud! Well, that was how he and his mother managed things. 'We blood-sucking matriarchs!' Mrs. Pordage used to say of herself — in the presence of the Rector, what was more. Or else it was into Lady Fredegond's ear-trumpet that she proclaimed her innocence. 'Old Jocastas like me, with a middle-aged son in the house,' she would shout. And Jeremy would play up to her by coming across the room and bellowing into that tomb of intelligent conversation some feeble waggery about his being an old maid, for example, or about erudition as a substitute for embroidery; any rot would do. And the old harridan would utter that deep gangster's laugh of hers and wag her head till the stuffed sea-gulls, or the artificial petunias, or whatever it was that she happened to be wearing in her always extraordinary hat, nodded like the plumes of a horse in a French *pompe funèbre* of the first class. Yes, how curious it was, he said to himself again; but how sensible, considering that they both, his mother and he, desired nothing better than to go on being just what they were. Her reasons for wanting to go on being a matriarch were obvious enough; it's fun to be a queen, it's delightful to receive homage and have a faithful subject. Less obvious, perhaps, at any rate to an outsider, were his own reasons for preferring the status quo. But, looked into, they turned out to be cogent enough. There was affection to begin with; for, under a certain superficial irony and airiness, he was deeply attached to his mother. Then there was habit — habit so long standing that his mother had come to be for him almost like an organ of his own body, hardly less dispensable than his pancreas or his liver. There was even a feeling of gratitude towards her for having done to him the things which, at the time she did them, had seemed the most cruelly unjustifiable. He had fallen in love when he was thirty; he had wanted to marry. Without making a single scene, without being anything but sympathetically loving towards himself and charming in all her dealings with dear little Eileen, Mrs. Pordage had set to work to undermine the relationship between the two young people; and had succeeded so well that, in the end, the relationship just fell in on itself, like a house sapped from beneath. He had been very unhappy at the time, and with a part of himself he had hated his mother for what she had done. But as the years passed he had felt less and less bitterly about the whole business, until now he was positively grateful to her for having delivered him from the horrors of responsibility, of a family, of regular and remunerative labour, of a wife who would probably have turned out to be a worse tyrant than his mother — indeed, who would certainly have turned out

to be a worse tyrant; for the bulging, bustling matron into whom Eileen had by degrees transformed herself was one of the most disastrous females of his acquaintance: a creature passionately conventional, proud of her obtuseness, ant-like in her efficiency, tyrannically benevolent. In short, a monster. But for his mother's strategy he would now be the unfortunate Mr. Welkin who was Eileen's husband and the father of no less than four little Welkins as dreadful even in childhood and adolescence as Eileen had become in her middle age. His mother was doubtless speaking the truth when she jokingly called herself an old Jocasta, a blood-sucking matriarch; and doubtless, too, his brother Tom was right when he called him, Jeremy, a Peter Pan, and talked contemptuously of apron-strings. But the fact remained that he had had the opportunity to read what he liked and write his little articles; and that his mother saw to all the practical aspects of life, demanded in return an amount of devotion which it really wasn't very difficult to give, and left him free, on alternate Friday afternoons, to savour the refined pleasures of an infinite squalor in Maida Vale. Meanwhile, look what had happened to poor Tom! Second Secretary at Tokyo; First Secretary at Oslo; Counsellor at La Paz; and now back, more or less for good, in the Foreign Office, climbing slowly up the hierarchy, towards posts of greater responsibility and tasks of increasing turpitude. And as the salary rose and the morality of what he was called upon to do correspondingly sank, the poor fellow's uneasiness had increased, until at last, with the row over Abyssinia, he just hadn't been able to stand it any longer. On the brink of resignation or a nervous breakdown, he had managed, in the nick of time, to get himself converted to Catholicism. Thenceforward, he had been able to pack up the moral responsibility for his share in the general iniquity, take it to Farm Street and leave it there, in camphor, so to speak, with the Jesuit Fathers. Admirable arrangement! It had made a new man of him. After fourteen years of childlessness, his wife had suddenly had a baby — conceived, Jeremy had calculated, on the very night that the Spanish civil war began. Then, two days after the sack of Nanking, Tom had published a volume of comic verses. (Curious how many English Catholics take to comic versifying.) Meanwhile, he was steadily gaining weight; between the Anschluss and Munich he had put on eleven pounds. Another year or two of Farm Street and power-politics, and Tom would turn the scale at fourteen stone and have written the libretto of a musical comedy. No! Jeremy said to himself with decision. No! it simply wasn't admissible. Better Peter Pan and apron-strings and infinite squalor in a little room. Better a thousand times. Better to begin with, aesthetically; for this getting fat on Realpolitik, this scribbling of comic verses on the margins of an engraving of the Crucifixion — really, it was too inelegant. And that wasn't all: it was better even ethically; for, of course, the old Propter-Object was right: if you can't be sure of doing positive good, at least keep out of mischief. And there was poor old Tom, as busy as a beaver and, now that he was a Papist, as happy as a lark, working away at the precise spot where he could do the maximum amount of harm to the greatest possible number of people.

(The other scab came loose. Jeremy sighed and leaned back in his chair.)

One scratched like a baboon, he concluded; one lived, at fifty-four, in the security of one's mother's shadow; one's sexual life was simultaneously infantile and corrupt; by no stretch of the imagination could one's work be described as useful or important. But when one compared oneself with other people, with Tom, for example, or even with the eminent and august, with cabinet ministers and steel-magnates and bishops and celebrated novelists — well, really, one didn't come out so badly after all. Judged by the negative criterion of harmlessness, one even came out extremely well. So that, taking all things into consideration, there was really no reason why one should do anything much about anything. Having decided which, it was time to get back to the Hauberks.

Chapter Two

VIRGINIA DID NOT wake up that morning till nearly ten; and even after having had her bath and eaten her breakfast she remained in bed for another hour or more, her eyes closed, leaning back

motionless against the heaped-up pillows, like a beautiful young convalescent newly emerged from the valley of the shadow.

The valley of the shadow of death; of the greater deaths and all the little deaths. Through deaths come transfigurations. He who would save his life must lose it. Men and women are continually trying to lose their lives, the stale, unprofitable, senseless lives of their ordinary personalities. For ever trying to get rid of them, and in a thousand different ways. In the frenzies of gambling and revivalism; in the monomanias of avarice and perversion, of research and sectarianism and ambition; in the compensatory lunacies of alcohol, of reading, of daydreaming, of morphia; in the hallucinations of opium and the cinema and ritual; in the wild epilepsies of political enthusiasm and erotic pleasure; in the stupors of veronal and exhaustion. To escape; to forget one's own, old, wearisome identity; to become someone else or, better, some other thing — a mere body, strangely numbed or more than ordinarily sentient; or else just a state of impersonal mind, a mode of unindividualized consciousness. What happiness, what a blissful alleviation! Even for such as were not previously aware that there was anything in their condition that needed to be alleviated. Virginia had been one of those, happy in limitation, not sufficiently conscious of her personal self to realize its ugliness and inadequacy, or the fundamental wretchedness of the human state. And yet, when Dr. Obispo had scientifically engineered her escape into an erotic epilepsy more excruciatingly intense than anything she had known before or even imagined possible, Virginia had realized that, after all, there was something in her existence that required alleviating, and that this headlong plunge through an intenser, utterly alien consciousness into the darkness of a total oblivion was precisely the alleviation it required.

But, like all the other addictions, whether to drugs or books, to power or applause, the addiction to pleasure tends to aggravate the condition it temporarily alleviates. The addict goes down into the valley of the shadow of his own particular little death — down indefatigably, desperately down in search of something else, something not himself, something other and better than the life he miserably lives as a human person in the hideous world of human persons. He goes down and, either violently or in delicious inertia, he dies and is transfigured; but dies only for a little while, is transfigured only momentarily. After the little death is a little resurrection, a resurrection out of unconsciousness, out of self-annihilating excitement, back into the misery of knowing oneself alone and weak and worthless, back into a complete separateness, an acuter sense of personality. And the acuter the sense of separate personality, the more urgent the demand for yet another experience of assuaging death and transfiguration. The addiction alleviates, but in doing so increases the pains demanding alleviation.

Lying there, propped up against her pillows, Virginia was suffering her daily resurrection from the valley of the shadow of her nocturnal deaths. From having been epileptically something else, she was becoming her own self again — a self, it was true, still somewhat numbed and bewildered by fatigue, still haunted by the memory of strange scenes and overpowering sensations, but none the less recognizably the old Virginia; the Virginia who admired Uncle Jo for his success and was grateful to him for having given her such a wonderful time, the Virginia who had always laughed and thought life grand and never bothered about things, the Virginia who had made Uncle Jo build the Grotto and had loved Our Lady ever since she was a kid. And now this Virginia was double-crossing her poor old, admired Uncle Jo — not just telling a few little fibs, which might happen to anyone, but deliberately and systematically double-crossing him. And not only him; she was also double-crossing poor Pete. Talking to him all the time; giving him the glad eye (as glad an eye, at any rate, as she was capable of giving in the circumstances); practically making love to him in public, so that Uncle Jo wouldn't suspect Sig. Not that she wouldn't be glad in some ways if Uncle Jo did suspect him. She'd love to see him getting a punch on the jaw and being thrown out. Just love it! But meanwhile she was doing everything she could to cover him up; and in the process making that poor, idiot boy imagine she was stuck on him. A double-crosser — that was all she was. A double-crosser. The knowledge of this worried her, it made her feel unhappy and ashamed; it prevented her laughing at things the way she used to; it kept her thinking, and feeling bad about what she was doing, and resolving not to do it again; resolving, but not being able to prevent herself doing it again, even though she really hated herself for doing it and hated

Sig for making her and, above all, for telling her, in that horrible, hard-boiled, cynical way, just how he made her and why she couldn't resist it. And one of the reasons why she had to do it again was that it stopped her feeling bad about having done it before. But then, afterwards, she felt bad again. Felt so bad, indeed, that she had been ashamed to look Our Lady in the face. For more than a week now the white velvet curtains across the front of the sacred doll's house had remained drawn. She simply didn't dare to open them, because she knew that if she did, and if she made a promise there, on her knees, to Our Lady, it just wouldn't be any good. When that awful Sig came along again, she'd just go all funny inside, like her bones had all turned into rubber, and the strength would go out of her and, before she knew where she was, it would all be happening again. And that would be much worse than the other times, because she'd made a promise about it to Our Lady. So that it was better not to make any promise at all — not now, at any rate; not until there seemed to be some chance of keeping it. Because it just couldn't last this way for ever; she simply refused to believe she'd always have that awful rubber feeling in her bones. Some day she'd feel strong enough to tell Sig to go to hell. And when she did, she'd make that promise. Till then, better not.

Virginia opened her eyes, and looked with a nostalgic expression at the niche between the windows and the drawn white curtains that concealed the treasure within — the cunning little crown, the seed pearls, the mantle of blue silk, the benignant face, the adorable little hands. Virginia sighed profoundly and, closing her eyes again, tried, by a simulation of sleep, to recapture the happy oblivion from which the light of morning had forced her unwillingly to emerge.

Chapter Three

MR. STOYTE HAD SPENT his morning at the Beverly Pantheon. Very reluctantly; for he had a horror of cemeteries, even his own. But the claims of moneymaking were sacred; business was a duty to which all merely personal considerations had to be sacrificed. And talk of business! The Beverly Pantheon was the finest real estate proposition in the country. The land had been bought during the War at five hundred dollars an acre, improved (with roads, Tiny Tajes, Columbariums and statuary) to the tune of about ten thousand an acre, and was now selling, in grave-sites, at the rate of a hundred and sixty thousand an acre — selling so fast that the entire capital outlay had already been amortized, so that everything from now on would be pure jam. And, of course, as the population of Los Angeles increased, the jam would become correspondingly more copious. And the population was increasing, at the rate of nearly ten per cent, per annum — and, what was more, the main accessions consisted of elderly retired people from other States of the Union; the very people who would bring the greatest immediate profit to the Pantheon. And so, when Charlie Habakkuk sent that urgent call for him to come over and discuss the latest plans of improvements and extensions, Mr. Stoyte had found it morally impossible to refuse. Repressing his antipathies, he had done his duty. All that morning the two men had sat with their cigars in Charlie's office at the top of the Tower of Resurrection; and Charlie had waved those hands of his, and spouted cigar-smoke from his nostrils, and talked — God, how he had talked! As though he were one of those men in a red fez trying to make you buy an Oriental carpet — and incidentally, Mr. Stoyte reflected morosely, that was what Charlie looked like; only he was better fed than most of those carpet boys, and therefore greasier.

'Cut the sales talk,' he growled out loud. 'You seem to forget I own the place.'

Charlie looked at him with an expression of pained surprise. Sales talk? But this wasn't sales talk. This was real, this was earnest. The Pantheon was his baby; for all practical purposes he had invented the place. It was he who had thought up the Tiny Taj and the Church of the Bard; he who, on his own initiative, had bought that bargain lot of statues at Genoa; he who had first clearly formulated the policy of injecting sex-appeal into death; he who had resolutely resisted every attempt to introduce into the cemetery any representation of grief or age, any symbol of mortality, any image of the sufferings of

Jesus. He had had to fight for his ideas, he had had to listen to a lot of criticism; but the results had proved him right. Anyone who complained that there was no Crucifixion in the place could be referred to the published accounts. And here was Mr. Stoyte talking sarcastically about sales talk. Sales talk, indeed, when the demand for space in the Pantheon was so great that existing accommodation would soon be inadequate. There would have to be enlargements. More space, more buildings, more amenities. Bigger and better; progress; service.

In the top of the Tower of Resurrection, Charlie Habakkuk unfolded his plans. The new extension was to have a Poets' Corner, open to any bona fide writer — though he was afraid they'd have to draw the line at the authors of advertising copy, which was a pity, because a lot of them made good money and might be persuaded to pay extra for the prestige of being buried with the moving-picture people. But that cut both ways — because the scenario writers wouldn't feel that the Poets' Corner was exclusive enough if you let in the advertising boys. And seeing that the moving-picture fellows made so much more than the others ... well, it stood to reason, Charlie had concluded, it stood to reason. And, of course, they'd have to have a replica of Westminster Abbey in the Poets' Corner. Wee Westminster — it would sound kind of cute. And as they needed a couple of extra mortuary furnaces anyhow, they'd have them installed there in the Dean's Yard. And they'd put a new automatic record-player in the crypt, so that there'd be more variety in the music. Not that people didn't appreciate the Perpetual Wurlitzer; they did. But all the same it got a bit monotonous. So he'd thought they might have some recordings of a choir singing hymns and things, and perhaps, every now and then, just for a change, some preacher giving an inspirational message, so that you'd be able to sit in the Garden of Contemplation, for example, and listen to the Wurlitzer for a few minutes, and then the choir singing 'Abide with Me,' and then a nice sort of Barrymore voice saying some piece, like the Gettysburg Address, or 'Laugh and the World Laughs with You,' or maybe some nice juicy bit by Mrs. Eddy or Ralph Waldo Trine — anything would do so long as it was inspirational enough. And then there was his idea of the Catacombs. And, boy, it was the best idea he'd ever had. Leading Mr. Stoyte to the southeastern window, he had pointed across an intervening valley of tombs and cypresses and the miniature monuments of bogus antiquity, to where the land sloped up again to a serrated ridge on the further side. There, he had shouted excitedly, there, in that hump in the middle; they'd tunnel down into that. Hundreds of yards of catacombs. Lined with reinforced concrete to make them earthquake-proof. The only class-A catacombs in the world. And little chapels, like the ones in Rome. And a lot of phoney-looking murals, looking like they were real old. You could get them done cheap by one of those W.P.A. art projects. Not that those guys knew how to paint, of course; but that was quite O.K. seeing that the murals had to look phoney anyhow. And they wouldn't have anything but candles and little lamps for people to carry around — no electric light at all, except right at the very end of all those winding passages and stairs, where there'd be a great big sort of underground church, with one of those big nude statues that were going up at the San Francisco Fair and that they'd be glad to sell for a thousand bucks or even less when the show was over — one of those modernistic broads with muscles on them — and they'd have her standing right in the middle there, with maybe some fountain spouting all around her and concealed pink lighting in the water so she'd look kind of real. Why, the tourists would come a thousand miles to see it. Because there was nothing people liked so much as caves. Look at those Carlsbad Caverns, for example; and all those caves in Virginia. And those were just common-or-garden natural caves, without murals or anything. Whereas these would be catacombs. Yes, sir; real catacombs, like the things the Christian Martyrs lived in — and, by gum, that was another idea! Martyrs! Why wouldn't they have a Chapel of the Martyrs with a nice plaster group of some girls with no clothes on, just going to be eaten by a lion? People wouldn't stand for the Crucifixion; but they'd get a real thrill out of that.

Mr. Stoyte had listened wearily and with repugnance. He loathed his Pantheon and everything to do with it. Loathed it because in spite of statues and Wurlitzer, it spoke to him of nothing but disease and death and corruption and final judgment; because it was here, in the Pantheon, that they would bury him — at the foot of the pedestal of Rodin's 'Le Baiser.' (An assistant manager had once inadvisedly pointed out the spot to him and been immediately fired; but there was no dismissing the memory of his

offence.) Charlie's enthusiasm for catacombs and Wee Westminster's elicited no answering warmth; only occasional grunts and a final sullen O.K. for everything except the Chapel of the Martyrs. Not that the Chapel of the Martyrs seemed to Mr. Stoyte a bad idea; on the contrary, he was convinced that the public would go crazy over it. If he rejected it, it was merely on principle — because it would never do to allow Charlie Habakkuk to think he was always right.

'Get plans and estimates for everything else,' he ordered in a tone so gruff that he might have been delivering a reprimand. 'But no martyrs. I won't have any martyrs.'

Almost in tears, Charlie pleaded for just one lion, just one Early Christian Virgin with her hands tied behind her back — because people got such a kick out of anything to do with ropes or handcuffs. Two or three Virgins would have been much better, of course; but he'd be content with one. 'Just one, Mr. Stoyte,' he implored, clasping his eloquent hands. 'Only one.'

Obstinately deaf to all his entreaties, Mr. Stoyte shook his head. 'No martyrs here,' he said. 'That's final.' And to show that it was final, he threw away the butt of his cigar and got up to go.

Five minutes later, Charlie Habakkuk was letting off steam to his secretary. The ingratitude of people! The stupidity! He'd a good mind to resign, just to show the old buzzard that they couldn't get on without him. Not for five minutes. Who was it that had made the place what it was: the unique cemetery in the world? Absolutely the unique. Who? (Charlie slapped himself on the chest.) And who made all the money? Jo Stoyte. And what had he done to make the place a success? Absolutely nothing at all. It was enough to make you want to be a communist. And the old devil wasn't grateful or even decently polite. Pushing you around as though you were a bum off the streets! Well, there was one comfort: Old Jo hadn't been looking any too good this morning. One of these days, maybe, they'd have the pleasure of burying him. Down there in the vestibule of the Columbarium, eight foot underground. And serve him right!

It was not only that he didn't look too good; leaning back in the car which was taking him down to Beverly Hills on his way to see Clancy, Mr. Stoyte was thinking, as he had thought so often during these last two or three weeks, that he didn't feel too good. He'd wake up in the morning feeling kind of sluggish and heavy; and his mind didn't seem to be as clear as it was. Obispo called it suppressed influenza and made him take those pills every night; but they didn't seem to do him any good. He went on feeling that way just the same. And, on top of everything else, he was worrying himself sick about Virginia. The Baby was acting strange, like someone that wasn't really there; so quiet, and not noticing anything, and starting when you spoke to her and asking what you said. Acting for all the world like one of those advertisements for Sal Hepatica or California Syrup of Figs; and that was what he'd have thought it was, if it hadn't been for the way she went on with that Peter Boone fellow. Always talking to him at meals; and asking him to come and have a swim; and wanting to take a squint down his microscope — and what sort of a damn did she give for microscopes, he'd like to know? Throwing herself at him — that was what it had looked like on the surface. And that kind of syrup-of-figs way of acting (like people at those Quaker Meetings that Prudence used to make him go to before she took up with Christian Science) — that all fitted in. You'd say she was kind of stuck on the fellow. But then why should it have happened so suddenly? Because she'd never shown any signs of being stuck on him before. Always treated him like you'd treat a great big dog — friendly and all that, but not taking him too seriously; just a pat on the head and then, when he'd wagged his tail, thinking of something else. No, he couldn't understand it; he just couldn't figure it out. It looked like she was stuck on him; but then, at the same time, it looked like she just didn't notice if he was a boy or a dog. Because that was how she was acting even now. She paid a lot of attention to him — only the way you'd pay attention to a nice big retriever. And that was what had thrown him out. If she'd been stuck on Pete in the ordinary way, then he'd have got mad, and raised hell, and thrown the boy out of the house. But how could you raise hell over a dog? How could you get mad with a girl for telling a retriever she'd like to have a squint down his microscope? You couldn't even if you tried; because getting mad didn't make any sense. All he'd been able to do was just worry, trying to figure things out and not being able to. There was only one thing that was clear, and that was that the Baby meant more to him than he had thought,

more than he had ever believed it possible that anyone should mean to him. It had begun by his just wanting her — wanting her to touch, to hold, to handle, to eat; wanting her because she was warm and smelt good; wanting her because she was young and he was old, because she was so innocent and he too tired for anything not innocence to excite. That was how it had begun; but almost immediately something else had happened. That youth of hers, that innocence and sweetness — they were more than just exciting. She was so cute and lovely and childish, he almost felt like crying over her, even while he wanted to hold and handle and devour. She did the strangest things to him — made him feel good, like you felt when you'd tanked up a bit on Scotch, and at the same time made him feel good, like you felt when you were at church, or listening to William Jennings Bryan, or making some poor kid happy by giving him a doll or something. And Virginia wasn't just anybody's kid, like the ones at the hospital; she was his kid, his very own. Prudence wasn't able to have children; and at the time he'd been sore about it. But now he was glad. Because if he'd had a row of kids, they'd be standing in the way of the Baby. And Virginia meant more to him than any daughter could mean. Because even if she were only a daughter, which she wasn't, she was probably a lot nicer than his own flesh-and-blood daughter would have been — seeing that, after all, the Stoytes were all a pretty sour-faced lot and Prudence had been kind of dumb even if she was a good woman, which she certainly was — maybe a bit too good. Whereas with the Baby everything was just right, just perfect. He had been happier since he'd known her than he'd ever been in years. With her around, things had seemed worth doing again. You didn't have to go through life asking 'Why?' The reason for everything was there in front of you, wearing that cunning little yachting-cap, maybe, or all dressed up with her emeralds and everything for some party with the moving-picture crowd.

And now something had happened. The reason for carrying on was being taken away from him. The Baby had changed; she was fading away from him; she had gone somewhere else. Where had she gone? And why? Why did she want to leave him? To leave him all alone. Absolutely alone, and he was an old man, and the white slab was there in the vestibule of the Columbarium, waiting for him.

'What's the matter, Baby?' he had asked. Time and again he had asked, with anguish in his heart, too miserable to be angry, too much afraid of being left alone to care about his dignity, or his rights, about anything except keeping her, at whatever cost: 'What's the matter, Baby?'

And all she ever did was to look at him as though she were looking at him from some place a million miles away — to look at him like that and say: Nothing; she was feeling fine; she hadn't got anything on her mind; and, no, there wasn't anything he could do for her, because he'd given her everything already, and she was perfectly happy.

And if he mentioned Pete (kind of casually, so she shouldn't think he suspected anything) she wouldn't even bat an eyelid; just say: Yes, she liked Pete; he was a nice boy, but unsophisticated — and that made her laugh; and she liked laughing.

'But, Baby, you're different,' he would say; and it was difficult for him to keep his voice from breaking, he was so unhappy. 'You don't act like you used to, Baby.'

And all she'd answer was, that that was funny because she felt just the same.

'You don't feel the same about me,' he would say.

And she'd say she did. And he'd say no. And she'd say it wasn't true. Because what reasons did he have for saying she felt different about him? And of course she was quite right; there weren't any reasons you could lay your finger on. He couldn't honestly say she acted less affectionate, or didn't want to let him kiss her, or anything like that. She was different because of something you couldn't put a name to. Something in the way she looked and moved and sat around. He couldn't describe it except by saying it was like she wasn't really there where you thought you were looking at her, but some place else; some place where you couldn't touch her, or talk to her, or even really see her. That was how it was. But whenever he had tried to explain it to her, she had just laughed at him and said he must be having some of those feminine intuitions you read about in stories — only his feminine intuitions were all wrong.

And so there he'd be, back where he started from, trying to figure it out and not being able to, and worrying himself sick. Yes, worrying himself sick. Because when he'd got over feeling sluggish and heavy, like he always did in the mornings now, he felt so worried about the Baby that he'd start bawling at the servants and being rude to that god-damned Englishman and getting mad with Obispo. And the next thing that happened was that he couldn't digest his meals. He was getting heartburn and sour stomach; and one day he had such a pain that he'd thought it was appendicitis. But Obispo had said it was just gas; because of his suppressed influenza. And then he'd got mad and told the fellow he must be a lousy doctor if he couldn't cure a little thing like that. Which must have put the fear of God into Obispo, because he'd said, 'Just give me two or three days more. That's all I need to complete the treatment.' And he'd said that suppressed influenza was a funny thing; didn't seem to be anything, but poisoned the whole system, so you couldn't think straight any more; and you'd get to imagining things that weren't really there, and worrying about them.

Which might be true in a general way; but in this case he just knew it wasn't all imagination. The Baby was different; he had a reason for being worried.

Sunk in his mood of perplexed and agitated gloom, Mr. Stoyte was carried down the windings of the mountain road, through the bowery oasis of Beverly Hills, and eastward (for Clancy lived in Hollywood) along Santa Monica Boulevard. Over the telephone, that morning, Clancy had put on one of his melodramatic conspirator acts. From the rigmarole of hints and dark allusions and altered names, Mr. Stoyte had gathered that the news was good. Clancy and his boys had evidently succeeded in buying up most of the best land in the San Felipe Valley. At another time, Mr. Stoyte would have exulted in his triumph; to-day, even the prospect of making a million or two of easy money gave him no sort of pleasure. In the world he had been reduced to inhabiting, millions were irrelevant. For what could millions do to allay his miseries? The miseries of an old, tired, empty man; of a man who had no end in life but himself, no philosophy, no knowledge but of his own interests, no appreciations, not even any friends — only a daughter-mistress, a concubine-child, frantically desired, cherished to the point of idolatry. And now this being, on whom he had relied to give significance to his life, had begun to fail him. He had come to doubt her fidelity — but to doubt without tangible reasons, to doubt in such a way that none of the ordinary satisfying reactions, of rage, of violence, of recrimination, was appropriate. The sense was going out of his life and he could do nothing; for he was in a situation with which he did not know how to deal, hopelessly bewildered. And always, in the background of his mind, there floated an image of that circular marble room, with Rodin's image of desire at the centre, and that white slab in the pavement at its base — the slab that would some day have his name engraved upon it: Joseph Panton Stoyte, and the dates of his birth and death. And along with that inscription went another, in orange letters on a coal-black ground: 'It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God.' And meanwhile here was Clancy, conspiratorially announcing victory. Good news! Good news! A year or two from now he would be richer by another million. But the millions were in one world and the old, unhappy, frightened man was in another, and there was no communication between the two.

Chapter Four

JEREMY WORKED FOR a couple of hours, unpacking, examining, provisionally cataloguing, filing. There were no finds this morning — merely accounts and legal documents and business letters. Stuff for Coulton and Tawney and the Hammonds; not at all his cup of tea.

By half-past twelve the weight of boredom had become too much for him. He broke off and, in search of a little spiritual refreshment, turned to the Fifth Earl's vellum-bound notebook.

'July 1780,' he read. 'Sensuality is close allied with Sorrow, and it sometimes happens that, on account of the very sincerity of her Grief, the weeping Widow is betrayed by her own Feelings and finds herself unable to resist the importunities of the funeral Guest, who knows the Art of passing

imperceptibly from Condolence to Familiarity. I myself have posthumously cuckolded a Duke and two Viscounts (one of them no later than last night) upon the very Beds from which, but a few hours before, they had been borne in Pomp to the ancestral Sepulchre.'

That was something for his mother, Jeremy reflected. The sort of thing she really adored! He had a good mind, if it wasn't too horribly expensive, to cable it to her in a night letter.

He returned to the notebook.

'One of the Livings in my Gift having unexpectedly fallen vacant, my Sister sent to me to-day a young Divine whom she commends, and I believe her, for his singular Virtue. I will have no Parsons around me but such as drink deep, ride to Hounds and caress the Wives and daughters of their Parishioners. A Virtuous Parson does nothing to test or exercise the Faith of his Flock; but as I have written to my Sister, it is by Faith that we come to Salvation.'

The next entry was dated March 1784.

'In old Tombs newly opened a kind of ropy Slime depends from the roof and coats the walls. It is the condensation of decay.'

'January 1786. Half a dozen pensées in as many years. If I am to fill a volume at this rate, I must outlast the patriarchs. I regret my sloth, but console myself with the thought that my fellow men are too contemptible for me to waste my time instructing or entertaining them.'

Jeremy hurried over three pages of reflections on politics and economics. Under the date of March 12th, 1787, he found a more interesting entry:

'Dying is almost the least spiritual of our acts, more strictly carnal even than the act of love. There are Death Agonies that are like the strainings of the Costive at stool. To-day I saw M. B. die.'

'January 11th, 1788. This day fifty years ago I was born. From solitude in the Womb, we emerge into solitude among our Fellows, and return again to solitude within the Grave. We pass our lives in the attempt to mitigate that solitude. But Propinquity is never fusion. The most populous City is but an agglomeration of wildernesses. We exchange Words, but exchange them from prison to prison, and without hope that they will signify to others what they mean to ourselves. We marry, and there are two solitudes in the house instead of one; we beget children, and there are many solitudes. We reiterate the act of love; but again propinquity is never fusion. The most intimate contact is only of Surfaces, and we couple, as I have seen the condemned Prisoners at Newgate coupling with their Trulls, between the bars of our cages. Pleasure cannot be shared; like Pain, it can only be experienced or inflicted, and when we give Pleasure to our Lovers or bestow Charity upon the Needy, we do so, not to gratify the object of our Benevolence, but only ourselves. For the Truth is that we are kind for the same reason as we are cruel, in order that we may enhance the sense of our own Power; and this we are for ever trying to do, despite the fact that by doing it we cause ourselves to feel more solitary than ever. The reality of Solitude is the same in all men, there being no mitigation of it, except in Forgetfulness, Stupidity or Illusion; but a man's sense of Solitude is proportionate to the sense and fact of his Power. In any set of circumstances, the more Power we have, the more intensely do we feel our solitude. I have enjoyed much Power in my life.'

'June 1788. Captain Pavey came to pay his respects to-day, a round, jovial, low man, whom even his awe of me could not entirely prevent from breaking out into the vulgar Mirth which is native to him. I questioned him concerning his last Voyage, and he very minutely described for me the mode of packing the Slaves in the holds; the chains used to secure them; the feeding of them and, in calm weather, the exercising on deck, though always with Nets about the bulwarks, to prevent the more desperate from casting themselves into the sea; the Punishments for the refractory; the schools of hungry sharks accompanying the vessel; the scurvy and other diseases, the wearing away of the negroes' Skin by the hardness of the planks on which they lie and the continual Motion of the waves; the Stench so horrible that even the hardiest seaman will turn pale and swoon away, if he ventures into the hold; the frequent Deaths and almost incredibly rapid Putrefaction, especially in damp Weather near the Line. When he took his leave, I made him a present of a gold snuff box. Anticipating no such favour, he was so coarsely loud in his expression of thanks and future devotion to my Interests, that I was forced to cut

him short. The snuff box cost me sixty guineas; Captain Pavey's last three Voyages have brought me upwards of forty thousand. Power and wealth increase in direct proportion to a man's distance from the material objects from which wealth and power are ultimately derived. For every risk taken by the General Officer, the private soldier takes a hundred; and for every guinea earned by the latter the General earns a hundred. So with myself and Pavey and the Slaves. The Slaves labour in the Plantation for nothing but blows and their diet; Captain Pavey undergoes the hardships and dangers of the Sea and lives not so well as a Haberdasher or Vintner; I put my hands to nothing more material than a Banker's draft, and a shower of gold descends upon me for my pains. In a world such as ours, a man is given but three choices. In the first place, he may do as the multitude have always done and, too stupid to be wholly a knave, mitigate his native baseness with a no less native folly. Second, he may imitate those more consummate fools who painfully deny their native Baseness in order to practise Virtue. Third, he may choose to be a man of sense — one who, knowing his native Baseness, thereby learns to make use of it and, by the act of knowledge, rises superior to it and to his more foolish Fellows. For myself, I have chosen to be a man of sense.'

'March 1789. Reason promises happiness; Feeling protests that it is Happiness; Sense alone gives Happiness. And Happiness itself is like dust in the mouth.'

'July 1789. If Men and Women took their Pleasures as noisily as the Cats, what Londoner could ever hope to sleep of nights?'

'July 1789. The Bastille is fallen. Long live the Bastille!'

The next few pages were devoted to the Revolution. Jeremy skipped them. In 1794 the Fifth Earl's interest in the Revolution gave place to interest in his own health.

'To those who visit me,' he had written, 'I say that I have been sick and am now well again. The words are quite untrue; for it was not I who lay at Death's door, nor is it I who am recovered. The first was a special creation of Fever, an embodiment of Pain and Lassitude; the second is not I, but an old man, weak, shrunken and without desires. My name and some memories are all that remain to me of the Being I once was. It is as if a Man had died and willed to some surviving Friend a handful of worthless trinkets to remember him by.'

'1794. A sick, rich Man is like one who lies wounded and alone in the deserts of Egypt; the Vultures hover lower and lower above his head and the Jackals and Hyenas prowl in ever-narrowing circles about the place where he lies. Not even a rich Man's Heirs could be more unsleepingly attentive. When I look into my Nephew's face and read there, behind the mask of Solicitude, his impatient longing for my Death and his disappointment that I am not already gone, I feel an influx of new Life and Strength. If for no other reason, I will live on to rob Him of the Happiness which he still believes (for he is confident of my Relapse) to be within his Grasp.'

'1794. The World is a Mirror, reflecting his image to the Beholder.'

'January 1795. I have tried King David's remedy against old age and found it wanting. Warmth cannot be imparted, but only evoked; and where no lingering spark persists, even tinder will not raise a flame.

'It may be as the Parsons say, that we are saved by another's vicarious suffering; but I can vouch for the feet that vicarious pleasure is without efficacy, except only to enhance the sentiments of Superiority and Power in him who inflicts it.'

'1795. As the Satisfactions of Sense decay, we compensate ourselves for their loss by cultivating the sentiments of Pride and Vanity. The love of Domination is independent of the bodily faculties and therefore, when the body loses its powers, may easily take the place of vanished Pleasure. For myself, I was never without the love of Dominion even when in the Throes of Pleasure. Since my late Death, the Phantom that remains of me is forced to content itself with the first, less substantial and, above all, less harmless of these two Satisfactions.'

'July 1796. The fishponds at Gonister were dug in the Ages of Superstition by the monks of the Abbey upon whose foundations the present House is built. Under King Charles I, my great-great-grandfather caused a number of leaden Disks engraved with his cypher and the date, to be attached by silver rings

to the tails of fifty well-grown carp. Not less than twenty of these fish are alive to-day, as one may count whenever the bell is rung that calls the Creatures to be fed. With them come others even larger than they — survivors, it may be, from the monkish times before King Henry's Dissolution of the Religious Houses. Watching them through the pellucid Water, I marvel at the strength and unimpaired agility of these great Fishes, of which the oldest were perhaps alive when the Utopia was written, while the youngest are co-eval with the author of Paradise Lost. The latter attempted to justify God's ways to Man. He would have done a more useful Work in undertaking to explain the ways of God to Fish. Philosophers have wasted their own and their readers' time in speculations upon the Immortality of the Soul; the Alchemists have pored for centuries over their crucibles in the vain hope of discovering the Elixir or the Stone. Meanwhile, in every pond and river, one may find Carps that have outlived three Platos and half a dozen Paracelsuses. The Secret of eternal Life is not to be found in old Books, nor in liquid Gold, nor even in Heaven; it is to be found in the Mud and only awaits a skilful Angler.'

Outside the corridor the bell rang for lunch. Jeremy rose, put the Fifth Earl's notebook away and walked towards the lift, smiling to himself at the thought of the pleasure he would derive from telling that bumptious ass, Obispo, that all his best ideas about longevity had been anticipated in the eighteenth century.

Chapter Five

LUNCHEON, IN THE absence of Mr. Stoyte, was a very cheerful meal. The servants went about their business unreprimated. Jeremy could talk without the risk of being snubbed or insulted. Dr. Obispo was able to tell the story about the chimney-sweep who applied for life-insurance after going on his honeymoon, and, from the far-away depths of that almost trance-like state of fatigue — that state which she deliberately fostered, so as not to have to think too much and feel too badly about what was happening — Virginia was at liberty to laugh at it as loudly as she liked. And though with one part of herself she would have liked not to laugh at all, because she didn't want to make Sig think she was encouraging him in any way, with another part she wanted to laugh, indeed couldn't help laughing, because, after all, the story was really very funny. Besides, it was such a relief not to have to put on that act with Pete for the benefit of uncle Jo. No double-crossing. For once, she could be herself. The only fly in the ointment was that this self she was being was such a miserable specimen: a self with bones that would go like rubber whenever that horrible Sig chose to come along; a self without the strength to keep a promise even to Our Lady. Her laughter abruptly ceased.

Only Pete was consistently unhappy — about the chimney-sweep, of course, and Virginia's burst of merriment; but also because Barcelona had fallen and, with it, all his hopes of a speedy victory over fascism, all prospect of ever seeing any of his old comrades again. And that wasn't all. Laughing at the story of the chimney-sweep was only a single painful incident among many. Virginia had allowed the first two courses of the meal to come and go without once paying any attention to him. But why, why? His distress was aggravated by bitter bewilderment. Why? In the light of what had been happening during the past three weeks it was inexplicable. Ever since the evening of the day she had turned back at the Grotto, Virginia had been simply wonderful to him — going out of her way to talk to him, inviting him to tell her things about Spain and even about biology. Why, she had actually asked to look at something under the microscope. Trembling with happiness, so that he could hardly adjust the slide, he had focussed the instrument on a preparation of the carp's intestinal flora. Then she had sat down in his place, and as she bent over the eyepiece her auburn curls had swung down on either side of the microscope and, above the edge of her pink sweater, the nape of her neck had been uncovered, so white, so tangibly inviting, that the enormous effort he had had to make to prevent himself from kissing it had left him feeling almost faint.

There had been times during the ensuing days when he wished that he hadn't made that effort. But then his better self would reassert its rule and he was glad again that he had. Because, of course, it wouldn't have been right. For, though he had long since given up the family belief in that Blood-of-the-Lamb business, he still remembered what his pious and conventional mother had said about kissing anyone you weren't engaged to; he was still at heart the earnest adolescent whom Reverend Schlitz's eloquence had fired during the perplexities of puberty with a passionate determination to be continent, a conviction of the Sacredness of Love, an enthusiasm for something wonderful called Christian marriage. But at the moment, unfortunately, he wasn't earning enough to feel justified in asking Virginia to accept his sacred love and enter into Christian marriage with him. And there was the added complication that on his side the Christian marriage wouldn't be Christian except in substance, whereas Virginia was attached to the institution which Reverend Schlitz sometimes called the Whore of Babylon and the Marxists regarded as pre-eminently detestable. An institution, moreover, that would think as poorly of him as he thought of it — though he thought rather less poorly of it now that Hitler was persecuting it in Germany and since he had been looked after by those Sisters of Mercy in Spain. And even if those religious and financial difficulties could somehow be miraculously smoothed away, there remained the dreadful fact of Mr. Stoyte. He knew, of course, that Mr. Stoyte was nothing more than a father to Virginia, or at most an uncle — but knew it with that excessive certainty that is born of desire; knew it in the same way as Don Quixote knew that the pasteboard vizor of his helmet was as strong as steel. It was the kind of knowledge about which it is prudent to make no enquiries; and of course, if he asked Virginia to marry him, such enquiries, or the information such enquiries might be expected to elicit, would almost inevitably be forced upon him.

Yet another complicating factor in the situation was Mr. Propter. For if Mr. Propter was right, as Pete was coming to feel more and more certain that he was, then it was obviously unwise to do something that would make more difficult the passage from the human level to the level of eternity. And though he loved Virginia, he found it difficult to believe that marriage to her would be anything but an obstacle to the enlightenment of everybody concerned.

Or rather, he had thought this; but in the course of the last week or two his opinion had changed. Or, to be more exact, he no longer had an opinion; he was just uncertain and bewildered. For Virginia's character seemed almost suddenly to have changed. From being childlike, loud and extraverted, her innocence had become quiet and inscrutable. In the past, she had treated him with the jocular and casual friendliness of mere good-fellowship; but recently there had been a strange alteration. The jokes had stopped and a kind of earnest solicitude had taken their place. She had been simply wonderful to him — but not in the way a girl is wonderful to a man she wants to fall in love with her. No, Virginia had been wonderful like a sister — and not an ordinary sister, either: almost a Sister of Mercy. Not just any Sister of Mercy: that particular Sister who had nursed him when he was in hospital at Gerona; the young Sister with the big eyes and the pale oval face, like the face of the Virgin Mary in a picture; the one who always seemed to be secretly happy, not because of anything that was going on around her, but because of something inside, something extraordinary and beautiful behind her eyes that she could look in at; and when she'd looked at it, there was no reason any more why she should feel scared by an air-raid, for example, or upset by an amputation. She evidently saw things from what Mr. Propter called the level of eternity; they didn't affect her in the way they'd affect a person living on the human level. On the human level you were scared and angry; or, if you were calm, you made yourself calm by an effort of will. But the Sister was calm without making an effort of will. At the time, he had admired without comprehension. Now, thanks to Mr. Propter, he could begin to understand as well as admire.

Well, that was the face that Virginia's had reminded him of during the past weeks. There had been a kind of sudden conversion from the outward-looking life to the inward, from open responsiveness to secret and mysterious abstraction. The cause of this conversion was beyond his comprehension; but the fact was manifest, and he had respected it. Respected it by not kissing her neck as she bent over the microscope; by never even touching her arm or taking her hand; by not saying to her one word of all he felt about her. In the strange, inexplicable circumstances of her transformation, such actions, he had

felt, would have been inappropriate to the point positively of sacrilege. It was as a sister that she had chosen to be wonderful to him; it was therefore as a brother that he had responded. And now, for no known reason, she seemed suddenly to have become unaware of his existence.

The sister had forgotten her brother; and the Sister of Mercy had forgotten herself — forgotten herself so far as to listen to Dr. Obispo's ignoble anecdote about the chimney-sweep, even to laugh at it. And yet, Pete noticed in bewilderment, the moment she stopped laughing, her face resumed its expression of inwardness and secrecy and detachment. The Sister of Mercy remembered herself as promptly as she had forgotten. It was beyond him; he simply couldn't figure it out.

With the arrival of the coffee, Dr. Obispo announced that he proposed to take the afternoon off and, as there was nothing that urgently needed doing in the laboratory, he advised Pete to do the same. Pete thanked him and, pretending to be in a hurry (for he didn't want to go through the humiliation of being ignored when Virginia discussed her plans for the afternoon), swallowed his coffee and, mumbling excuses, left the room. A little later he was out in the sunshine, walking down towards the plain.

As he went, he thought of some of the things Mr. Propter had said to him in the course of his recent visits.

Of what he had said about the silliest text in the Bible and the most sensible. 'They hated me without a cause' and 'God is not mocked; as a man sows, so shall he reap.'

Of what he had said about nobody ever getting something for nothing — so that a man would pay for too much money, for example, or too much power, or too much sex, by being shut up more tightly inside his own ego; so that a country that moved too quickly and violently would fall under a tyranny, like Napoleon's, or Stalin's, or Hitler's; and a people that was prosperous and internally peaceful would pay for it by being smug and self-satisfied and conservative, like the English.

The baboons were gibbering as he passed. Pete recalled some of Mr. Propter's remarks about literature. About the wearisomeness, to an adult mind, of all those merely descriptive plays and novels which critics expected one to admire. All the innumerable, interminable anecdotes and romances and character-studies, but no general theory of anecdotes, no explanatory hypothesis of romance or character. Just a huge collection of facts about lust and greed, fear and ambition, duty and affection; just facts, and imaginary facts at that, with no coordinating philosophy superior to common sense and the local system of conventions, no principle of arrangement more rational than simple aesthetic expediency. And then the astonishing nonsense talked by those who undertake to elucidate and explain this hodge-podge of prettily patterned facts and fancies! All that solemn tosh, for example, about Regional Literature — as though there were some special and outstanding merit in recording unco-ordinated facts about the lusts, greeds and duties of people who happen to live in the country and speak in dialect! Or else the facts were about the urban poor and there was an effort to co-ordinate them in terms of some post-Marxian theory that might be partly true, but was always inadequate. And in that case it was the great Proletarian Novel. Or else somebody wrote yet another book proclaiming that Life is Holy; by which he always meant that anything people do in the way of fornicating, or getting drunk, or losing their tempers, or feeling maudlin, is entirely O.K. with God and should therefore be regarded as permissible and even virtuous. In which case it was up to the critics to talk about the author's ripe humanity, his deep and tender wisdom, his affinities with the great Goethe, and his obligations to William Blake.

Pete smiled as he remembered, but with a certain ruefulness as well as amusement; for he too had taken this sort of thing with the seriousness its verbiage seemed to demand.

Misplaced seriousness — the source of some of our most fatal errors. One should be serious, Mr. Propter had said, only about what deserves to be taken seriously. And, on the strictly human level, there was nothing that deserved to be taken seriously except the suffering men inflicted upon themselves by their crimes and follies. But, in the last analysis, most of these crimes and follies arose from taking too seriously things which did not deserve it. And that, Mr. Propter had continued, was another of the enormous defects of so-called good literature; it accepted the conventional scale of values; it respected power and position; it admired success; it treated as though they were reasonable the mainly lunatic preoccupations of statesmen, lovers, business men, social climbers, parents. In a word, it took

seriously the causes of suffering as well as the suffering. It helped to perpetuate misery by explicitly or implicitly approving the thoughts and feelings and practices which could not fail to result in misery. And this approval was bestowed in the most magnificent and persuasive language. So that even when a tragedy ended badly, the reader was hypnotized by the eloquence of the piece into imagining that it was all somehow noble and worth while. Which of course it wasn't. Because, if you considered them dispassionately, nothing could be more silly and squalid than the themes of *Phèdre*, or *Othello*, or *Wuthering Heights*, or the *Agamemnon*. But the treatment of these themes had been in the highest degree sublime and thrilling, so that the reader or the spectator was left with the conviction that, in spite of the catastrophe, all was really well with the world, the all too human world, which had produced it. No, a good satire was much more deeply truthful and, of course, much more profitable than a good tragedy. The trouble was that so few good satires existed, because so few satirists were prepared to carry their criticism of human values far enough. *Candide*, for example, was admirable as far as it went; but it went no further than debunking the principal human activities in the name of the ideal of harmlessness. Now, it was perfectly true that harmlessness was the highest ideal most people could aspire to; for, though few had the power to do much positive good, there was nobody who could not refrain, if he so desired, from evil. Nevertheless, mere harmlessness, however excellent, most certainly didn't represent the highest possible ideal. *Il faut cultiver notre jardin* was not the last word in human wisdom; at the best it was only the last but one.

The sun was in such a position that, as he walked down the hill, Pete saw two little rainbows spouting from the nipples of Giambologna's nymph. Thoughts of Noah immediately arose in conjunction with thoughts of Virginia in her white satin bathing-costume. He tried to repress the latter as incompatible with the new thoughts he was trying to cultivate about the Sister of Mercy; and since Noah was not a subject that would bear much thinking about, he proceeded instead to concentrate on that talk he had had with Mr. Propter about sex. It had begun with his own puzzled questionings as to what sort of sexual behaviour was normal — not statistically normal, of course, but normal in that absolute sense in which perfect vision or unimpaired digestion may be called normal. What sort of sexual behaviour was normal in that sense of the word? And Mr. Propter had answered: None. But there must be, he had protested. If good could be manifested on the animal level, then there must be some kind of sexual behaviour that was absolutely normal and natural, just as there was an absolutely normal and natural sort of digestive activity. But man's sexual behaviour, Mr. Propter had answered, wasn't on the same level as digestion. A rat's love-making — yes, that was on the same level as digestion; for the entire process was instinctive; in other words, was controlled by the physiological intelligence of the body — the same physiological intelligence as correlated the actions of heart and lungs and kidneys, as regulated temperature, as nourished the muscles and made them do the work demanded of them by the central nervous system. Men's bodily activities were controlled by the same physiological intelligence; and it was that intelligence which, on the animal level, manifested good. In human beings, sexual behaviour was almost completely outside the jurisdiction of this physiological intelligence. It controlled only the cellular activities which made sexual behaviour possible. All the rest was non-instinctive and took place on the strictly human level of self-consciousness. Even when men thought that they were being most exclusively animal in their sexuality, they were still on the human level. Which meant that they were still self-conscious, still dominated by words — and where there were words, there, of necessity, were memories and wishes, judgments and imaginations. There, inevitably, were the past and the future, the actual and the fantastic; regret and anticipation; good and evil; the creditable and the discreditable; the beautiful and the ugly. Among men and women, even the most apparently bestial acts of eroticism were associated with some or all of these non-animal factors — factors which were injected into every human situation by the existence of language. This meant that there was no one type of human sexuality that could be called 'normal' in the sense in which one could say that there was a normality of vision or digestion. In that sense, all kinds of human sexuality were strictly abnormal. The different kinds of sexual behaviour could not be judged by referring them to an absolute natural norm. They could only be judged in reference to the ultimate aims of each individual and the results observed in each case.

Thus, if an individual wanted to be well thought of in any given society, he or she could safely regard as 'normal' the type of sexual behaviour currently tolerated by that local religion and approved by the 'best people.' But there were some individuals who cared little for the judgment of an angry God or even of the best people. Their principal desire was for intense and reiterated stimulation of their senses and their feelings. For these, it was obvious, 'normality' in sexual behaviour would be quite different from what it was for the more social-minded. Then there would be all the kinds of sexuality 'normal' to those desirous of making the best of both worlds — the personal world of sensations and emotions, and the social world of moral and religious conventions. The 'normalities' of Tartuffe and Pecksniff; of the clergymen who can't keep away from schoolgirls, the cabinet ministers with a secret mania for handsome youths. And, finally, there were those who were concerned neither to get on in society, nor to placate the local deity, nor to enjoy repeated emotional and sensuous stimulations, but whose chief preoccupation was with enlightenment and liberation, with the problem of transcending personality, of passing from the human level to the level of eternity. Their conceptions of 'normality' in sexual behaviour would not resemble those of the men and women in any of the other categories.

From the concrete tennis-court the children of the Chinese cook were flying kites in the shape of birds and equipped with little whistles, so that they warbled plaintively in the wind. The cheerful quacking sound of Cantonese drifted down to Pete's ears. Across the Pacific, he reflected, millions upon millions of such children had died already or were dying. Below them, in the Sacred Grotto, stood the plaster figure of Our Lady. Pete thought of Virginia kneeling in white shorts and a yachting-cap, of the abusive eloquence of Reverend Schlitz, of Dr. Obispo's jokes, of Alexis Carrel on the subject of Lourdes, of Lee's History of the Inquisition, of Tawney on the relationship between Protestantism and Capitalism, of Niemöller and John Knox and Torquemada and that Sister of Mercy and again of Virginia, and finally of Mr. Propter as the only person he knew who could make some sense out of the absurd, insane, diabolical confusion of it all.

Chapter Six

SOMEWHAT TO JEREMY'S disappointment, Dr. Obispo was not at all mortified by the information that his ideas had been anticipated in the eighteenth century.

'I'd like to hear some more about your Fifth Earl,' he said, as they glided down into the cellars with the Vermeer. You say he lived to ninety?'

'More than ninety,' Jeremy answered. 'Ninety-six or seven, I forget which. And died in the middle of a scandal, what's more.'

'What sort of a scandal?'

Jeremy coughed and patted the top of his head. 'The usual sort,' he fluted.

'You mean, the old bozo was still at it?' Dr. Obispo asked incredulously.

'Still at it,' Jeremy repeated. 'There's a passage about the affair in the unpublished papers of Greville. He died just in time. They were actually on the point of arresting him.'

'What for?'

Jeremy twinkled again and coughed. 'Well,' he said slowly and in his most Cranford-like manner, 'it seems that he had a tendency to take his pleasures rather homicidally.'

'You mean, he'd killed someone.'

'Not actually killed,' Jeremy answered: 'just damaged.'

Dr. Obispo was rather disappointed, but consoled himself almost immediately by the reflection that, at ninety-six, even damage was pretty creditable. 'I'd like to look into this a little further,' he added.

'Well, the notebook's at your disposal,' said Jeremy politely.

Dr. Obispo thanked him. Together they walked towards Jeremy's work-room.

'The handwriting's rather difficult,' said Jeremy as they entered. 'I think it might be easier if I read it aloud to you.'

Dr. Obispo protested that he didn't want to waste Jeremy's time; but as the other was anxious to find an excuse for putting off to another occasion the wearisome task of sorting papers that didn't interest him, the protest was out-protested. Jeremy insisted on being altruistic. Dr. Obispo thanked him and settled down to listen. Jeremy took his eyes out of their native element for long enough to polish his spectacles, then began to re-read aloud the passage he had been reading that morning when the bell rang for lunch.

"It is to be found in the Mud," he concluded, "and only awaits a skilful Angler."

Dr. Obispo chuckled. 'You might almost use it as a definition of science,' he said. 'What is science? Science is angling in the mud — angling for immortality and for anything else that may happen to turn up.' He laughed again and added that he liked the old bastard.

Jeremy went on reading.

"August 1796. To-day my gabbling niece Caroline reproached me with what she called the Inconsistency of my Conduct. A man who is humane with the Horses in his stables, the Deer in his park and the Carp in his fishponds should show his Consistency by being more sociable than I am, more tolerant of the company of Fools, more charitable towards the poor and humble. To which I answered by remarking that the word, Man, is the general Name applied to successions of inconsistent Conduct, having their source within a two-legged and featherless Body, and that such words as Caroline, John and the like are the proper names applied to particular successions of inconsistent Conduct within particular Bodies. The only Consistency exhibited by the mass of Mankind is a Consistency of Inconsistency. In other words, the nature of any particular succession of inconsistent Conduct depends upon the history of the individual and his ancestors. Each succession of Inconsistencies is determined and obeys the Laws imposed upon it by its own antecedent Circumstances. A Character may be said to be consistent in the sense that its Inconsistencies are predestined and cannot pass beyond the boundaries ordained for it. The Consistency demanded by such Fools as Caroline is of quite another kind. These reproach us because our successive Acts are not consistent with some arbitrarily selected set of Prejudices, or ridiculous code of rules, such as the Hebrew, the Gentlemanlike, the Iroquois or the Christian. Such Consistency is not to be achieved, and the attempt to achieve it results only in Imbecility or Hypocrisy. Consider, I said to Caroline, your own Conduct. What Consistency, pray, do you find between your conversations with the Dean upon Redemption and your Draconian birchings of the younger Maids? between your conspicuous charities and the setting of man-traps on your estates? between your appearances at Court and your chaise percée? or between divine service on Sunday morning and the pleasures enjoyed on Saturday night with your husband and on Friday or Thursday, as all the world suspects, with a certain Baronet who shall be nameless? But before I had concluded my final question, Caroline had left the room."

'Poor Caroline,' said Dr. Obispo, with a laugh. 'Still, she got what she asked for.'

Jeremy read out the next entry.

"December 1796. After this second attack of pulmonary congestion, Convalescence has come more slowly than before and advanced less far. I hang here suspended above the pit as though by a single thread, and the substance of that thread is Misery."

With an elegantly bent little finger, Dr. Obispo flicked the ash of his cigarette on to the floor.

'One of those pharmaceutical tragedies,' he commented. 'With a course of thiamin chloride and some testosterone I could have made him as happy as a sandboy. Has it ever struck you,' he added, 'what a lot of the finest romantic literature is the result of bad doctoring?'

I could lie down like a tired child

And weep away this life of care.

Lovely! But if they'd known how to clear up poor Shelley's chronic tuberculous pleurisy it would never have been written. Lying down like a tired child and weeping life away happens to be one of the most characteristic symptoms of chronic tuberculous pleurisy. And most of the other Weltschmerz

boys were either sick men or alcoholics or dope addicts. I could have prevented every one of them from writing as he did.' Dr. Obispo looked at Jeremy with a wolfish smile that was almost childlike in the candour of its triumphant cynicism. 'Well, let's hear how the old boy gets over his troubles.'

"December, 1796," Jeremy read out. "The prowlings of my attendant hyaenas became so intolerable to me that yesterday I resolved to put an end to them. When I asked them to leave me alone in the future, Caroline and John protested their more than filial Affection. In the end I was forced to say that, unless they were gone by noon to-day, I would order my Steward to bring a score of men and eject them from my House. This morning, from my window, I watched them take their departure."

The next note was dated January nth, 1797. "This year the anniversary of my birth calls up Thoughts more gloomy than ever before. I am too weary to record them. The day being fine and remarkably warm for the Season, I had myself carried in my chair to the fishponds. The bell was rung, and the Carp at once came hurrying to be fed. The spectacle of the brute Creation provides me with almost my sole remaining pleasure. The stupidity of the Brutes is without pretensions and their malignity depends on Appetite and is therefore only intermittent. Men are systematically and continuously cruel, while their Follies are justified in the names of Religion and Politics, and their Ignorance is muffled up in the pompous garments of Philosophy.

"Meanwhile, as I watched the fishes pushing and jostling for their dinner, like a crowd of Divines in search of Preferment, my Thoughts returned to the perplexing Question upon which I have so often speculated in the past. Why should a man die at three-score years and ten, when a Fish can retain its Youth for two or three centuries? I have debated with myself a number of possible answers. There was a time, for example, when I thought that the longer life of Carp and Pike might be due to the superiority of their Watery Element over our Air. But the lives of some subaqueous Creatures are short, while those of certain Birds exceed the human span.

"Again, I have asked myself if the Fish's longer years might not be due to its peculiar mode of begetting and bearing its young. But again I am met by fatal Objections. The Males of Parrots and Ravens do not onanize, but copulate; the females of Elephants do not lay eggs but bear their young, if we are to believe M. de Buffon, for a period of not less than four and twenty months. But Parrots, Ravens and Elephants are long-lived Creatures; from which we must conclude that the Brevity of human Life is due to other Causes than the manner in which Men beget and Females reproduce their Kind.

"The only Hypotheses to which I can see no manifest Objections are these: the Diet of such fish as Carp and Pike contains some substance which preserves their Bodies from the Decay which overtakes the greater number of Creatures even while they are alive; alternatively the substance which prevents Decay is to be found within the Body of the Fish, especially, it would be reasonable to guess, in the Stomach, Liver, Bowels and other Organs of Concoction and Assimilation. In the short-lived animals, such as Man, the Substances preventive of Decay must be presumed to be lacking. The question then arises whether these Substances can be introduced into the human Body from that of the Fish. History does not record any remarkable instances of longevity among the Ichthyophagi, nor have I ever observed that the Inhabitants of sea ports and other places where there is an abundance of Fish were specially long-lived. But we need not conclude from this that the Substance preventive of Decay can never be conveyed from Fish to Man. For Man cooks his Food before eating it, and we know by a thousand instances that the application of Heat profoundly modifies the nature of many Substances; moreover, he throws away, as unfit for his Consumption, precisely those Organs of the Fish in which it is most reasonable to assume that the Substance preventive of Decay is contained."

'Christ!' said Dr. Obispo, unable to contain himself any longer. 'Don't tell me that the old buzzard is going to eat raw fish-guts!'

Bright behind their bifocals, Jeremy's eyes had darted down to the bottom of the page and were already at the top of the next. 'That's exactly what he is doing,' he cried delightedly. 'Listen to this: "My first three attempts provoked an uncontrollable retching; at the fourth I contrived to swallow what I had placed in my mouth, but within two or three minutes my triumph was cut short by an access of

vomiting. It was only after the ninth or tenth essay that I was able to swallow and retain even a few spoonfuls of the nauseating mince meat.”

‘Talk of courage!’ said Dr. Obispo. ‘I’d rather go through an air-raid than that.’

Jeremy, meanwhile, had not so much as raised his eyes from the book.

“‘It is now a month,’” he read, “‘since I began to test the truth of my Hypothesis, and I am now ingesting each day not less than six ounces of the raw, triturated Viscera of freshly opened Carp.’”

‘And the fish,’ said Dr. Obispo, slowly shaking his head, ‘has a greater variety of parasitic worms than any other animal. It makes my blood run cold even to hear about it.’

‘You needn’t worry,’ said Jeremy, who had gone on reading. ‘His Lordship does nothing but get better and better. Here’s a “singular accession of Strength and Vigour during the month of March.” Not to mention “Revival of appetite and Improved memory and powers of ratiocination.” I like that ratiocination,’ Jeremy put in appreciatively. ‘Such a nice period piece, don’t you think? A real Chippendale word!’ He went on reading to himself, and after a little silence announced triumphantly: ‘By April he’s riding again “an hour on the bay gelding every afternoon.” And the dose of what he calls his “visceral and stercoraceous pap” has been raised to ten ounces a day.’

Dr. Obispo jumped up from his chair and began to walk excitedly up and down the room. ‘Damn it all!’ he shouted. ‘This is more than a joke. This is serious. Raw fish-guts; intestinal flora; prevention of sterol poisoning; and rejuvenation. Rejuvenation!’ he repeated.

‘The Earl’s more cautious than you are,’ said Jeremy. ‘Listen to this. “Whether I owe my recovery to the Carp, to the Return of Spring, or to the Vis medicatrix Naturæ, I am not yet able to determine.”’

Dr. Obispo nodded approvingly. ‘That’s the right spirit,’ he said.

“‘Time,’” Jeremy continued, “‘will show; that is, if I can force it to show, which I intend to do by persisting in my present Regimen. For I take it that my Hypothesis will be substantiated if, after persisting in it for some time longer, I shall have recovered not only my former state of Health, but a measure of Vigour not enjoyed since the passing of Youth.’”

‘Good for him!’ Dr. Obispo exclaimed. ‘I only wish old Uncle Jo could look at things in that scientific way. Or, maybe,’ he added, suddenly remembering the Nembutal and Mr. Stoyte’s childlike faith in his medical omniscience, ‘maybe I don’t wish it. It might have its inconveniences.’ He chuckled to himself over his private joke. ‘Well, let’s go on with our case history,’ he added.

‘In September he can ride for three hours at a stretch without fatigue,’ said Jeremy. ‘And he’s renewing his acquaintance with Greek literature, and thinks very poorly of Plato, I notice. After which we have no entry till 1799.’

‘No entry till 1799!’ Dr. Obispo repeated indignantly. ‘The old bastard! Just when his case is getting really interesting, he goes and leaves us in the dark.’

Jeremy looked up from the notebook, smiling. ‘Not entirely in the dark,’ he said. ‘I’ll read you his first entry after the two years of silence, and you can draw your own conclusions about the state of his intestinal flora.’ He uttered a little cough and began to read in his Mrs. Gaskell manner. “‘May 1799. The most promiscuously abandoned Females, especially among Women of Quality, are often those to whom an unkind Nature has denied the ordinary Reason and Excuse for Gallantry. Cut off by a constitutional Frigidity from the enjoyments of Pleasure, they are in everlasting rebellion against their Fate. The power which drives them on to multiply the number of their Gallantries is not Sensuality, but Hope; not the wish to reiterate the experience of a familiar Bliss, but rather the aspiration towards a common and much vaunted Felicity which they themselves have had the misfortune never to know. To the Voluptuary, the woman of easy Virtue is often no less obnoxious, though for other reasons, than she seems to the severe Moralist. God preserve me in Future from any such Conquests as that which I made this Spring at Bath!’” Jeremy put down the book. ‘Do you still feel that you’ve been left in the dark?’ he asked.

Chapter Seven

WITH A DEAFENING shriek the electric smoothing-tool whirled its band of sandpaper against the rough surface of the wood. Bent over the carpenter's bench, Mr. Propter did not hear the sound of Pete's entrance and approach. For a long half-minute the young man stood in silence, watching him while he moved the smoothing-tool back and forth over the board before him. There was sawdust, Pete noticed, in the shaggy eyebrows, and on the sunburnt forehead a black smear where he had touched his face with oily fingers.

Pete felt a sudden twinge of compunction. It wasn't right to spy on a man if he didn't know you were there. It was underhand: you might be seeing something he didn't want you to see. He called Mr. Propter's name.

The old man looked up, smiled, and stopped the motor of his little machine.

'Well, Pete,' he said. 'You're just the man I want. That is, if you'll do some work for me. Will you? But I'd forgotten,' he added, interrupting Pete's affirmative answer, 'I'd forgotten about that heart of yours. These miserable rheumatic fevers! Do you think you ought to?'

Pete blushed a little; for he had not yet had time to live down a certain sense of shame in regard to his disability. 'You're not going to make me run the quartermile, are you?'

Mr. Propter ignored the jocular question. 'You're sure it's all right?' he insisted, looking with an affectionate earnestness into the young man's face.

'Quite sure, if it's only this sort of thing.' Pete waved his hand in the direction of the carpenter's bench.

'Honest?'

Pete was touched and warmed by the other's solicitude. 'Honest!' he affirmed.

'Very well then,' said Mr. Propter, reassured. 'You're hired. Or rather you're not hired, because you'll be lucky if you get as much as a Coca-Cola for your work. You're conscribed.'

All the other people round the place, he went on to explain, were busy. He had been left to run the entire furniture factory single-handed. And the trouble was that it had to be run under pressure; three of the migrant families down at the cabins were still without any chairs or tables.

'Here are the measurements,' he said, pointing to a typewritten sheet of paper pinned to the wall. 'And there's the lumber. Now, I'll tell you what I'd like you to do first,' he added, as he picked up a board and laid it on the bench.

The two men worked for some time without trying to speak against the noise of their electric tools. Then there was an interim of less noisy activity. Too shy to embark directly upon the subject of his own perplexities, Pete started to talk about Professor Pearl's new book on population. Forty inhabitants to the square mile for the entire land area of the planet. Sixteen acres per head. Take away at least half for unproductive land, and you were left with eight acres. And with average agricultural methods a human being could be supported on the produce of two and a half acres. With five and a half acres to spare for every person, why should a third of the world be hungry;

'I should have thought you'd have discovered the answer in Spain,' said Mr. Propter. 'They're hungry because man cannot live by bread alone.'

'What has that got to do with it?'

'Everything,' Mr. Propter answered. 'Men can't live by bread alone, because they need to feel that their life has a point. That's why they take to idealism. But it's a matter of experience and observation that most idealism leads to war, persecution and mass insanity. Man cannot live by bread alone; but if he chooses to nourish his mind on the wrong kind of spiritual food, he won't even get bread. He won't even get bread, because he'll be so busy killing or preparing to kill his neighbours in the name of God, or Country, or Social Justice, that he won't be able to cultivate his fields. Nothing could be simpler or more obvious. But at the same time,' Mr. Propter concluded, 'nothing is unfortunately more certain

than that most people will go on choosing the wrong spiritual food and thereby indirectly choosing their own destruction.'

He turned on the current, and once more the smoothing-tool set up its rasping shriek. There was another cessation of talk.

'In a climate like this,' said Mr. Propter, in the next interval of silence, 'and with all the water that'll be available when the Colorado River aqueduct starts running next year, you could do practically anything you liked.' He unplugged the smoothing-tool and went to fetch a drill. 'Take a township of a thousand inhabitants; give it three or four thousand acres of land and a good system of producers' and consumers' co-operatives: it could feed itself completely; it could supply about two-thirds of its other needs on the spot; and it could produce a surplus to exchange for such things as it couldn't produce itself. You could cover the State with such townships. That is,' he added, smiling rather mournfully, 'that is, if you could get the permission from the banks and a supply of people intelligent and virtuous enough to run a genuine democracy.'

'You certainly wouldn't get the banks to agree,' said Pete.

'And you probably couldn't find more than quite a few of the right people,' Mr. Propter added. 'And of course nothing's more disastrous than starting a social experiment with the wrong people. Look at all the efforts to start communities in this country. Robert Owen, for example, and the Fourierists and the rest of them. Dozens of social experiments and they all failed. Why? Because the men in charge didn't choose their people. There was no entrance examination and no novitiate. They accepted anyone who came along. That's what comes of being unduly optimistic about human beings.'

He started the drill and Pete took his turn with the smoothing-tool.

'Do you think one oughtn't to be optimistic?' the young man asked.

Mr. Propter smiled. 'What a curious question!' he answered. 'What would you say about a man who installed a vacuum pump in a fifty-foot well? Would you call him an optimist?'

'I'd call him a fool.'

'So would I,' said Mr. Propter. 'And that's the answer to your question; a man's a fool if he's optimistic about any situation in which experience has shown that there's no justification for optimism. When Robert Owen took in a crowd of defectives and incompetents and habitual crooks, and expected them to organize themselves into a new and better sort of human society, he was just a damned fool.'

There was silence for a time while Pete did some sawing.

'I suppose I've been too optimistic,' the young man said reflectively, when it was over.

Mr. Propter nodded. 'Too optimistic in certain directions,' he agreed. 'And at the same time too pessimistic in others.'

'For instance?' Pete questioned.

'Well, to begin with,' said Mr. Propter, 'too optimistic about social reforms. Imagining that good can be fabricated by mass-production methods. But, unfortunately, good doesn't happen to be that sort of commodity. Good is a matter of moral craftsmanship. It can't be produced except by individuals. And, of course, if individuals don't know what good consists in, or don't wish to work for it, then it won't be manifested, however perfect the social machinery. There!' he added, in another tone, and blew the sawdust out of the hole he had been drilling. 'Now for these chair-legs and battens.' He crossed the room and began to adjust the lathe.

'And what do you think I've been too pessimistic about?' Pete asked.

Mr. Propter answered, without looking up from his work: 'About human nature.'

Pete was surprised. 'I'd have expected you to say I was too optimistic about human nature,' he said.

'Well, of course, in certain respects that's true,' Mr. Propter agreed. 'Like most people nowadays, you're insanely optimistic about people as they are, people living exclusively on the human level. You seem to imagine that people can remain as they are and yet be the inhabitants of a world conspicuously better than the world we live in. But the world we live in is a consequence of what men have been and a projection of what they are now. If men continue to be like what they are now and have been in the past, it's obvious that the world they live in can't become better. If you imagine it can, you're wildly

optimistic about human nature. But, on the other hand, you're wildly pessimistic if you imagine that men and women are condemned by their nature to pass their whole lives on the strictly human level. Thank God,' he said emphatically, 'they're not. They have it in their power to climb out and up, on to the level of eternity. No human society can become conspicuously better than it is now, unless it contains a fair proportion of individuals who know that their humanity isn't the last word and who consciously attempt to transcend it. That's why one should be profoundly pessimistic about the things most people are optimistic about — such as applied science, and social reform, and human nature as it is in the average man or woman. And that's also why one should be profoundly optimistic about the thing they're so pessimistic about that they don't even know it exists — I mean, the possibility of transforming and transcending human nature. Not by evolutionary growth, not in some remote future, but at any time — here and now, if you like — by the use of properly directed intelligence and good-will.'

Tentatively he started the lathe, then stopped it again for further adjustments.

'It's the kind of pessimism and the kind of optimism you find in all the great religions,' he added. 'Pessimism about the world at large and human nature as it displays itself in the majority of men and women. Optimism about the things that can be achieved by anyone who wants to and knows how.' He started the lathe again and, this time, kept it going.

'You know the pessimism of the New Testament,' he went on through the noise of the machine. 'Pessimism about the mass of mankind: many are called, few chosen. Pessimism about weakness and ignorance: from those that have not shall be taken away even that which they have. Pessimism about life as lived on the ordinary human level; for that life must be lost if the other eternal life is to be gained. Pessimism about even the highest forms of worldly morality: there's no access to the kingdom of heaven for anyone whose righteousness fails to exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees. But who are the Scribes and Pharisees? Simply the best citizens; the pillars of society; all right-thinking men. In spite of which, or rather because of which, Jesus calls them a generation of vipers. Poor dear Dr. Mulge!' he added parenthetically. 'How pained he'd be if he ever had the misfortune to meet his Saviour!' Mr. Propter smiled to himself over his work. 'Well, that's the pessimistic side of the Gospel teaching,' he went on. 'And, more systematically and philosophically, you'll find the same things set forth in the Buddhist and Hindu scriptures. The world as it is and people on the strictly human level — they're beyond hope: that's the universal verdict. Hope begins only when human beings start to realize that the kingdom of heaven, or whatever other name you care to give it, is within and can be experienced by anybody who's prepared to take the necessary trouble. That's the optimistic side of Christianity and the other-world religions.'

Mr. Propter stopped the lathe, took out the chair-leg he had been turning and put another in its place.

'It isn't the sort of optimism they teach you in the liberal churches,' said Pete, thinking of his transition period between Reverend Schlitz and militant anti-fascism.

'No, it isn't,' Mr. Propter agreed. 'What they teach you in liberal churches hasn't got anything to do with Christianity or any other realistic religion. It's mainly drivel.'

'Drivel!'

'Drivel,' Mr. Propter repeated. 'Early twentieth-century humanism seasoned with nineteenth-century evangelicalism. What a combination! Humanism affirms that good can be achieved on a level where it doesn't exist and denies the fact of eternity. Evangelicalism denies the relationship between causes and effects by affirming the existence of a personal deity who forgives offences. They're like Jack Spratt and his wife: between the two of them, they lick the platter clean of all sense whatsoever. No, I'm wrong,' Mr. Propter added, through the buzz of the machine, 'not all sense. The humanists don't talk of more than one race, and the evangelicals only worship one God. It's left to the patriots to polish off that last shred of sense. The patriots and the political sectarians. A hundred mutually exclusive idolatries. "There are many gods and the local bosses are their respective prophets." The amiable silliness of the liberal churches is good enough for quiet times; but note that it's always supplemented by the ferocious lunacies of nationalism for use in times of crisis. And those are the philosophies young people are brought up

on. The philosophies your optimistic elders expect you to reform the world with.' Mr. Propter paused for a moment, then added, "As a man sows, so shall he reap. God is not mocked." Not mocked,' he repeated. 'But people simply refuse to believe it. They go on thinking they can cock a snook at the nature of things and get away with it. I've sometimes thought of writing a little treatise, like a cook-book, "One Hundred Ways of Mocking God" I'd call it. And I'd take a hundred examples from history and contemporary life, illustrating what happens when people undertake to do things without paying regard to the nature of reality. And the book would be divided into sections, such as "Mocking God in Agriculture," "Mocking God in Politics," "Mocking God in Education," "Mocking God in Philosophy," "Mocking God in Economics." It would be an instructive little book. But a bit depressing,' Mr. Propter added.

Chapter Eight

THE NEWS THAT the Fifth Earl had had three illegitimate children at the age of eighty-one was announced in the notebook with a truly aristocratic understatement. No boasting, no self-congratulation. Just a brief, quiet statement of the facts between the record of a conversation with the Duke of Wellington and a note on the music of Mozart. One hundred and twenty years after the event, Dr. Obispo, who was not an English gentleman, exulted noisily, as though the achievement had been his own.

'Three of them,' he shouted in his proletarian enthusiasm. 'Three! What do you think of that?'

Brought up in the same tradition as the Fifth Earl, Jeremy thought that it wasn't bad, and went on reading.

In 1820 the Earl had been ill again, but not severely; and a three months' course of raw carps' entrails had restored him to his normal health, 'the health,' as he put it, 'of a man in the flower of his age.'

A year later, for the first time in a quarter of a century, he visited his nephew and niece, and was delighted to find that Caroline had become a shrew, that John was already bald and asthmatic, and that their eldest daughter was so monstrously fat that nobody would marry her.

On the news of the death of Bonaparte he had written philosophically that a man must be a great fool if he could not satisfy his desire for glory, power and excitement except by undergoing the hardships of war and the tedium of civil government. "The language of polite conversation," he concluded, "reveals with a sufficient clarity that such exploits as those of Alexander and Bonaparte have their peaceful and domestic equivalents. We speak of amorous Adventures, of the Conquest of a desired Female and the Possession of her Person. For the Man of sense, such tropes are eloquent indeed. Considering their significance, he perceives that war and the pursuit of Empire are wrong because foolish, foolish because unnecessary, and unnecessary because the satisfactions derivable from Victory and Dominion may be obtained with vastly less trouble, pain and ennui behind the silken curtains of the Duchess's Alcove or on the straw Pallet of the Dairy Maid. And if at any time such simple Pleasures should prove insipid, if, like the antique Hero, he should find himself crying for new Worlds to conquer, then by the offer of a supplementary guinea, or in very many instances, as I have found, gratuitously, by the mere elicitation of a latent Desire for Humiliation and even Pain, a man may enjoy the privilege of using the Birch, the Manacles, the Cage and any such other Emblems of absolute Power as the Fancy of the Conqueror may suggest and the hired Patience of the Conquered will tolerate or her consenting Taste approve. I recall a remark by Dr. Johnson to the effect that a man is seldom more innocently employed than when making Money. Making Love is an even more innocent employment than making Money. If Bonaparte had had the Wisdom to vent his Desire for Domination in the Saloons and Bed Chambers of his native Corsica, he would have expired in Freedom among his own people, and many hundreds of thousands of men now dead or maimed or blind would be alive and enjoying the use of their faculties. True, they would doubtless be employing their Eyes, Limbs and Lives as foolishly and malignantly as those whom

Bonaparte did not murder are employing them to-day. But though a Superior Being might applaud the onetime Emperor for having removed so great a quantity of Vermin from the Earth, the Vermin themselves will always be of another Opinion. As a mere Man of Sense, and not a Superior Being, I am on the side of the Vermin.”

‘Have you ever noticed,’ said Dr. Obispo reflectively, ‘the way even the most hard-boiled people always try to make out they’re really good. Even this old buzzard — you’d think he wouldn’t care how he rated, so long as he got his fun. But no; he has to write a long screed proving what a much better man he is than Napoleon. Which, of course, he is by any reasonable standard. But you wouldn’t expect him to go out of his way to say so.’

‘Well, nobody else was likely to say so,’ Jeremy put in.

‘So he had to do it himself,’ Dr. Obispo concluded. ‘Which just proves my point. Iagos don’t exist. People will do everything Iago did; but they’ll never say they’re villains. They’ll construct a beautiful verbal world in which all their villainies are right and reasonable. I’d hoped that old carp-guts would be an exception. But he isn’t. It’s really rather a disappointment.’

Jeremy giggled with a certain patronizing disdain. ‘You’d have liked him to do the Don-Juan-in-hell-act. The *calme héros courbé sur sa rapière*. You’re more romantic than I thought.’ He turned back to the notebook and, after a pause, announced that in 1823 the Fifth Earl had spent some hours with Coleridge and found his conversation deep, but singularly muddy—“characteristics,” he had added, “which are admirable in Fish Ponds, but deplorable in rational Discourse, which should be pellucid and always shallow enough for a man to wade through without risk of drowning himself in an abyss of nonsense.” Jeremy beamed with pleasure. Coleridge was not a favourite of his. ‘When I think of the rot people are still talking about the rubbish that old dope-addict wrote ...’

Dr. Obispo cut him short. ‘Let’s hear some more about the Earl,’ he said.

Jeremy returned to the notebook.

In 1824 the old gentleman was lamenting the passage of the Bill which assimilated the transportation of slaves to piracy and so made the trade a capital offence. Henceforward, he would be a matter of eight or nine thousand a year the poorer. But he consoled himself by thinking of Horace living in philosophic tranquillity on his Sabine farm.

In 1826 he was deriving his keenest pleasure from a reperusal of Theocritus and the company of a young female, called Kate, whom he had made his housekeeper. In the same year, despite the curtailment of his income, he had been unable to resist the temptation of purchasing an exquisite ‘Assumption of the Virgin’ by Murillo.

1827 had been a year of financial reverses; reverses that were connected, apparently, with the death, following an abortion, of a very young maid employed by the housekeeper as her personal attendant. The entry in the notebook was brief and obscure; but it seemed to imply that the girl’s parents had had to be paid a very substantial sum.

A little later, he was unwell again and wrote a long and minute description of the successive stages of decay in the human corpse, with special reference to the eyes and lips. A short course of triturated carp restored him to a more cheerful frame of mind, and in 1828 he made a voyage to Athens, Constantinople and Egypt.

In 1831 he was in negotiations for the purchase of a house near Farnham.

‘That must be Selford,’ Jeremy put in. ‘The house where these things came from.’ He indicated the twenty-seven packing-cases. ‘Where the two old ladies are living.’ He continued his reading. ““The house is old, dark and inconvenient, but stands in sufficiently extensive Grounds upon an Eminence above the River Wey, whose southern bank at this point rises almost perpendicularly in a Cliff of yellow sandstone, to the height of perhaps one hundred and twenty feet. The Stone is soft and easily worked, a Circumstance which accounts for the existence beneath the house of very extensive Cellars which were dug, it would seem, about a Century ago, when the Vaults were used for the storage of smuggled Spirits and other goods on their way from the coasts of Hampshire and Sussex to the Metropolis. To allay the fears of his Wife, who dreads to lose a child in their subterranean meanders, the Farmer who now owns

the House has walled off the greater part of his Cellarage; but even that which remains presents the appearance of a veritable Catacomb. In Vaults such as these a man could be assured of all the Privacy required for the satisfaction of even the most eccentric Tastes.” Jeremy looked up over the top of his book. ‘That sounds a bit sinister, don’t you think?’

Dr. Obispo shrugged his shoulders. ‘Nobody can have enough privacy,’ he said emphatically. ‘When I think of all the trouble I’ve had for want of some nice cellars like the ones you’ve been reading about ...’ He left the sentence unfinished, and a shadow crossed his face: he was thinking that he couldn’t go on giving Jo Stoyte those Nembutal capsules indefinitely, damn him!

‘Well, he buys the house,’ said Jeremy, who had been reading to himself. ‘And he has repairs and additions made in the Gothic manner. And an apartment is fitted up in the cellars, forty-five feet underground and at the end of a long passage. And, to his delight, he finds that there’s a subterranean well, and another shaft that goes down to a great depth and can be used as a privy. And the place is perfectly dry and has an ample supply of air, and ...’

‘But what does he do down there?’ Dr. Obispo asked impatiently.

‘How should I know?’ Jeremy answered. He ran his eyes down the page. ‘At the moment,’ he went on, ‘the old boy’s making a speech to the House of Lords in favour of the Reform Bill.’

‘In favour of it?’ said Obispo in surprise.

“‘In the first days of the French Revolution,’” Jeremy read out, “‘I infuriated the adherents of every political Party by saying: ‘The Bastille is fallen; long live the Bastille.’ Forty-three years have elapsed since the occurrence of that singularly futile Event, and the correctness of my Prognostications has been demonstrated by the rise of new Tyrannies and the restoration of old ones. It is therefore with perfect Confidence that I now say: ‘Privilege is dead; long live Privilege.’ The masses of mankind are incapable of Emancipation and too inept to direct their own Destinies. Government must always be by Tyrants or Oligarchs. My opinion of the Peerage and the landed Gentry is exceedingly low; but their own opinion of themselves must be even lower than mine. They believe that the Ballot will rob them of their Power and Privileges, whereas I am sure that, by the exercise of even such little Prudence and Cunning as parsimonious Nature has endowed them with, they can with ease maintain themselves in their present pre-eminence. This being so, let the Rabble amuse itself by voting. An Election is no more than a gratuitous Punch and Judy Show, offered by the Rulers in order to distract the attention of the Ruled.’”

‘How he’d have enjoyed a modern communist or fascist election!’ said Dr. Obispo. ‘By the way, how old was he when he made this speech?’

‘Let me see.’ Jeremy paused for a moment to make the calculation, then answered: ‘Ninety-four.’

‘Ninety-four!’ Dr. Obispo repeated. ‘Well, if it wasn’t those fish-guts, I don’t know what it was.’

Jeremy turned back to the notebook. ‘At the beginning of 1833 he sees his nephew and niece again, on the occasion of Caroline’s sixty-fifth birthday. Caroline now wears a red wig, her eldest daughter is dead of cancer, the younger is unhappy with her husband and is addicted to piety, the son, who is now a Colonel, has gambling debts which he expects his parents to pay. Altogether, as the Earl remarks, “a most enjoyable evening.”’

‘Nothing about those cellars?’ Dr. Obispo complained.

‘No; but his housekeeper, Kate, has been ill and he’s giving her the carp diet.’

Dr. Obispo showed a renewal of interest. ‘And what happens?’ he asked.

Jeremy shook his head. ‘The next entry’s about Milton,’ he said.

‘Milton?’ exclaimed Dr. Obispo in a tone of indignant disgust.

‘He says that Milton’s writings prove that religion depends for its existence upon the picturesque use of intemperate language.’

‘He may be right,’ said Dr. Obispo irritably. ‘But what I want to know is what happened to that housekeeper.’

‘She’s evidently alive,’ said Jeremy. ‘Because here’s a little note in which he complains about the tediousness of too much female devotion.’

‘Tedious!’ Dr. Obispo repeated. ‘That’s putting it mildly. I’ve known women who were like fly-paper.’

‘He doesn’t seem to have objected to an occasional infidelity. There’s a reference here to a young mulatto girl.’ He paused; then, smiling, ‘Delicious creature,’ he said. “‘She combines the brutish imbecility of the Hottentot with the malice and cupidity of the European.’” After which the old gentleman goes out to dinner at Farnham Castle with the Bishop of Winchester and finds his claret poor, his port execrable and his intellectual powers beneath contempt.’

‘Nothing about Kate’s health?’ Dr. Obispo persisted.

‘Why should he talk about it? He takes it for granted.’

‘I’d hoped he was a man of science,’ said Dr. Obispo almost plaintively.

Jeremy laughed. ‘You must have very odd ideas about fifth earls and eleventh barons. Why on earth should they be men of science?’ Dr. Obispo was unable to answer. There was a silence, while Jeremy started a new page. ‘Well, I’m damned!’ he broke out. ‘He’s been reading James Mill’s Analysis of the Human Mind. At ninety-five. I think that’s even more remarkable than having a rejuvenated housekeeper and a mulatto. “The Common Fool is merely stupid and ignorant. To be a Great Fool a man must have much learning and high abilities. To the everlasting credit of Mr. Bentham and his Lieutenants it must be said that their Folly has always been upon the grandest scale. Mr. Mill’s Analysis is a veritable Coliseum of silliness.” And the next note is about the Marquis de Sade. By the way,’ Jeremy interpolated, looking up at Dr. Obispo, ‘when are you going to return me my books?’

Dr. Obispo shrugged his shoulders. ‘Whenever you like,’ he answered. ‘I’m through with them.’

Jeremy tried not to show his delight and, with a cough, returned to the notebook. “‘The Marquis de Sade,’” he read aloud, “‘was a man of powerful genius, unhappily deranged. In my opinion, an Author would achieve Perfection if he combined the qualities of the Marquis with those of Bishop Butler and Sterne.’” Jeremy paused. ‘The Marquis, Bishop Butler and Sterne,’ he repeated slowly. ‘My word, you’d have a pretty remarkable book!’ He went on reading. “‘October 1833. To degrade oneself is pleasurable in proportion to the height of the worldly and intellectual Eminence from which one descends and to which one returns when the act of Degradation is concluded.’” That’s pretty good,’ he commented, thinking of the Trojan Women and alternate Friday afternoons in Maida Vale. ‘Yes, that’s pretty good. Let me see, where are we? Oh yes. “The Christians talk much of Pain, but nothing of what they say is to the point. For the most remarkable Characteristics of Pain are these: the Disproportion between the enormity of physical suffering and its often trifling causes; and the manner in which, by annihilating every faculty and reducing the body to helplessness, it defeats the Object for which it was apparently devised by Nature: viz. to warn the sufferer of the approach of Danger, whether from within or without. In relation to Pain, that empty word, Infinity, comes near to having a meaning. This is not the case with Pleasure; for Pleasure is strictly finite and any attempt to extend its boundaries results in its transformation into Pain. For this reason, the infliction of Pleasure can never be so delightful to the aspiring Mind as the infliction of Pain. To give a finite quantity of Pleasure is a merely human act; the infliction of the Infinity we call Pain is truly god-like and divine.’”

‘The old bastard’s going mystical in his old age,’ Dr. Obispo complained. ‘Almost reminds me of Mr. Propter.’ He lit a cigarette. There was a silence.

‘Listen to this,’ Jeremy suddenly cried in a tone of excitement. “‘March nth, 1834. By the criminal negligence of Kate, Priscilla has been allowed to escape from the subterranean place of confinement. Bearing as she does upon her Person the evidence that she has been for some weeks past the subject of my Investigations, she holds in her hands my Reputation and perhaps even my Liberty and Life.’”

‘I suppose this is what you were talking about before we started reading,’ said Dr. Obispo. ‘The final scandal. What happened?’

‘Well, I suppose the girl must have told her story,’ Jeremy answered, without looking up from the page before him. ‘Otherwise how do you account for the presence of this “hostile Rabble” he’s suddenly started talking about? “The Humanity of men and women is inversely proportional to their Numbers. A Crowd is no more human than an Avalanche or a Whirlwind. A rabble of men and women stands lower in the scale of moral and intellectual being than a herd of Swine or of Jackals.’”

Dr. Obispo threw back his head and uttered a peal of his surprisingly loud, metallic laughter. 'That's exquisite!' he said. 'Exquisite! You couldn't have a better example of typically human behaviour. Homo conducting himself like sub-homo and then being sapiens in order to prove that he's really super-homo.' He rubbed his hands together. 'This is really heavenly!' he said; then added: 'Let's hear what happens now.'

'Well, as far as I can make out,' said Jeremy, 'they have to send a company of militia from Guildford to protect the house from the rabble. And a magistrate has issued a warrant for his arrest; but they're not doing anything for the time being, on account of his age and position and the scandal of a public trial. Oh, and now they've sent for John and Caroline. Which makes the old gentleman wildly angry. But he's helpless. So they arrive at Selford; "Caroline in her orange wig, and John, at seventy-two, looking at least twenty years older than I, who was already twenty-four when my Brother, then scarcely of age, had the imprudence to marry an attorney's Daughter and the richly merited misfortune to beget this Attorney's Grandson whom I have always treated with the Contempt which his low origin and feeble Intellect deserve, but to whom the negligence of a Strumpet has now given the Power to impose his Will upon me.'"

'One of those delightful family reunions,' said Dr. Obispo. 'But I suppose he doesn't give us any of the details;'

Jeremy shook his head. 'No details,' he said. 'Just an outline of the negotiations. On March the seventeenth they tell him that he can avoid prosecution if he makes over his unentailed property by deed of gift, assigns them the revenues of the entailed estates, and consents to enter a private asylum.'

'Pretty stiff conditions!'

'Which he refuses,' Jeremy continued, 'on the morning of the eighteenth.'

'Good for him!'

"Private madhouses," Jeremy read out, "are private prisons in which, uncontrolled by Parliament or Judiciary, subject to no inspection by the Police and closed even to the humanitarian visitations of Philanthropists, hired Torturers and Gaolers execute the dark designs of family Vengeance and personal Spite."

Dr. Obispo clapped his hands with delight. 'There's another beautiful human touch!' he cried. 'Those humanitarian visitations of philanthropists!' he laughed aloud. 'And hired torturers! It's like a speech by one of the Foundling Fathers. Magnificent! And then one thinks of those slave-ships and little Miss Priscilla. It's almost as good as Field-Marshal Goering denouncing unkindness to animals. Hired torturers and gaolers,' he repeated with relish, as though the phrase were a delicious sweetmeat, slowly melting upon the palate. 'What's the next move?' he asked.

'They tell him he'll be tried, condemned and transported. To which he answers that he prefers transportation to a private asylum. "At this it was evident that my precious nephew and niece were nonplussed. They swore that my treatment in the Madhouse should be humane. I answered that I would not accept their word. John talked of his honour. I said, An Attorney's honour, no doubt, and spoke of the manner in which a lawyer sells his convictions for a Fee. They then implored me for the good name of the Family to accept their offers. I answered that the good name of the Family was indifferent to me, but that I had no desire to undergo the Humiliations of a Public Trial or the pains and discomforts of Transportation. I was ready, I said, to accept any reasonable alternative to Trial and Transportation; but I would regard no Alternative as reasonable which did not in some sort guarantee my proper treatment at their hands. Their word of honour I did not regard as such a Guarantee; nor could I accept to be placed in an Institution where I should be entrusted to the care of Doctors and Keepers in the pay of those whose Interest it was that I should perish with all possible Celerity. I therefore refused to subscribe to any Arrangement which left me at their Mercy without placing them to a corresponding extent at mine.'"

'The principles of diplomacy in a nutshell!' said Dr. Obispo. 'If only Chamberlain had understood them a little better before he went to Munich! Not that it would have made much difference in the long run,' he added. 'Because, after all, it doesn't really matter what the politicians do: nationalism will

always produce at least one war each generation. It has done in the past, and I suppose we can rely on it to do the same in the future. But how does the old gentleman propose to put his principles into practice? He's at their mercy all right. How's he going to put them at his?'

'I don't know yet,' Jeremy answered from the depths of the recorded past. 'He's gone off on one of his philosophizing jaunts again.'

'Now?' said Dr. Obispo in astonishment. 'When he's got a warrant out against him?'

"'There was a time,'" Jeremy read, "'when I believed that all the Efforts of Humanity were directed towards a Point located approximately at the Centre of the female Person. To-day I am inclined to think that Vanity and Avarice play a more considerable part even than Lust in shaping the course of men's Actions and determining the nature of their Thoughts.'" And so on. Where the devil does he get back to the point again? Perhaps he never does; it would be just like him. No, here's something: "March 20th. To-day, Robert Parsons, my Factor, returned from London bringing with him in the Coach, three strong boxes containing Gold coin and Bank Notes to the value of two hundred and eighteen thousand pounds, the product of the sale of my Securities and such Jewels, Plate and works of Art as it was possible to dispose of at such short notice and for cash. With more time I could have realized at least three hundred and fifty thousand pounds. This loss I can bear philosophically; for the sum I have in hand is amply sufficient for my purposes.'"

'What purposes?' asked Dr. Obispo.

Jeremy did not answer for a little while. Then he shook his head in bewilderment. 'What on earth is happening now?' he said. 'Listen to this: "My funeral will be conducted with all the Pomp befitting my exalted Rank and the eminence of my Virtues. John and Caroline were miserly and ungrateful enough to object to the expense; but I have insisted that my Obsequies shall cost not a penny less than Four Thousand Pounds. My only Regret is that I shall be unable to leave my subterranean Retreat to see the Pageantry of Woe and to study the expression of grief upon the withered faces of the new Earl and his Countess. To-night I shall go down with Kate to our Quarters in the Cellarage; and to-morrow morning the World will hear the news of my death. The body of an aged Pauper has already been conveyed hither in Secret from Haslemere, and will take my place in the Coffin. After the Interment the New Earl and Countess will proceed at once to Gonister, where they will take up their Residence, leaving this house untenanted except for Parsons, who will serve as Caretaker and provide for our material wants. The Gold and Bank Notes brought by Parsons from London are already bestowed in a subterranean hiding-place known only to myself, and it has been arranged that, every First of June, so long as I live, five thousand pounds in cash shall be handed over by myself to John, or to Caroline, or, in the event of their predeceasing me, to their Heir, or to some duly authorized Representative of the Family. By this arrangement, I flatter myself, I fill the Place left vacant by the Affection they most certainly do not feel.'" And that's all,' said Jeremy, looking up. 'There's nothing else. Just two more blank pages, and that's the end of the book. Not another word of writing.'

There was a long silence. Once more Dr. Obispo got up and began to walk about the room.

'And nobody knows how long the old buzzard lived on?' he said at last.

Jeremy shook his head. 'Not outside the family. Perhaps those two old ladies ...'

Dr. Obispo halted in front of him, and banged the table with his fist. 'I'm taking the next boat to England,' he announced dramatically.

Chapter Nine

TO-DAY, EVEN THE Children's Hospital brought Mr. Stoyte no consolations. The nurses had welcomed him with their friendliest smiles. The young house physician encountered in the corridor was flatteringly deferential. The convalescents shouted 'Uncle Jo!' with all their customary enthusiasm, and, as he paused beside their beds, the faces of the sick were momentarily illuminated with pleasure. His

gifts of toys were received as usual, sometimes with noisy rapture, sometimes (more touchingly) in the silence of a happiness speechless with amazement and incredulity. On his round of the various wards, he saw, as on other days, the pitiful succession of small bodies distorted by scrofula and paralysis, of small emaciated faces resigned to suffering, of little angels dying, and martyred innocents and snub-faced imps of mischief tortured into a reluctant stillness.

Ordinarily it all made him feel good — like he wanted to cry, but at the same time like he wanted to shout and be proud: proud of just being human, because these kids were human and you'd never seen anything so brave as they were; and proud that he had done this thing for them, given them the finest hospital in the State, and all the best that money could buy. But to-day his visit brought none of the customary reactions. He had no impulsion either to cry or to shout. He felt neither pride, nor the anguish of sympathy, nor the exquisite happiness that resulted from their combination. He felt nothing — nothing except the dull, gnawing misery which had been with him all that day, at the Pantheon, with Clancy, in his down-town office. Driving out from the city, he had looked forward to his visit to the hospital as an asthma patient might look forward to a dose of adrenalin or an opium-smoker to a long-postponed pipe. But the looked-for relief had not come. The kids had let him down.

Taking his cue from what had happened at the end of previous visits, the porter smiled at Mr. Stoyte as he left the hospital and said something about it being the finest bunch of great little kids he ever knew. Mr. Stoyte looked at him blankly, nodded without speaking, and passed on.

The porter watched him go. 'Jeepers Creepers!' he said to himself, remembering the expression on Mr. Stoyte's face.

Mr. Stoyte drove back to the castle feeling as unhappy as he had felt when he left it in the morning. He went up with the Vermeer to the fourteenth floor; Virginia was not in her boudoir. He went down to the tenth; but she was not in the billiard-room. He dropped to the second; but she was being neither manicured nor massaged. In a sudden access of suspicion he descended to the sub-subbasement and almost ran to see if she were in the laboratory with Pete; the laboratory was empty. A mouse squeaked in its cage, and behind the glass of the aquarium one of the aged carp glided slowly from shadow into light and from light once more into green shadow. Mr. Stoyte hurried back to the elevator, shut himself in with the Dutchman's dream of everyday life mysteriously raised to the pitch of mathematical perfection, and pressed the topmost of the twenty-three buttons.

Arrived at his destination, Mr. Stoyte slid back the gate of the elevator and looked out through the glass panel in the second door.

The water of the swimming-pool was perfectly still. Between the battlements, the mountains had taken on their evening richness of golden light and indigo shadow. The sky was cloudless and transparently blue. A tray with bottles and glasses had been set on the iron table at the further side of the pool, and behind the table stood one of the low couches on which Mr. Stoyte was accustomed to take his sun-baths. Virginia was lying on this couch, as though anaesthetized, her lips parted, her eyes closed, one arm dropped limply and its hand lying palm upwards on the floor, like a flower carelessly thrown aside and forgotten. Half concealed by the table, Dr. Obispo, the Claude Bernard of his subject, was looking down into her face with an expression of slightly amused scientific curiosity.

In its first irrepressible uprush, Mr. Stoyte's fury came near to defeating its own homicidal object. With a great effort, he checked the impulse to shout, to charge headlong out of the elevator, waving his fists and foaming at the mouth. Trembling under the internal pressure of pent-up rage and hatred, he groped in the pocket of his jacket. Except for a child's rattle and two packets of chewing-gum left over from his distribution of gifts at the hospital, it was empty. For the first time in months he had forgotten his automatic.

For a few seconds Mr. Stoyte stood hesitating, undecided what to do. Should he rush out, as he had first been moved to do, and kill the man with his bare hands? Or should he go down and fetch his gun? In the end, he decided to get the gun. He pressed the button, and the lift dropped silently down its shaft. Unseeing, Mr. Stoyte glared at the Vermeer; and from her universe of perfected geometrical beauty the young lady in blue satin turned her head from the open harpsichord and looked out, past the draped

curtain, over the black-and-white tessellated floor — out through the window of the picture-frame into that other universe in which Mr. Stoyte and his fellow-creatures had their ugly and untidy being.

Mr. Stoyte ran to his bedroom, opened the drawer in which his handkerchiefs were kept, rummaged furiously among the silks and cambrics, and found nothing. Then he remembered. Yesterday morning he had worn no jacket. The gun had been in his hip-pocket. Then Pedersen had come to give him his Swedish exercises. But a gun in the hip-pocket was uncomfortable if you did things on your back, on the floor. He had taken it out and put it away in the writing-desk in his study.

Mr. Stoyte ran back to the elevator, went down four floors and ran to the study. The gun was in the top left-hand drawer of the writing-table; he remembered exactly.

The top left-hand drawer of the writing-table was locked. So were all the other drawers.

‘God damn that old bitch!’ Mr. Stoyte shouted as he tugged at the handles.

Thoughtful and conscientious in every detail, Miss Grogram, his secretary, always locked up everything before she went home.

Still cursing Miss Grogram, whom he hated at the moment almost as bitterly as he hated that swine there on the roof, Mr. Stoyte hurried back to the elevator. The gate was locked. During his absence in the study, somebody must have pressed the recall button on some other floor. Through the closed door he could hear the faint hum of the machinery. The elevator was in use. God only knew how long he would have to wait.

Mr. Stoyte let out an inarticulate bellow, rushed along the corridor, turned to the right, opened a swing-door, turned to the right again and was at the gate of the service lift. He seized the handle and pulled. It was locked. He pressed the recall button. Nothing happened. The service elevator was also in use.

Mr. Stoyte ran back along the corridor, through the swing-door, then through another swing-door. Spiral round a central well that went down two hundred feet into the depth of the cellars, the staircase mounted and descended. Mr. Stoyte started to climb. Breathless after only two floors, he ran back to the elevators. The service elevator was still in use; but the other responded to the call of the button. Dropping from somewhere overhead, it came to a halt in front of him. The locked door unlocked itself. He pulled it open and stepped in. The young lady in satin still occupied her position of equilibrium in a perfectly calculated universe. The distance of her left eye from the left side of the picture was to its distance from the right side as one is to the square root of two minus one; and the distance of the same eye from the bottom of the picture was equal to its distance from the left side. As for the knot of ribbons on her right shoulder — that was precisely at the corner of an imaginary square with the sides equal to the longer of the two golden sections into which the base of the picture was divisible. A deep fold in the satin skirt indicated the position of the right side of this square, and the lid of the harpsichord marked the top. The tapestry in the upper right-hand corner stretched exactly one-third of the way across the picture and had its lower edge at a height equal to the base. Pushed forward by the browns and dusky ochres of the background, the blue satin encountered the black-and-white marble slabs of the floor and was pushed back, to be held suspended in mid picture-space, like a piece of steel between two magnets of opposite sign. Within the frame nothing could have been different; the stillness of that world was not the mere immobility of old paint and canvas; it was also the spirited repose of consummated perfection.

‘The old bitch!’ Mr. Stoyte kept growling to himself, and then, turning in memory from his secretary to Dr. Obispo, ‘The swine!’

The elevator came to a stop. Mr. Stoyte darted out and hurried along the corridor to Miss Grogram’s empty office. He thought he knew where she kept the keys; but it turned out that he was wrong. They were somewhere else. But where? where? where? Frustration churned up his rage into a foam of frenzy. He opened drawers and flung their contents on the floor, he scattered the neatly filed papers about the room, he overturned the dictaphone, he even went to the trouble of emptying the bookshelves and upsetting the potted cyclamen and the bowl of Japanese goldfish which Miss Grogram kept on the window-sill. Red scales flashed among the broken glass and the reference-books. One gauzy tail was

black with spilt ink. Mr. Stoyte picked up a bottle of glue and, with all his might, threw it down among the dying fish.

‘Bitch!’ he shouted. ‘Bitch!’

Then suddenly he saw the keys, hanging in a neat little bunch on a hook near the mantelpiece, where, he suddenly remembered, he had seen them a thousand times before.

‘Bitch!’ he shouted with redoubled fury as he seized them. He hurried towards the door, pausing only to push the typewriter off its table. It fell with a crash into the chaos of torn paper and glue and goldfish. That would serve the old bitch right, Mr. Stoyte reflected with a kind of maniacal glee as he ran towards the elevator.

Chapter Ten

BARCELONA HAD FALLEN.

But even if it had not fallen, even if it had never been besieged, what then?

Like every other community, Barcelona was part machine, part sub-human organism, part nightmare-huge projection and embodiment of men’s passions and insanities — their avarice, their pride, their lust for power, their obsession with meaningless words, their worship of lunatic ideals.

Captured or uncaptured, every city and nation has its being on the plane of the absence of God. Has its being on the plane of the absence of God, and is therefore foredoomed to perpetual self-stultification, to endlessly reiterated attempts at self-destruction.

Barcelona had fallen. But even the prosperity of human societies is a continual process of gradual or catastrophic falling. Those who build up the structures of civilization are the same as those who undermine the structures of civilization. Men are their own termites, and must remain their own termites for just so long as they persist in being only men.

The towers rise, the palaces, the temples, the dwellings, the workshops; but the heart of every beam is gnawed to dust even as it is laid, the joists are riddled, the floors eaten away under the feet.

What poetry, what statues — but on the brink of the Peloponnesian War! And now the Vatican is painted — just in time for the sack of Rome. And the *Eroica* is composed — but for a hero who turns out to be just another bandit. And the nature of the atom is elucidated — by the same physicists as volunteer in war-time to improve the arts of murder.

On the plane of the absence of God, men can do nothing else except destroy what they have built — destroy even while they build — build with the elements of destruction.

Madness consists in not recognizing the facts; in making wishes the fathers of thoughts; in conceiving things to be other than they really are; in trying to realize desired ends by means which countless previous experiments have shown to be inappropriate.

Madness consists, for example, in thinking of oneself as a soul, a coherent and enduring human entity. But, between the animal below and the spirit above there is nothing on the human level except a swarm of constellated impulses and sentiments and notions; a swarm brought together by the accidents of heredity and language; a swarm of incongruous and often contradictory thoughts and desires. Memory and the slowly changing body constitute a kind of spatio-temporal cage, within which the swarm is enclosed. To talk of it as though it were a coherent and enduring ‘soul’ is madness. On the strictly human level there is no such thing as a soul.

Thought-constellations, feeling-arrangements, desirepatterns. Each of these has been built up and is strictly conditioned by the nature of its fortuitous origin. Our ‘souls’ are so little ‘us’ that we cannot even form the remotest conception how ‘we’ should react to the universe, if we were ignorant of language in general, or even of our own particular language. The nature of our ‘souls’ and of the world they inhabit would be entirely different from what it is, if we had never learnt to talk, or if we had learnt to talk

Eskimo instead of English. Madness consists, among other things, in imagining that our 'soul' exists apart from the language our nurses happen to have taught us.

Every psychological pattern is determined; and, within the cage of flesh and memory, the total swarm of such patterns is no more free than any of its members. To talk of freedom in connection with acts which in reality are determined is madness. On the strictly human level no acts are free. By their insane refusal to recognize facts as they are, men and women condemn themselves to have their desires stultified and their lives distorted or extinguished. No less than the cities and nations of which they are members, men and women are for ever falling, for ever destroying what they have built and are building. But whereas cities and nations obey the laws that come into play whenever large numbers are involved, individuals do not. Or rather need not; for though in actual fact most individuals allow themselves to be subjected to these laws, they are under no necessity to do so. For they are under no necessity to remain exclusively on the human level of existence. It is in their power to pass from the level of the absence of God to that of God's presence. Each member of the psychological swarm is determined; and so is the conduct of the total swarm. But beyond the swarm, and yet containing and interpenetrating it, lies eternity, ready and waiting to experience itself. But if eternity is to experience itself within the temporal and spatial cage of any individual human being, the swarm we call the 'soul' must voluntarily renounce the frenzy of its activity, must make room, as it were, for the other timeless consciousness, must be silent to render possible the emergence of profounder silence. God is completely present only in the complete absence of what we call our humanity. No iron necessity condemns the individual to the futile torment of being merely human. Even the swarm we call the soul has it in its power temporarily to inhibit its insane activity, to absent itself, if only for a moment, in order that, if only for a moment, God may be present. But let eternity experience itself, let God be sufficiently often present in the absence of human desires and feelings and preoccupations: the result will be a transformation of the life which must be lived, in the intervals, on the human level. Even the swarm of our passions and opinions is susceptible to the beauty of eternity; and, being susceptible, becomes dissatisfied with its own ugliness; and, being dissatisfied, undertakes to change itself. Chaos gives place to order — not the arbitrary, purely human order that comes from the subordination of the swarm to some lunatic 'ideal,' but an order that reflects the real order of the world. Bondage gives place to liberty — for choices are no longer dictated by the chance occurrences of earlier history, but are made ideologically and in the light of a direct insight into the nature of things. Violence and mere inertia give place to peace — for violence is the manic, and inertia the depressive, phase of that cyclic insanity, which consists in regarding the ego or its social projections as real entities. Peace is the serene activity which springs from the knowledge that our 'souls' are illusory and their creations insane, that all beings are potentially united in eternity. Compassion is an aspect of peace and a result of the same act of knowledge.

Walking at sunset up the castle hill, Pete kept thinking with a kind of tranquil exultation of all the things Mr. Propter had said to him. Barcelona had fallen. Spain, England, France, Germany, America — all were falling; falling even at such times as they seemed to be rising; destroying what they built in the very act of building. But any individual has it in his power to refrain from falling, to stop destroying himself. The solidarity with evil is optional, not compulsory.

On their way out of the carpenter's shop Pete had brought himself to ask Mr. Propter if he would tell him what he ought to do.

Mr. Propter had looked at him intently. 'If you want it,' he had said, 'I mean, if you really want it ...'

Pete had nodded without speaking.

The sun had set; and now the twilight was like the embodiment of peace — the peace of God, Pete said to himself, as he looked across the plain to the distant mountains, the peace that passes all understanding. To part with such loveliness was unbearable. Entering the castle, he went straight to the elevator, recalled the cage from somewhere up aloft, shut himself up with the Vermeer and pressed the highest of the buttons. Up there, at the top of the keep, he would be at the very heart of this celestial peace.

The elevator came to a halt. He opened the gates and stepped out. The swimming-pool reflected a luminous tranquillity. He turned his eyes from the water to the sky, and from the sky to the mountains; then walked round the pool in order to look down over the battlements on the further side.

‘Go away!’ a muffled voice suddenly said.

Pete started violently, turned and saw Virginia lying in the shadow almost at his feet.

‘Go away,’ the voice repeated. ‘I hate you.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he stammered. ‘I didn’t know ...’

‘Oh, it’s you.’ She opened her eyes, and in the dim light he was able to see that she had been crying. ‘I thought it was Sig. He went to get a comb for my hair.’ She was silent for a little; then suddenly she burst out, ‘I’m so unhappy, Pete.’

‘Unhappy?’ The word and her tone had utterly shattered the peace of God. In an anguish of love and anxiety he sat down beside her on the couch. (Under her bath-robe, he couldn’t help noticing, she didn’t seem to be wearing anything at all.) ‘Unhappy?’

Virginia covered her face with her hands and began to sob. ‘Not even Our Lady,’ she gasped in an incoherency of grief. ‘I can’t even tell her. I feel so mean ...’

‘Darling!’ he said in a voice of entreaty, as though imploring her to be happy. He began to stroke her hair. ‘My darling!’

Suddenly there was a violent commotion on the further side of the pool; a crash as the elevator gates were flung back; a rush of feet; an inarticulate yell of rage. Pete turned his head and was in time to see Mr. Stoyte rushing towards them, holding something in his hand, something that might almost have been an automatic pistol.

He had half risen to his feet, when Mr. Stoyte fired.

Arriving two or three minutes later with the comb for Virginia’s hair, Dr. Obispo found the old man on his knees, trying, with a pocket-handkerchief, to stanch the blood that was still pouring out of the two wounds, one clean and small, the other cavernous, which the bullet had made as it passed through Pete’s head.

Crouching in the shadow of the battlements, the Baby was praying. ‘Holy-Mary-Mother- of-God-pray-for-us sinners-now-and-in-the-hour- of-our-death-Amen,’ she repeated, again and again, as fast as her sobs would permit her. Every now and then she would be seized and shaken by an access of nausea, and the praying would be interrupted for a moment. Then it began again where she had left off ‘... us-sinners-now- and-in-the-hour- of-our-death-Amen-Holy-Mary-Mother-of-God ...’

Dr. Obispo opened his mouth to make an exclamation, then closed it again, whispered, ‘Christ!’ and walked quickly and silently round the pool. Before making his presence known, he took the precaution of picking up the pistol and slipping it into his pocket. One never knew. Then he called Mr. Stoyte’s name. The old man started, and a hideous expression of terror appeared on his face. Fear gave place to relief as he turned round and saw who it was that had spoken to him.

‘Thank God it’s you,’ he said; then suddenly remembered that this was the man he had meant to kill. But all that had been a million years ago, a million miles away. The near, immediate, urgent fact was not the Baby, not love or anger; it was fear and this thing that lay here on the ground.

‘You got to save him,’ he said in a hoarse whisper. ‘We can say it was an accident. I’ll pay him anything he likes. Anything in reason,’ an old reflex impelled him to add. ‘But you got to save him.’ Laboriously he heaved himself to his feet and motioned Dr. Obispo to his vacated place.

The only movement Dr. Obispo made was one of withdrawal. The old man was covered with blood, and he had no wish to spoil a ninety-five-dollar suit. ‘Save him?’ he repeated. ‘You’re mad. Look at all the brain lying there on the floor.’

From the shadows behind him, Virginia interrupted the sobbing mutter of her prayers to scream. ‘On the floor,’ she kept wailing. ‘On the floor.’

Dr. Obispo turned on her savagely. ‘Shut up, do you hear?’

The screams abruptly ceased; but a few seconds later there was a sound of violent retching; then ‘Holy-Mary-Mother-of-God-pray-for-us-sinners-now-and-in-the-hour-of-our-death-Amen-Holy-Mary-Mother-of-God-pray-for-us- sinners ...’

‘If we’re going to try and save anybody,’ Dr. Obispo went on, ‘it had better be you. And believe me,’ he added emphatically, throwing all his weight on his left leg and using the toe of his right shoe to point at the body, ‘you need some saving. It’s either the gas chamber or St. Quentin for life.’

‘But it was an accident.’ Mr. Stoyte began to protest with a breathless eagerness. ‘I mean, it was all a mistake. I never wanted to shoot him. I meant to ...’ He broke off and stood in silence, his mouth working, as though he were trying to swallow some unspoken words.

‘You meant to kill me,’ said Dr. Obispo, completing the sentence for him and smiling, as he did so, with the expression of wolfish good-humour which was characteristic of him in any situation where the joke was at all embarrassing or painful. Secure in the knowledge that the old buzzard was much too scared to be angry, and that anyhow the gun was in his own pocket, he prolonged the joke by saying, ‘Well,’ sententiously, ‘that’s what comes of snooping.’

‘... now-and-in-the-hour-of-our-death-Amen,’ Virginia gabbled in the ensuing silence. ‘Holy-Mary-Mother ...’

‘I never meant it,’ Mr. Stoyte reiterated. ‘I just got mad. Guess I didn’t really figure out what I was doing....’

‘Tell that to the jury,’ said Dr. Obispo sarcastically.

‘But I swear it: I didn’t really know,’ Mr. Stoyte protested. His harsh voice broke grotesquely into a squeak. His face was white with fear.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. ‘Maybe,’ he said. ‘But not knowing doesn’t make any difference to that.’ He stood on one leg again to point an elegantly shod foot in the direction of the body.

‘But what shall I do?’ Mr. Stoyte almost screamed in the anguish of his terror.

‘Don’t ask me.’

Mr. Stoyte initiated the gesture of laying his hand imploringly on the other’s sleeve; but Dr. Obispo quickly drew back. ‘No, don’t touch me,’ he said. ‘Just look at your hands.’

Mr. Stoyte looked. The thick, carrot-like fingers were red; under the horny nails the blood was already caked and dry, like clay. ‘God!’ he whispered. ‘Oh my God!’

‘... and-at-the-hour- of-our-death-Amen-Holy- Mary ...’

At the word ‘death’ the old man started as though he had been struck with a whip. ‘Obispo,’ he began again, breathless with apprehension, ‘Obispo! Listen here — you got to help me out of this. You got to help me,’ he entreated.

‘After you did your best to do that to me?’ The white-and-tan shoe shot out again.

‘You wouldn’t let them get me?’ Mr. Stoyte wheedled, abject in his terror.

‘Why wouldn’t I?’

‘But you can’t,’ he almost shouted. ‘You can’t.’

Dr. Obispo bent down to make quite sure, in the fading light, that there was no blood on the couch; then, pulling up his fawn-coloured trousers, sat down. ‘One gets tired of standing,’ he said in a pleasant conversational tone.

Mr. Stoyte went on pleading. ‘I’ll make it worth your while,’ he said. ‘You can have anything you care to ask for. Anything,’ he repeated without any qualifying reference, this time, to reason.

‘Ah,’ said Dr. Obispo, ‘now you’re talking turkey.’

‘... Mother-of-God,’ muttered the Baby, ‘pray-for-us-sinners-now-and-in-the-hour-of-our-death-Amen-Holy-Mary-Mother-of-God-pray-for-us-sinners-now ...’

‘You’re talking turkey,’ Dr. Obispo repeated.

Part Three

Chapter One

THERE WAS A tap at the door of Jeremy's work-room; it was Mr. Propter who entered. He was wearing, Jeremy noticed, the same dark-grey suit and black tie as he had worn at Pete's funeral. The urban costume diminished him; he seemed smaller than in his working clothes, and at the same time less himself. That weather-beaten, emphatically featured face of his — that face of a statue high up on the west front of a cathedral — looked curiously incongruous above a starched collar.

'You've not forgotten?' he said, when they had shaken hands.

For all reply, Jeremy pointed to his own black jacket and sponge-bag trousers. They were expected at Tarzana for the ceremonial opening of the new Stoyte Auditorium.

Mr. Propter looked at his watch. 'We've got another few minutes before we need think of starting.' He sat down. 'What's the news?'

'Couldn't be better,' Jeremy answered.

Mr. Propter nodded. 'Now that poor Jo and the others have gone, it must be quite agreeable here.'

'All alone with twelve million dollars' worth of bric-à-brac,' said Jeremy. 'I have the most enormous fun.'

'How little fun you'd be having,' said Mr. Propter meditatively, 'if you'd been left in company with the people who actually made the bric-à-brac. With Greco, and Rubens, and Turner, and Fra Angelico.'

'God preserve us!' said Jeremy, throwing up his hands.

'That's the charm of art,' Mr. Propter went on. 'It represents only the most amiable aspects of the most talented human beings. That's why I've never been able to believe that the art of any period threw much light on the life of that period. Take a Martian; show him a representative collection of Botticellis, Peruginos and Raphaels. Could he infer from them the conditions described by Machiavelli?'

'No, he couldn't,' Jeremy agreed. 'But meanwhile, here's another question. The conditions described by Machiavelli — were they the real conditions? Not that Machiavelli didn't tell the truth. The things he described really happened. But did contemporaries think them as awful as they seem to us when we read about them now? We think they ought to have been miserable about what was happening. But were they?'

'Were they?' Mr. Propter repeated. 'We ask the historians; and of course they can't answer — because obviously there's no way of compiling statistics about the sum of happiness, nor any way of comparing the feelings of people living under one set of conditions with the feelings of people living under another and quite different set. The real conditions at any given moment are the subjective conditions of the people then alive. And the historian has no way of finding out what those conditions were.'

'No way except through looking at works of art,' said Jeremy. 'I'd say they do throw light on the subjective conditions. Take one of your examples. Perugino's a contemporary of Machiavelli. That means that at least one person contrived to be cheerful all through an unpleasant period. And if one could be, why not many?' He cleared the way for a quotation with a little cough. "'The state of the country never put a man off his dinner.'"

'Massive wisdom!' said Mr. Propter. 'But remember that the state of Dr. Johnson's England was excellent, even at its worst. What about the state of a country like China, say, or Spain — a country

where a man can't be put off his dinner, for the simple reason that there isn't any dinner? And conversely, what about all the losses of appetite at times when everything's going well?' He paused, smiled enquiringly at Jeremy, then shook his head. 'Sometimes there's a lot of cheerfulness as well as a lot of misery; sometimes there seems to be almost nothing but misery. That's all the historian can say in so far as he's a historian. In so far as he's a theologian, of course, or a metaphysician, he can maunder on indefinitely, like Marx or St. Augustine or Spengler.' Mr. Propter made a little grimace of distaste. 'God, what a lot of bosh we've managed to talk in the last few thousand years!' he said.

'But it has its charm,' Jeremy insisted. 'Really good bosh ...'

'I'm barbarous enough to prefer sense,' said Mr. Propter. 'That's why, if I want a philosophy of history, I go to the psychologist.'

'"Totem and Taboo?"' Jeremy questioned in some astonishment.

'No, no,' said Mr. Propter with a certain impatience. 'Not that kind of psychologist. I mean the religious psychologist; the one who knows by direct experience that men are capable of liberation and enlightenment. He's the only philosopher of history whose hypothesis has been experimentally verified; therefore the only one who can make a generalization that covers the facts.'

'And what are his generalizations?' said Jeremy. 'Just the usual thing?'

Mr. Propter laughed. 'Just the usual thing,' he answered: 'the old, boring, unescapable truths. On the human level men live in ignorance, craving and fear. Ignorance, craving and fear result in some temporary pleasures, in many lasting miseries, in final frustration. The nature of the cure is obvious; the difficulties in the way of its achieving it, almost insuperable. We have to choose between almost insuperable difficulties on the one hand and absolutely certain misery and frustration on the other. Meanwhile, the general hypothesis remains as the intellectual key to history. Only the religious psychologist can make any sense of Perugino and Machiavelli, for example; or of all this.' He pointed towards the Hauberk Papers.

Jeremy twinkled behind his glasses and patted his bald patch. 'Your true scholar,' he fluted, 'doesn't even want to make sense of it.'

'Yes, I always tend to forget that,' said Mr. Propter rather sadly.

Jeremy coughed. "'Gave us the doctrine of the enclitic De,'" he quoted from the 'Grammarian's Funeral.'

'Gave it for his own sake,' said Mr. Propter, getting out of his chair. 'Gave it regardless of the fact that the grammar he was studying was hopelessly unscientific, riddled with concealed metaphysics, utterly provincial and antiquated. Well,' he added, 'that's what one would expect, I suppose.' He took Jeremy's arm, and they walked together towards the elevator. 'What a curious figure old Browning is!' he continued, his mind harking back to the Grammarian. 'Such a first-rate intelligence, and at the same time such a fool. All that preposterous stuff about romantic love! Bringing God into it, putting it into heaven, talking as though marriage and the higher forms of adultery were identical with the beatific vision. The silliness of it! But, again, that's what one has to expect.' He sighed. 'I don't know why,' he added after a pause, 'I often find myself remembering that rhyme of his — I can't even recall which poem it comes from — the one that goes: "one night he kissed My soul out in a burning mist." My soul out in a burning mist, indeed!' he repeated. 'Really, how much I prefer Chaucer on the subject. Do you remember? "Thus swived is this carpenter's wife." So beautifully objective and unemphatic and free of verbiage! Browning was always rambling on about God; but I suspect he was much further away from reality than Chaucer was, even though Chaucer never thought about God if he could possibly help it. Chaucer had nothing between himself and eternity but his appetites. Browning had his appetites, plus a great barrage of nonsense — nonsense, what's more, with a purpose. For, of course, that bogus mysticism wasn't merely gratuitous bosh. It had an object. It existed in order that Browning might be able to persuade himself that his appetites were identical with God. "Thus swived is this carpenter's wife,"' he repeated, as they entered the elevator and went up with Vermeer to the great hall. "'My soul out in a burning mist!'" It's extraordinary the way the whole quality of our existence can be changed by altering the words in which we think and talk about it. We float in language like icebergs — four-fifths

under the surface and only one-fifth of us projecting into the open air of immediate, non-linguistic experience.'

They crossed the hall. Mr. Propter's car was standing outside the front door. He took the wheel; Jeremy got in beside him. They drove off, down the curving road, past the baboons, past Giambologna's nymph, past the Grotto, under the portcullis and across the drawbridge.

'I so often think of that poor boy,' said Mr. Propter, breaking a long silence. 'Dying so suddenly.'

'I'd no idea his heart was as bad as that,' said Jeremy.

'In a certain sense,' Mr. Propter went on, 'I feel responsible for what happened. I asked him to help me in the carpenter's shop. Made him work too hard, I guess — though he insisted it was all right for him. I ought to have realized that he had his pride — that he was young enough to feel ashamed of admitting he couldn't take it. One's punished for being insensitive and unaware. And so are the people one's insensitive about.'

They drove past the hospital and through the orange groves in silence. 'There's a kind of pointlessness about sudden and premature death,' said Jeremy at last. 'A kind of specially acute irrelevance ...'

'Specially acute?' Mr. Propter questioned. 'No, I shouldn't say so. It's no more irrelevant than any other human event. If it seems more irrelevant, that's only because, of all possible events, premature death is the most glaringly out of harmony with what we imagine ourselves to be.'

'What do you mean?' Jeremy asked.

Mr. Propter smiled. 'I mean what I presume you mean,' he answered. 'If a tiling seems irrelevant, there must be something it's irrelevant to. In this case, that something is our conception of what we are. We think of ourselves as free, purposive beings. But every now and then things happen to us that are incompatible with this conception. We speak of them as accidents; we call them pointless and irrelevant. But what's the criterion by which we judge? The criterion is the picture we paint of ourselves in our own fancy — the highly flattering portrait of the free soul making creative choices and being the master of its fate. Unfortunately, the picture bears no resemblance to ordinary human reality. It's the picture of what we'd like to be, of what, indeed, we might become if we took the trouble. To a being who is in fact the slave of circumstance there's nothing specially irrelevant about premature death. It's the sort of event that's characteristic of the universe in which he actually lives — though not, of course, of the universe he foolishly imagines he lives in. An accident is the collision of a train of events on the level of determinism with another train of events on the level of freedom. We imagine that our life is full of accidents, because we imagine that our human existence is lived on the level of freedom. In fact, it isn't. Most of us live on the mechanical level, where events happen in accordance with the laws of large numbers. The things we call accidental and irrelevant belong to the very essence of the world in which we elect to live.'

Annoyed at having, by an unconsidered word, landed himself in a position which Mr. Propter could show to be unwarrantably 'idealistic,' Jeremy was silent. They drove on for a time without speaking.

'That funeral!' Jeremy said at last; for his chronically anecdotal mind had wandered back to what was concrete, particular and odd in the situation under discussion. 'Like something out of Ronald Firbank!' He giggled. 'I told Mr. Habakkuk he ought to put steam heat into the statues. They're dreadfully unlife-like to the touch.' He moved his cupped hand over an imaginary marble protuberance.

Mr. Propter, who had been thinking about liberation, nodded and politely smiled.

'And Dr. Mulge's reading of the service!' Jeremy went on. 'Talk of unction! It couldn't have been oilier even in an English cathedral. Like vaseline with a flavour of port wine. And the way he said, "I am the resurrection and the life" — as though he really meant it, as though he, Mulge, could personally guarantee it, in writing, on a money-back basis: the entire cost of the funeral refunded if the next world fails to give complete satisfaction.'

'He probably even believes it,' said Mr. Propter meditatively. 'In some curious Pickwickian way, of course. You know: it's true, but you consistently act as though it weren't; it's the most important fact in the universe, but you never think about it if you can possibly avoid it.'

‘And how do you believe in it?’ Jeremy asked. ‘Pickwickianly or unPickwickianly?’ And when Mr. Propter answered that he didn’t believe in that sort of resurrection and life: ‘Oho!’ he went on in the tone of an indulgent father who has caught his son kissing the housemaid, ‘Oho! So there’s also a Pickwickian resurrection?’

Mr. Propter laughed. ‘I think there may be,’ he said.

‘In which case, what has become of poor Pete?’

‘Well, to start with,’ said Mr. Propter slowly, ‘I should say that Pete, qua Pete, doesn’t exist any longer.’

‘Super-Pickwickian!’ Jeremy interjected.

‘But Pete’s ignorance,’ Mr. Propter went on, ‘Pete’s fears and cravings — well, I think it’s quite possible that they’re still somehow making trouble in the world. Making trouble for everything and everyone, especially for themselves. Themselves in whatever form they happen to be taking.’

‘And if by any chance Pete hadn’t been ignorant and concupiscent, what then?’

‘Well, obviously,’ said Mr. Propter, ‘there wouldn’t be anything to make further trouble.’ After a moment’s silence, he quoted Tauler’s definition of God. “‘God is a being withdrawn from creatures, a free power, a pure working.’”

He turned the car off the main road, into the avenue of pepper trees that wound across the green lawns of the Tarzana Campus. The new Auditorium loomed up, austere, romanescque. Mr. Propter parked his old Ford among the lustrous Cadillacs and Chryslers and Packards already lined up in front of it, and they entered. The press photographers at the entrance looked them over, saw at a glance that they were neither bankers, nor movie stars, nor corporation lawyers, nor dignitaries of any church, nor senators, and turned away contemptuously.

The students were already in their places. Under their stares, Jeremy and Mr. Propter were ushered down the aisle to the rows of seats reserved for distinguished guests. And what distinction! There, in the front row, was Sol R. Katzenblum, the President of Abraham Lincoln Pictures Incorporated and a pillar of Moral Re-Armament; there, beside him, was the Bishop of Santa Monica; there too was Mr. Pescecagnolo, of the Bank of the Far West. The Grand Duchess Eulalie was sitting next to Senator Bardolph; and in the next row were two of the Engels Brothers and Gloria Bossom, who was chatting with Rear-Admiral Shotoverk. The orange robe and permanently waved beard belonged to Swami Yogalinga, founder of the School of Personality. Beside him sat the Vice-President of Consol Oil and Mrs. Wagner ...

Suddenly the organ burst out, full blast, into the Tarzana Anthem. The academic procession filed in. Two by two, in their gowns and hoods and tasselled mortarboards, the Doctors of Divinity, of Philosophy, of Science, of Law, of Letters, of Music, shuffled down the aisle and up the steps on to the platform, where their seats had been prepared for them in a wide arc close to the back drop. At the centre of the stage stood a reading-desk, and at the reading-desk stood Dr. Mulge. Not that he did any reading, of course; for Dr. Mulge prided himself on being able to speak almost indefinitely without a note. The reading-desk was there to be intimately leant over, to be caught hold of and passionately leant back from, to be struck emphatically with the palm of the hand, to be dramatically walked away from and returned to.

The organ was silent. Dr. Mulge began his address — began it with a reference, of course, to Mr. Stoyte. Mr. Stoyte whose generosity ... The realization of a Dream ... This embodiment of an ideal in Stone ... The Man of Vision. Without Vision the people perish ... But this Man had had Vision ... The Vision of what Tarzana was destined to become ... The centre, the focus, the torch-bearer ... California ... New Culture, richer science, higher spirituality ... (Dr. Mulge’s voice modulated from bassoon to trumpet. From vaseline with a mere flavour of port wine to undiluted fatty alcohol.) But, alas (and here the voice subsided pathetically into saxophone and lanoline), alas ... Unable to be with us to-day ... A sudden distressing event ... Carried off on the threshold of life ... A young collaborator in those scientific fields which he ventured to say were as close to Mr. Stoyte’s heart as the fields of social service and culture ... The shock ... The exquisitely sensitive heart under the sometimes rough exterior ... His

physician had ordered a complete and immediate change of scene ... But in spite of physical absence, his spirit ... We feel it among us to-day ... An inspiration to all, young and old alike ... The torch of Culture ... The Future ... The Ideal ... The Spirit of Man ... Great things already accomplished ... God had walked in power through this campus ... Strengthened and guided ... Forward ... Onward ... Upward ... Faith and Hope ... Democracy ... Freedom ... The imperishable heritage of Washington and Lincoln ... The glory that was Greece reborn beside the waters of the Pacific ... The flag ... The mission ... The manifest destiny ... The will of God ... Tarzana ...

It was over at last. The organ played. The academic procession filed back up the aisle. The distinguished guests straggled after it.

Outside, in the sunshine, Mr. Propter was button-holed by Mrs. Pescecagniollo.

'I thought that was a wonderfully inspirational address,' she said with enthusiasm.

Mr. Propter nodded. 'Almost the most inspirational address I ever listened to. And God knows,' he said, 'I've heard a lot of them in the course of my life.'

Chapter Two

EVEN IN LONDON there was a little diluted sunshine — sunshine that brightened and grew stronger as they drove through the diminishing smoke of the outer suburbs, until at last, somewhere near Esher, they had travelled into the most brilliant of early spring mornings.

Under a fur rug, Mr. Stoyte sprawled diagonally across the rear seat of the car. More for his own good, this time, than for his physician's, he was back again on sedatives, and found it hard, before lunch, to keep awake. With a fitful stertorousness he had dozed almost from the moment they drove away from the Ritz.

Pale and with sad eyes, silently ruminating an unhappiness which five days of rain on the Atlantic and three more of London gloom had done nothing to alleviate, Virginia sat aloof in the front seat.

At the wheel (for he had thought it best to take no chauffeur on this expedition) Dr. Obispo whistled to himself and, occasionally, even sang aloud — sang, 'Stretti, stretti, nell' estasi d' amor'; sang, 'Do you think a l-little drink'll do us any harm?'; sang, 'I dreamt I dwelt in marble halls.' It was partly the fine weather that made him so cheerful — spring-time, he said to himself, the only merry ring-time, not to mention the lesser celandines, the windflowers, whatever they might be, the primroses in the copse. And should he ever forget his bewilderment when English people had started talking about cops in the singular and in contexts where policemen seemed deliriously out of place? 'Let's go and pick some primroses in the cops.' Surprising intestinal flora! Better even than the carp's. Which brought him to the second reason for his satisfaction with life. They were on their way to see the two old Hauberk ladies — on their way, perhaps, to finding something interesting about the Fifth Earl, something significant about the relationship between senility and sterols and the intestinal flora of the carp.

With mock-operatic emphasis he burst again into song.

'I drea-heatm I dwe-helt in mar-harble halls,' he proclaimed, 'with vass-als and serfs at my si-hi-hide. And of all who assembled with-hin those walls, that I was the hope and the pri-hi-hide.'

Virginia, who had been sitting beside him, stony with misery, turned round in sudden exasperation. 'Oh, for heaven's sake!' she almost screamed, breaking a silence that had lasted all the way from Kingston-on-Thames. 'Can't you be quiet?'

Dr. Obispo ignored her protests. 'I had riches,' he sang on (and reflected, with an inward chuckle of satisfaction as he did so, that the statement now happened to be true), 'I had riches too grea-heat to cou-hount.' No; that was an exaggeration. Not at all too great to count. Just a nice little competence. Enough to give him security and the means to continue his researches without having to waste his time on a lot of sick people who ought to be dead. Two hundred thousand dollars in cash and forty-five hundred acres of land in the San Felipe Valley — land that Uncle Jo had positively sworn was just on

the point of getting its irrigation water. (And if it didn't get it, God! how he'd twist the old buzzard's tail for him!) 'Heart failure due to myocarditis of rheumatic origin.' He could have asked a lot more than two hundred thousand for that death-certificate. Particularly as it hadn't been his only service. No, sir! There had been all the mess to clear up. (The ninety-five-dollar fawn-coloured suit was ruined after all.) There had been the servants to keep away; the Baby to put to bed with a big shot of morphia; the permission to cremate the body to be obtained from the next of kin, who was a sister, living, thank God, in straitened circumstances, and at Pensacola, Florida, so that she fortunately couldn't afford to come out to California for the funeral. And then (most ticklish of all) there had been the search for a dishonest undertaker; the discovery of a possible crook; the interview, with its veiled hints of an unfortunate accident to be hushed up, of money that was, practically speaking, no object; then, when the fellow had fired off his sanctimonious little speech about its being a duty to help a leading citizen to avoid unpleasant publicity, the abrupt change of manner, the business-like statement of the unavoidable facts and the necessary fictions, the negotiations as to price. In the end, Mr. Pengo had agreed not to notice the holes in Pete's skull for as little as twenty-five thousand dollars.

'I had riches too gre-heat to cou-hount, could boast of a hi-yish ancestral name.' Yes, decidedly, Dr. Obispo reflected, as he sang, decidedly he could have asked for a great deal more. But what would have been the point? He was a reasonable man; almost, you might say, a philosopher; modest in his ambitions, uninterested in worldly success, and with tastes so simple that the most besetting of them, outside the sphere of scientific research, could be satisfied in the great majority of cases at practically no expense whatsoever, sometimes even with a net profit, as when Mrs. Bojanus had given him that solid gold cigarette-case as a token of her esteem — and then mere were Josephine's pearl studs, and the green enamel cuff-links with his monogram in diamonds from little what's-her-name ...

'But I a-halso drea-heatm which plea-heased me most,' he sang, raising his voice for this final affirmation and putting in a passionate tremolo, 'that you lo-hoved me sti-hill the same, that you lo-hoved me sti-hill the same, that you loved me, he repeated, turning away for a moment from the Portsmouth road to peer with raised eyebrows and a look of amused, ironical enquiry into Virginia's averted face, 'you lo-hoved me sti-hill the same,' and, for the fourth time with tremendous emphasis and pathos, 'that you lo-ho-ho-hoved me sti-hi-hill the same.'

He shot another glance at Virginia. She was staring straight in front of her, holding her lower lip between her teeth, as though she were in pain but determined not to cry out.

'Did I dream correctly?' His smile was wolfish.

The Baby did not answer. From the back seat Mr. Stoyte snored like a bulldog.

'Do you lo-ho-hove sti-hi-hill the same?' he insisted, making the car swerve to the right as he spoke, and putting on speed to pass a row of Army lorries.

The Baby released her lip and said, 'I could kill you.'

'Of course you could,' Dr. Obispo agreed. 'But you won't. Because you lo-ho-ho-hove me too much. Or rather,' he added, and his smile became more gleefully canine with every word, 'you don't lo-ho-ho-hove me; you lo-ho-ho-hove ...' he paused for an instant: 'Well, let's put it in a more poetical way — because one can never have too much poetry, don't you agree? you're in lo-ho-hove with Lo-ho-ho-hove, so much in lo-ho-ho-hove that, when it came to the point, you simply couldn't bring yourself to bump me off. Because, whatever you may feel about me, I'm the boy that produces the lo-ho-ho-hoves.' He began to sing again: 'I dre-heatm I kihilled the goo-hoo-hoo-hoose that laid-haid the go-holden e-he-heggs.'

Virginia covered her ears with her hands in an effort to shut out the sound of his voice — the hideous sound of the truth. Because, of course, it was true. Even after Pete's death, even after she had promised Our Lady that it would never, never happen again — well, it had happened again.

Dr. Obispo continued his improvisation. 'And that thu-hus I'd lo-host my so-hole excuse for showing the skin of my le-he-hegs.'

Virginia pressed her fingers more tightly over her ears. It had happened again, even though she'd said no, even though she'd got mad at him, fought with him, scratched him; but he'd only laughed and gone on; and then suddenly she was just too tired to fight any more. Too tired and too miserable. He

‘You don’t say so!’

‘Like birds singing,’ the child added poetically. ‘She does it after lunch.’

Dr. Obispo patted the tow-coloured head again and said, ‘We’d like to see Lady Anne and Lady Jane.’

‘See them?’ the little girl repeated in a tone almost of alarm.

‘Do you think you could go and ask your Granny to show us in?’

Millie shook her head. ‘She wouldn’t do it. Granny won’t let nobody come in. Some people came about these things.’ She held up the gas-mask. ‘Lady Jane, she got so angry I was frightened. But then she broke one of the lamps with her stick — you know, by mistake: bang! and the glass was all in bits, all over the floor. That made me laugh.’

‘Good for you,’ said Dr. Obispo. ‘Why shouldn’t we make you laugh again?’

The child looked at him suspiciously. ‘What do you mean?’

Dr. Obispo assumed a conspiratorial expression and dropped his voice to a whisper. ‘I mean, you might let us in by one of the side-doors, and we’d all walk on tiptoes, like this’; he gave a demonstration across the gravel. ‘And then we’d pop into the room where they’re sitting and give them a surprise. And then maybe Lady Jane will smash another lamp, and we’ll all laugh and laugh and laugh. What do you say to that?’

‘Granny’d be awfully cross,’ the child said dubiously.

‘We won’t tell her you did it.’

‘She’d find out.’

‘No, she wouldn’t,’ said Dr. Obispo confidently. Then changing his tone, ‘Do you like candies?’ he added.

The child looked at him blankly.

‘Lovely candies?’ he repeated voluptuously; then suddenly remembered that, in this damned country, candies weren’t called candies. What the hell did they call them? He remembered. ‘Lovely sweets!’ He darted back to the car and returned with the expensive-looking box of chocolates that had been bought in case Virginia should feel hungry by the way. He opened the lid, let the child take one sniff, then closed it again. ‘Let us in,’ he said, ‘and you can have them all.’

Five minutes later they were squeezing their way through an ogival french window at the nineteenth-century end of the house. Within, there was a twilight that smelt of dust and dry-rot and moth-balls. Gradually, as the eyes became accustomed to the gloom, a draped billiard-table emerged into view, a mantelpiece with a gilt clock, a bookshelf containing the Waverley Novels in crimson leather, and the eighth edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, a large brown painting representing the baptism of the future Edward VII, the heads of five or six stags. Hanging on the wall near the door was a map of the Crimea; little flags on pins marked the position of Sevastopol and the Alma.

Still carrying the flower-filled gas-mask in one hand, and with the forefinger of the other pressed to her lips, Millie led the way on tiptoes along a corridor, across a darkened drawing-room, through a lobby, down another passage. Then she halted and, waiting for Dr. Obispo to come up with her, pointed.

‘That’s the door,’ she whispered. ‘They’re in there.’

Without a word, Dr. Obispo handed her the box of chocolates; the child snatched it and, like an animal with a stolen tit-bit, slipped past Virginia and Mr. Stoyte, and hurried away down the dark passage to enjoy her prize in safety. Dr. Obispo watched her go, then turned to his companions.

There was a whispered consultation, and in the end it was agreed that Dr. Obispo should go on alone.

He walked forward, quietly opened the door, slipped through and closed it behind him.

Outside, in the corridor, the Baby and Uncle Jo waited for what seemed to them hours. Then, all at once, there was a crescendo of confused noise which culminated in the sudden emergence of Dr. Obispo. He slammed the door, pushed a key into the lock and turned it.

An instant later, from within, the door-handle was violently rattled, a shrill old voice cried, 'How dare you?' Then an ebony cane delivered a series of peremptory raps and the voice almost screamed, 'Give me back those keys. Give them back at once.'

Dr. Obispo put the key of the door in his pocket and came down the corridor, beaming with satisfaction.

'The two god-damnest-looking old hags you ever saw,' he said. 'One on each side of the fire, like Queen Victoria and Queen Victoria.'

A second voice joined the first; the rattling and the rapping were redoubled.

'Bang away!' Dr. Obispo shouted derisively; then, pushing Mr. Stoyte with one hand and with the other giving the Baby a familiar little slap on the buttocks, 'Come on,' he said. 'Come on.'

'Come on where?' Mr. Stoyte asked in a tone of resentful bewilderment. He'd never been able to figure out what this damn fool expedition across the Atlantic was for — except, of course, to get away from the castle. Oh, yes, they'd had to get away from the castle. No question about that; in fact, the only question was whether they'd ever be able to go back to it, after what happened — whether they'd ever be able to bathe in that pool again, for example. Christ! when he thought of it ...

But, then, why go to England? At this season? Why not Florida or Hawaii? But no; Obispo had insisted it must be England. Because of his work, because there might be something important to be found out there. Well, he couldn't say no to Obispo — not now, not yet. And besides, he couldn't do without the man. His nerves, his digestion — all shot to pieces. And he couldn't sleep without dope; he couldn't pass a cop on the street without his heart missing a beat or two. And you could say, 'God is love. There is no death,' till you were blue in the face; but it didn't make any difference. He was old, he was sick; death was coming closer and closer, and unless Obispo did something quick, unless he found out something soon ...

In the dim corridor Mr. Stoyte suddenly halted. 'Obispo,' he said anxiously, while the Hauberk ladies hammered with ebony on the door of their prison, 'Obispo, are you absolutely certain there's no such thing as hell? Can you prove it?'

Dr. Obispo laughed. 'Can you prove that the back side of the moon isn't inhabited by green elephants?' he asked.

'No, but seriously ...' Mr. Stoyte insisted, in anguish.

'Seriously,' Dr. Obispo gaily answered, 'I can't prove anything about any assertion that can't be verified.' Mr. Stoyte and he had had this sort of conversation before. There was something, to his mind, exquisitely comic about chopping logic with the old man's unreasoning terror.

The Baby listened in silence. She knew about hell; she knew what happened if you committed mortal sins — sins like letting it happen again, after you'd promised Our Lady that it wouldn't. But Our Lady was so kind and so wonderful. And, after all, it had really been all that beast Sig's fault. Her own intentions had been absolutely pure; and then Sig had come along and just made her break her word. Our Lady would understand. The awful thing was that it had happened again, when he hadn't forced her. But even then it hadn't really been her fault — because, after all, she'd been through that terrible experience; she wasn't well; she ...

'But do you think hell's possible?' Mr. Stoyte began again.

'Everything is possible,' said Dr. Obispo cheerfully. He cocked an ear to listen to what the old hags were yelling back there behind the door.

'Do you think there's one chance in a thousand it may be true? Or one in a million?'

Grinning, Dr. Obispo shrugged his shoulders. Ask Pascal,' he suggested.

'Who's Pascal?' Mr. Stoyte enquired, clutching despairingly at any and every straw.

'He's dead,' Dr. Obispo positively shouted in his glee. 'Dead as a door-nail. And now, for God's sake!' He seized Uncle Jo by the arm and fairly dragged him along the passage.

The terrible word reverberated through Mr. Stoyte's imagination. 'But I want to be certain,' he protested. 'Certain about what you can't know!'

'There must be a way.'

‘There isn’t. No way except dying and then seeing what happens. Where the hell is that child?’ he added in another tone, and called, ‘Millie!’

Her face smeared with chocolate, the little girl popped up from behind an umbrella-stand in the lobby. ‘Did you see ’em?’ she asked with her mouth full.

Dr. Obispo nodded. ‘They thought I was the Air Raid Precautions.’

‘That’s it!’ the child cried excitedly. ‘That was the one that made her break the lamp.’

‘Come here, Millie,’ Dr. Obispo commanded. The child came. ‘Where’s the door to the cellar?’

An expression of fear passed over Millie’s face. ‘It’s locked,’ she answered.

Dr. Obispo nodded. ‘I know it,’ he said. ‘But Lady Jane gave me the keys.’ He pulled out of his pocket a ring on which were suspended three large keys.

‘There’s bogies down there,’ the child whispered.

‘We don’t worry about bogies.’

‘Granny says they’re awful,’ Millie went on. ‘She says they’re something chronic.’ Her voice broke into a whimper. ‘She says if I don’t go somewhere more regular-like, the bogies will come after me. But I can’t ’elp it.’ The tears began to flow. ‘It isn’t my fault.’

‘Of course it isn’t,’ said Dr. Obispo impatiently. ‘Nothing is ever anybody’s fault. Even constipation. But now I want you to show us the door of the cellar.’

Still in tears, Millie shook her head. ‘I’m frightened.’

‘But you won’t have to go down into the cellar. Just show us where the door is, that’s all.’

‘I don’t want to.’

‘Won’t you be a nice little girl,’ Dr. Obispo wheedled, ‘and take us to the door?’

Stubborn with fear, Millie continued to shake her head.

Dr. Obispo’s hand shot out and snatched the box of chocolates out of the child’s grasp. ‘If you don’t tell me, you won’t have any candies,’ he said, and added irritably, ‘sweets, I mean.’

Millie let out a scream of anguish and tried to get back at the box; but he held it high up, beyond her reach. ‘Only when you show us the door of the cellar,’ he said; and, to show that he was in earnest, he opened the box, took a handful of chocolates and popped them one after another into his mouth. ‘Aren’t they good!’ he said as he munched. ‘Aren’t they just wonderful! Do you know, I’m glad you won’t show us the door, because then I can eat them all.’ He took another bite, made a grimace of ecstasy. ‘Ooh, goody, goody!’ He smacked his lips. ‘Poor little Millie! She isn’t going to get any more of them.’ He helped himself again.

‘Oh, don’t, don’t!’ the child entreated each time she saw one of the brown nuggets of bliss disappearing between Dr. Obispo’s jaws. Then a moment came when greed was stronger than fear. ‘I’ll show you where it is,’ she screamed, like a victim succumbing to torture and promising to confess.

The effect was magical. Dr. Obispo replaced in the box the three chocolates he was still holding and closed the lid. ‘Come on,’ he said, and held out his hand for the child to take.

‘Give me the box,’ she demanded.

Dr. Obispo, who understood the principles of diplomacy, shook his head. ‘Not till you’ve taken us to the door,’ he said.

Millie hesitated for a moment; then, resigned to the hard necessity of keeping to her side of the bargain, took his hand.

Followed by Uncle Jo and the Baby, they made their way out of the lobby, back through the drawing-room, along the passage, past the map of the Crimea and across the billiard-room, along another passage and into a large library. The red plush curtains were drawn; but a little light filtered between them. All round the room the brown and blue and crimson strata of classic literature ran up to within three feet of the high ceiling, and at regular intervals along the mahogany cornice stood busts of the illustrious dead. Millie pointed to Dante. ‘That’s Lady Jane,’ she whispered confidentially.

‘For Christ’s sake!’ Mr. Stoyte broke out startingly. ‘What’s the big idea? What the hell do you figure we’re doing?’

Dr. Obispo ignored him. ‘Where’s the door?’ he asked.

The child pointed.

‘What do you mean?’ he started angrily to shout. Then he saw that what he had taken for just another section of the book-filled shelves was in fact a mere false front of wood and leather simulating thirty-three volumes of the Collected Sermons of Archbishop Stillingfleet and (he recognized the Fifth Earl’s touch) the Complete Works, in seventy-seven volumes, of Donatien Alphonse François, Marquis de Sade. A keyhole revealed itself to a closer scrutiny.

‘Give me my sweets,’ the child demanded.

But Dr. Obispo was taking no risks. ‘Not till we see if the key fits.’

He tried and, at the second attempt, succeeded. ‘There you are.’ He handed Millie her chocolates and at the same time opened the door. The child uttered a scream of terror and rushed away.

‘What’s the big idea?’ Mr. Stoyte repeated uneasily.

‘The big idea,’ said Dr. Obispo, as he looked down the flight of steps that descended, after a few feet, into an impenetrable darkness, ‘the big idea is that you may not have to find out whether there’s such a place as hell. Not yet awhile, that’s to say; not for a very long time maybe. Ah, thank God!’ he added. ‘We shall have some light.’

Two old-fashioned bull’s-eye lanterns were standing on a shelf just inside the door. Dr. Obispo picked one of them up, shook it, held it to his nose. There was oil in it. He lit them both, handed one to Mr. Stoyte and, taking the other himself, led the way cautiously down the stairs.

A long descent; then a circular chamber cut out of the yellow sandstone. There were four doorways. They chose one of them and passed, along a narrow corridor, into a second chamber with two more doorways. A blind alley first; then another flight of steps leading to a cave full of ancient refuse. There was no second issue; laboriously, with two wrong turnings on the way, they retraced their steps to the circular chamber from which they had started, and made trial of its second doorway. A flight of descending steps; a succession of small rooms. One of these had been plastered, and upon its walls early eighteenth-century hands had scratched obscene graffiti. They hurried on, down another short flight of steps, into a large square room with an air-shaft leading at an angle through the rock to a tiny, far-away ellipse of white light. That was all. They turned back again. Mr. Stoyte began to swear; but the doctor insisted on going on. They tried the third doorway. A passage, a suite of three rooms. Two outlets from the last, one mounting, but walled up with masonry after a little way; the other descending to a corridor on a lower level. Thirty or forty feet brought them to an opening on the left. Dr. Obispo turned his lantern into it, and the light revealed a vaulted recess, at the end of which, on a stuccoed pedestal, stood a replica in marble of the Medici Venus.

‘Well, I’m damned!’ said Mr. Stoyte, and then, on second thoughts, was seized with a kind of panic. ‘How the hell did that get here, Obispo?’ he said, running to catch up the doctor.

Dr. Obispo did not answer, but hurried impatiently forward.

‘It’s crazy,’ Mr. Stoyte went on apprehensively, as he trotted behind the doctor. ‘It’s downright crazy. I tell you, I don’t like it.’

Dr. Obispo broke his silence. ‘We might see if we can get her for the Beverly Pantheon,’ he said with a wolfish joviality. ‘Hullo, what’s this?’ he added.

They emerged from the tunnel into a fair-sized room. At the centre of the room was a circular drum of masonry, with two iron uprights rising from either side of it, and a cross-piece, from which hung a pulley.

‘The well!’ said Dr. Obispo, remembering a passage in the Fifth Earl’s notebook.

He almost ran towards the tunnel on the further side of the room. Ten feet from the entrance, his progress was barred by a heavy, nail-studded oak door. Dr. Obispo took out his bunch of keys, chose at random and opened the door at the first trial. They were on the threshold of a small oblong chamber. His bull’s-eye revealed a second door on the opposite wall. He started at once towards it.

‘Canned beef!’ said Mr. Stoyte in astonishment, as he ran the beam of his lantern over the rows of tins and jars on the shelves of a tall dresser that occupied almost the whole of one of the sides of the

room. 'Biloxi Shrimps. Sliced Pineapple. Boston Baked Beans,' he read out, then turned towards Dr. Obispo. 'I tell you, Obispo, I don't like it.'

The Baby had taken out a handkerchief saturated in 'Shocking' and was holding it to her nose. 'The smell!' she said indistinctly through its folds, and shuddered with disgust. 'The smell!'

Dr. Obispo, meanwhile, was trying his keys on the lock of the other door. It opened at last. A draught of warm air flowed in, and at once the little room was filled with an intolerable stench. 'Christ!' said Mr. Stoyte, and behind her handkerchief the Baby let out a scream of nauseated horror.

Dr. Obispo made a grimace and advanced along the stream of foul air. At the end of a short corridor was a third door, of iron bars this time, like the door (Dr. Obispo reflected) of a death-cell in a prison. He flashed his lantern between the bars, into the foetid darkness beyond.

From the little room Mr. Stoyte and the Baby suddenly heard an astonished exclamation and then, after a moment's silence, a violent, explosive guffaw, succeeded by peal after peal of Dr. Obispo's ferocious, metallic laughter. Paroxysm upon uncontrollable paroxysm, the noise reverberated back and forth in the confined space. The hot, stinking air vibrated with a deafening and almost maniacal merriment.

Followed by Virginia, Mr. Stoyte crossed the room and hastened through the open door into the narrow tunnel beyond. Dr. Obispo's laughter was getting on his nerves. 'What the hell ...?' he shouted angrily as he advanced; then broke off in the middle of the sentence. 'What's that?' he whispered.

'A foetal ape,' Dr. Obispo began; but was cut short by another explosion of hilarity, that doubled him up as though with a blow in the solar plexus.

'Holy Mary,' the Baby began behind her handkerchief.

Beyond the bars, the light of the lanterns had scooped out of the darkness a narrow world of forms and colours. On the edge of a low bed, at the centre of this world, a man was sitting, staring, as though fascinated, into the light. His legs, thickly covered with coarse reddish hair, were bare. The shirt, which was his only garment, was torn and filthy. Knotted diagonally across the powerful chest was a broad silk ribbon that had evidently once been blue. From a piece of string tied round his neck was suspended a little image of St. George and the Dragon in gold and enamel. He sat hunched up, his head thrust forward and at the same time sunk between his shoulders. With one of his huge and strangely clumsy hands he was scratching a sore place that showed red between the hairs of his left calf.

'A foetal ape that's had time to grow up,' Dr. Obispo managed at last to say. 'It's too good!' Laughter overtook him again. 'Just look at his face!' he gasped, and pointed through the bars. Above the matted hair that concealed the jaws and cheeks, blue eyes stared out of cavernous sockets. There were no eyebrows; but under the dirty, wrinkled skin of the forehead a great ridge of bone projected like a shelf.

Suddenly, out of the black darkness, another simian face emerged into the beam of the lantern — a face only lightly hairy, so that it was possible to see, not only the ridge above the eyes, but also the curious distortions of the lower jaws, the accretions of bone in front of the ears. Clothed in an old check ulster and some glass beads, a body followed the face into the light.

'It's a woman,' said Virginia, almost sick with the horrified disgust she felt at the sight of those pendulous and withered dugs.

The doctor exploded into even noisier merriment.

Mr. Stoyte seized him by the shoulder and violently shook him. 'Who are they?' he demanded.

Dr. Obispo wiped his eyes and drew a deep breath; the storm of his laughter was flattened to a heaving calm. As he opened his mouth to answer Mr. Stoyte's question, the creature in the shirt suddenly turned upon the creature in the ulster and hit out at her head. The palm of the enormous hand struck the side of the face. The creature in the ulster uttered a scream of pain and rage, and shrank back out of the light. From the shadow came a shrill, furious gibbering that seemed perpetually to tremble on the verge of articulate blasphemy.

'The one with the Order of the Garter,' said Dr. Obispo, raising his voice against the tumult, 'he's the Fifth Earl of Gonister. The other's his housekeeper.'

'But what's happened to them?'

‘Just time,’ said Dr. Obispo airily.

‘Time?’

‘I don’t know how old the female is,’ Dr. Obispo went on. ‘But the Earl there — let me see, he was two hundred and one last January.’

From the shadows the shrill voice continued to scream its all but articulate abuse. Impassably the Fifth Earl scratched the sore on his leg and stared at the light.

Dr. Obispo went on talking. Slowing up of development rates ... one of the mechanisms of evolution ... the older an anthropoid, the stupider ... senility and sterol poisoning ... the intestinal flora of the carp ... the Fifth Earl had anticipated his own discovery ... no sterol poisoning, no senility ... no death, perhaps, except through an accident ... but meanwhile the foetal anthropoid was able to come to maturity ... It was the finest joke he had ever known.

Without moving from where he was sitting, the Fifth Earl urinated on the floor. A shriller chattering arose from the darkness. He turned in the direction from which it came and bellowed the guttural distortions of almost forgotten obscenities.

‘No need of any further experiment,’ Dr. Obispo was saying. ‘We know it works. You can start taking the stuff at once. At once,’ he repeated with sarcastic emphasis.

Mr. Stoyte said nothing.

On the other side of the bars, the Fifth Earl rose to his feet, stretched, scratched, yawned, then turned and took a couple of steps towards the boundary that separated the light from the darkness. His housekeeper’s chattering became more agitated and rapid. Affecting to pay no attention, the Earl halted, smoothed the broad ribbon of his order with the palm of his hand, then fingered the jewel at his neck, making as he did so a curious humming noise that was like a simian memory of the serenade in Don Giovanni. The creature in the ulster whimpered apprehensively, and her voice seemed to retreat further into the shadows. Suddenly, with a ferocious yell, the Fifth Earl sprang forward, out of the narrow universe of lantern light into the darkness beyond. There was a rush of footsteps, a succession of yelps; then a scream and the sound of blows and more screams; then no more screams, but only a stertorous growling in the dark and little cries.

Mr. Stoyte broke the silence. ‘How long do you figure it would take before a person went like that?’ he said in a slow, hesitating voice. ‘I mean, it wouldn’t happen at once ... there’d be a long time while a person ... well, you know; while he wouldn’t change any. And once you get over the first shock — well, they look like they were having a pretty good time. I mean in their own way, of course. Don’t you think so, Obispo?’ he insisted.

Dr. Obispo went on looking at him in silence; then threw back his head and started to laugh again.

Time Must Have a Stop

Time Must Have a Stop was first published in the USA in 1944 by Harper & Brothers and released a year later in Britain by Chatto & Windus. Huxley was immensely proud of the novel and considered it to be one of his most successful works at merging together his philosophical ideas with a good narrative. The title of book is taken from the death speech by Hotspur (Harry Percy) in Shakespeare's Henry IV, Part One. The novel introduces seventeen-year-old poet, Sebastian Barnack, whose frivolous and decadent lifestyle frustrates and enrages his father. Sebastian is a strikingly handsome young man, who cares much for his appearance, so when his father refuses to help him acquire expensive formal wear for a friend's party, he decides to leave for Italy with his debauched and hedonistic uncle to acquire the funds for his clothing. It is during this holiday that Sebastian begins to question his beliefs and values. He develops a close relationship with Bruno, a profoundly religious bookshop owner and is inspired to pursue a different path in life.

The first edition

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The title of the novel was taken from Shakespeare's Henry IV, Part 1

Chapter One

SEBASTIAN BARNACK CAME out of the reading room of the public library and paused in the vestibule to put on his shabby overcoat. Looking at him, Mrs. Ockham felt a sword in her heart. This small and exquisite creature with the seraphic face and the pale curly hair was the living image of her own, her only, her dead and vanished darling.

The boy's lips were moving, she noticed, as he struggled into his coat. Talking to himself — just as her Frankie used to do. He turned and began to walk past the bench on which she was sitting, towards the door.

'It's a raw evening,' she said aloud, acting on a sudden impulse to detain this living phantom, to turn the sharp memory in her wounded heart.

Startled out of his preoccupying thoughts, Sebastian halted, turned and, for a second or two, stared at her uncomprehending. Then he took in the significance of that yearningly maternal smile. His eyes hardened. This sort of thing had happened before. She was treating him as though he were one of those delicious babies one pats the heads of in perambulators. He'd teach the old bitch! But as usual he lacked the necessary courage and presence of mind. In the end he just feebly smiled and said, Yes, it was a raw evening.

Mrs. Ockham, meanwhile, had opened her bag and pulled out a white cardboard box.

'Would you like one of these?'

She held out the box. It was French chocolate, Frankie's favourite — her own too, for that matter. Mrs. Ockham had a weakness for sweet things.

Sebastian considered her uncertainly. Her accent was all right, and in their rather shapeless tweedy way the clothes were substantial and of good quality. But she was fat and old — at least forty, he guessed. He hesitated, torn between a desire to put this tiresome creature in her place and a no less urgent desire for those delicious *langues de chat*. Like a pug, he said to himself, as he looked at that blunt, soft face of hers. A pink, hairless pug with a bad complexion. After which he felt that he could accept the chocolates without compromising his integrity.

'Thanks,' he said, and gave her one of those enchanting smiles which middle-aged ladies always found completely irresistible.

To be seventeen, to have a mind which one felt to be agelessly adult, and to look like a Della Robbia angel of thirteen — it was an absurd and humiliating fate. But last Christmas he had read Nietzsche, and since then he had known that he must Love his Fate. *Amor Fad* — but tempered with a healthy cynicism. If people were ready to pay one for looking less than one's age, why not give them what they wanted?

'How good!'

He smiled at her again, and the corners of his mouth were brown with chocolate. The sword in Mrs. Ockham's heart gave another agonizing twist.

‘Take the whole box,’ she said. Her voice trembled, her eyes were bright with tears.

‘No, no, I couldn’t ...’

‘Take it,’ she insisted, ‘take it.’ And she pressed it into his hand — into Frankie’s hand.

‘Oh, thank you....’ It was just what Sebastian had hoped, even expected. He had had experience of these sentimental old dodoes.

‘I had a boy once,’ Mrs. Ockham went on brokenly. ‘So like you he was. The same hair and eyes ...’ The tears overflowed on to her cheeks. She took off her glasses and wiped them; then, blowing her nose, she got up and hurried into the reading room.

Sebastian stood looking after her until she was out of sight. All at once he felt horribly guilty and mean. He looked at the box in his hand. A boy had died in order that he might have these *langues de chat*: and if his own mother were alive, she would be nearly as old now as that poor creature in the spectacles. And if he had died, she’d have been just as unhappy and sentimental. Impulsively, he made a movement to throw the chocolates away; then checked himself. No, that would be just silliness and superstition. He slipped the box into his pocket and walked out into the foggy twilight.

‘Millions and millions,’ he whispered to himself; and the enormity of the evil seemed to grow with every repetition of the word. All over the world, millions of men and women lying in pain; millions dying, at this very moment; millions more grieving over them, their faces distorted, like that poor old hag’s, the tears running down their cheeks. And millions starving, millions frightened, and sick, and anxious. Millions being cursed and kicked and beaten by other brutal millions. And everywhere the stink of garbage and drink and unwashed bodies, everywhere the blight of stupidity and ugliness. The horror was always there, even when one happened to be feeling well and happy — always there, just round the corner and behind almost every door.

As he walked down Haverstock Hill, Sebastian felt himself overcome by a vast impersonal sadness. Nothing else seemed to exist now, or to matter, except death and agony.

And then that phrase of Keats’s came back to him— ‘The giant agony of the world!’ The giant agony. He racked his memory to find the other lines. ‘None may usurp this height ...’ How did it go?

None may usurp this height, returned that shade,

But those to whom the miseries of the world

Are misery, and will not let them rest....

How exactly right that was! And perhaps Keats had thought of it one cold spring evening, walking down the hill from Hampstead, just as he himself was doing now. Walking down, and stopping sometimes to cough up a morsel of his lungs and think of his own death as well as of other people’s. Sebastian began again, whispering articulately to himself.

None may usurp this height, returned that shade,

But those ...

But, good heavens, how awful it sounded when you spoke it aloud! None may usurp this height, returned that shade, but those ... How could he have let a thing like that get past him? But, of course, old Keats was pretty careless sometimes. And being a genius didn’t preserve him from the most ghastly lapses into bad taste. There were things in *Endymion* that made one shudder. And when one reflected that it was supposed to be Greek ... Sebastian smiled to himself with compassionate irony. One of these days he’d show them what could be done with Greek mythology. Meanwhile, his mind went back to the phrases that had come to him just now in the library, while he was reading Tarn’s book on Hellenistic civilization. ‘Ignore the dried figs!’ that was how it was to begin. ‘Ignore the dried figs ...’ But, after all, dried figs can be good figs. For slaves there would never be anything but the spoilage and refuse of the crop. ‘Ignore the stale figs,’ then. Besides, in this particular context of sound, ‘stale’ carried the proper vowel.

Ignore the stale figs, the weevils and the whippings,

The old men terrified of death ...

But that was horribly flat. Steam-rolled and macadamized, like bad Wordsworth. What about ‘scared of dying’?

The old men scared of dying, the women ...

He hesitated, wondering how to sum up that dismal life of the Gynceum. Then, from the mysterious source of light and energy at the back of his skull, out popped the perfect phrase: '... the women in cages.'

Sebastian smiled at the image that bobbed up — a whole zoo of ferocious and undomesticable girls, a deafening aviary of dowagers. But these would be for another poem — a poem in which he would take vengeance on the whole female sex. At the moment his business was with Hellas — with the historical squalor that was Greece and the imaginary glory. Imaginary, of course, so far as a whole people was concerned, but surely realizable by an individual, a poet above all. Some day, somehow, somewhere, that glory would be within his grasp; of that Sebastian was convinced. But meanwhile it was important not to make a fool of oneself. The passion of his nostalgia would have to be tempered, in the expression, with a certain irony, the splendour of the longed-for ideal with a spice of the absurd. Forgetting all about the dead boy and the giant agony of the world, he helped himself to a *langue de chat* from the store in his pocket and, his mouth full, resumed the intoxicating labour of composition.

Ignore the stale figs, the weevils and the whippings,

The old men scared of dying, the women in cages.

So much for history. Now for imagination.

In a perpetual June ...

He shook his head. 'Perpetual' was like the headmaster talking about the climate of Ecuador in those asinine geography lessons of his. 'Chronic' suggested itself as an alternative. The associations with varicose veins and the language of Cockney charwomen delighted him.

In a chronic June, what Alcibiadeses

Surround the beard of Plato!

Vile! This was no place for proper names. 'What musculatures' perhaps? Then, like manna, 'what heavyweights' fell from heaven. Yes, yes; 'what highbrow heavyweights.' He laughed aloud. And substituting 'wisdom' for 'Plato' you got:

In a chronic June, what highbrow heavyweights

Surround the beard of wisdom!

Sebastian repeated the words with relish, two or three times. And now for the other sex.

Hark, near by,

The twangling and the flutes!

He walked on, frowning to himself. Those prancing Bacchae, those Praxitelean breasts and buttocks, those dancers on the vases — how hellishly difficult to make any kind of sense of them! Compress and express. Squeeze all the voluptuous images into a lump and, in the act, squeeze out of them a liqueur-glassful of verbal juice, at once astringent and heady, tart and aphrodisiac. It was easier said than done. His lips began to move at last.

'Hark,' he whispered again.

Hark, near by,

The twangling and the flutes. Before, behind,

Gyre after gyre, what orbed resiliences,

The last veil loosened, uneclipse their moons!

He sighed and shook his head. Not quite right yet; but still, it would have to do for the time being. And meanwhile here was the corner. Should he go straight home, or walk round by Bantry Place, pick up Susan and let her hear the new poem? Sebastian hesitated a moment, then decided on the second course and turned to the right. He felt in the mood for an audience and applause.

... what orbed resiliences,

The last veil loosened, uneclipse their moons!

But perhaps the whole thing was too short. It might be necessary to slip in three or four more lines between those resiliences and his final, purple explosion of Bengal lights. Something about the Parthenon, for example. Or maybe something about Aeschylus would be more amusing.

Tragical on stilts, bawling sublimities
Through a tortured mouth-hole ...

But goodness! here were those Bengal lights, rocketing up irrepressibly and uninvited into his throat.
And all the time, darling upon a thousand

Islands in the hyacinthine sea,

What fierce desires ...

No, no, no. Too vague, too fleshlessly abstract!

What bulls, what boys, what frenzy of swans and nipples,

What radiant lusts like a red forge panting up

From fire to brighter fire ...

But 'brighter' had no kind of resonance, no meaning beyond itself. What he needed was a word that, while it described the growing intensity of the fire, should also convey the substance of his own passionately cherished faith — the equivalence of all the ecstasies, the poetic, the sexual, even the religious (if you went in for that sort of thing), and their superiority to all the merely humdrum and ordinary states of being.

He went back to the beginning, hoping in this way to gather enough momentum to carry him over the obstacle.

And all the while, darling upon a thousand

Islands in the hyacinthine sea,

What bulls, what boys, what frenzy of swans and nipples,

What radiant lusts, like a red forge panting up

From fire ... from fire ...

He hesitated; then the words came.

From fire to purer fire, to Light Itself —

The incandescent copulation of Gods.

But here was the turning into Bantry Place, and even through the closed and curtained windows of number five he could hear Susan at her piano lesson, playing that thing of Scarlatti's she had been working on all the winter. The sort of music, it struck him, that would happen if the bubbles in a magnum of champagne were to rush up rhythmically and, as they reached the surface, burst into sounds as dry and tangy as the wine from whose depths they had arisen. The simile pleased him so much that Sebastian failed to remember that he had never tasted champagne; and his last reflection, as he rang the bell, was that the music would be even dryer and tangier if it were the harpsichord that were being played and not old Pfeiffer's luscious Blüthner.

Over the top of the piano, Susan caught sight of him as he entered the music-room — those beautiful parted lips of his, and the soft hair she always longed to stroke and run her fingers through (but he would never let her), tousled by the wind into a delicious frenzy of pale curls. How sweet of him to have come out of his way to call for her! She gave him a quick glad smile, and as she did so, noticed all at once that there were tiny little water-drops in his hair, like the lovely dew on cabbage leaves — only here they were smaller, beaded along silk floss; and if one touched them, they would be as cold as ice. To think of it was enough to get her all tangled up in the fingering of her left hand.

Old Dr. Pfeiffer, who was pacing up and down the room like a caged animal — a small, obese bear in unpressed trousers and with the moustache of a walrus — took the much-chewed cigar stump out of the corner of his mouth and shouted in German:

'Musik, musik!'

With an effort, Susan expelled from her mind the thought of dewdrops on silky curls, caught up the faltering sonata and played on. To her chagrin, she felt herself blushing.

Crimson cheeks, and the hair auburn almost to redness. Beetroots and carrots, Sebastian reflected without indulgence; and the way she showed her gums when she smiled — it was positively anatomical.

Susan struck the final chord and dropped her hands into her lap, waiting for the master's verdict. It came with a roar and on a blast of cigar smoke.

‘Goot, goot, goot!’ And Dr. Pfeiffer clapped her on the shoulder, as though he were encouraging a cart-horse. Then he turned to Sebastian.

‘Und here’s der liddle Ariel! Oder, perhaps, der liddle Puck — not?’ He twinkled between his narrowed eyelids with what he felt to be the most playfully subtle, the most exquisite and cultured irony.

Little Ariel, little Puck ... Twice in an afternoon, and this time without any excuse — just because the old buffoon thought he was being funny.

‘Not being a German,’ Sebastian retorted tartly, ‘I haven’t read any Shakespeare — so I really can’t say.’

‘Der Puck, der Puck!’ cried Dr. Pfeiffer, and laughed so whole-heartedly that he stirred up his chronic bronchitis and started to cough.

An expression of anxiety appeared on Susan’s face. Goodness only knew where this would end. She jumped up from the piano-stool, and when the explosions and the horribly liquid wheezings of Dr. Pfeiffer’s cough had somewhat subsided, she announced that they must leave at once; her mother was particularly anxious for her to get back early today.

Dr. Pfeiffer wiped the tears out of his eyes, bit once again on the much-chewed end of his cigar, treated Susan to two or three more of his resounding, cart-horse endearments, and told her in God’s name to remember what he had said about the trills in the right hand. Then, picking up from a table the cedar-lined silver box, which a grateful pupil had given him for his last birthday, he turned to Sebastian, laid one huge square hand on the boy’s shoulder, and with the other held the cigars under his nose.

‘Take one,’ he said cajolingly. ‘Take a nize big fat Havana. Free of charge, und garantiert it won’t make a vomitus even to a sucking baby.’

‘Oh, shut up!’ Sebastian shouted in a fury that was on the verge of tears; and suddenly ducking down, he slipped from under his persecutor’s arm and ran out of the room. Susan stood for a moment, hesitant, then without a word hurried after him. Dr. Pfeiffer took the cigar out of his mouth and shouted after her:

‘Quick! Quick! Our liddle genius is crying.’

The door slammed. In defiance of his bronchitis, Dr. Pfeiffer started to laugh again, enormously. Two months before, the liddle genius had accepted one of his cigars and, while Susan did her best with the ‘Moonlight Sonata,’ had puffed away at it for nearly five minutes. Then there was a panic dash for the bathroom; but he had failed to get there quite in time. Dr. Pfeiffer’s sense of humour was mediievally robust; for him, that vomitus on the second-floor landing was almost the funniest thing that had happened since the jokes in Faust.

Chapter Two

HE WAS WALKING so fast that Susan had to run, and even so she came up with him only under the second lamp-post. She caught his arm and squeezed it affectionately.

‘Sebastian!’

‘Let go,’ he commanded angrily, and shook himself free. He wasn’t going to be patronized and condoled with by anyone.

There! She’d done the wrong thing again. But why must he be so horribly touchy? And why on earth did he pay any attention to an old ass like Pfeiffy?

For a while they walked along, side by side, in silence. She spoke at last.

‘Did you write any poetry today?’

‘No,’ Sebastian lied. Those incandescent copulations of gods had been quenched and turned to ashes. The very thought of reciting the lines now, after what had happened, made him feel sick — like the thought of eating the cold scraps left over from yesterday’s dinner.

There was another silence. It was a half-holiday, Susan was thinking, and because it was examination-time, there wasn't any football. Had he spent the afternoon with that awful Esdaile creature? She shot a glance at him under the next lamp; yes, there was no doubt of it, he looked dark under the eyes. The pigs! She was filled with sudden anger — anger born of a jealousy, all the more painful for being unavowable. She had no rights; there had never been any question of their being anything but cousins, almost sister and brother; besides, it was too painfully obvious that he didn't even dream of thinking about her in that other way. And incidentally when he had asked her, that time, two years before, to let him see her without any clothes on, she had said no, in an absolute panic. Two days later she told Pamela Groves about what had happened; and Pamela, who went to one of those progressive schools and whose parents were so much younger than Susan's, had merely roared with laughter. What a fuss about nothing at all! Why, she and her brothers and her cousins — they were always seeing one another with no clothes on. Yes, and her brothers' friends too. So why on earth shouldn't poor Sebastian do it, if he wanted to? All this silly Victorian prudery! Susan was made to feel ashamed of her own and her mother's old-fashioned views. Next time Sebastian asked, she'd take off her pyjamas immediately and stand there in front of him in the attitude, she decided after some reflection, of that Roman matron, or whoever she was, in the Alma-Tadema engraving in her father's study, smiling and with her arms up, doing her hair. For several days she rehearsed the scene in front of her looking-glass, until finally she had it all absolutely perfect. But unfortunately Sebastian never renewed his request, and she hadn't the nerve to take the initiative. With the result that here he was, doing the most awful things with that Esdaile bitch, and she didn't have any right or reason even to cry. Much less to slap his face, as she would have liked to do, and call him names, and pull his hair, and ... and make him kiss her.

'I suppose you spent the afternoon with your precious Mrs. Esdaile,' she said at last, trying to sound contemptuous and superior.

Sebastian, who had been walking with bent head, looked up at her.

'What's that to you?' he said after a pause.

'Nothing at all.' Susan shrugged her shoulders and uttered a little laugh. But inwardly she felt angry with herself and ashamed. How often she had vowed never to show any further curiosity about his beastly affair, never to listen again to those horrifying details, which he recounted so vividly and with so manifest a relish! And yet curiosity always got the better of her, and she listened greedily every time. Listened just because these accounts of his love-making with somebody else were so painful to her. Listened, too, because thus to share in his love-making, even theoretically and in imagination, was obscurely exciting to her, and itself constituted a kind of sensual bond between them, a mental embrace, horribly unsatisfying and exasperating, but none the less an embrace.

Sebastian had looked away; but now suddenly he turned back to her with a strange smile almost of triumph, as though he had just scored off somebody.

'All right, then,' he said. 'You've asked for it. Don't blame me if it shocks your maiden modesty.'

He broke off with a rather harsh little laugh, and walked along in silence, meditatively rubbing the bridge of his nose with the tip of his right forefinger. How well she knew the gesture! It was the infallible sign that he was composing a poem, or thinking of the best way to tell one of his stories.

Those stories, those extraordinary stories! Susan had lived in the fantastic worlds of Sebastian's creation almost as long and quite as intensely as she had lived in the real world. More intensely perhaps; for in the real world she had to depend on her own prosaic self, whereas in the story world she found herself endowed with Sebastian's rich imagination, moved and excited by Sebastian's flow of words.

The first of his stories that Susan clearly remembered was the one Sebastian had told her on the beach at Tenby, that summer (it must have been the summer of 1917) when there were five candles on their joint birthday cake. They had found among the seaweed an old red rubber ball, torn almost in half. Sebastian took it to a little pool and washed out the sand with which it was filled. On the wet inner surface of the ball was a kind of wart-like excrescence. Why? Only the manufacturers could say. For a child of five, it was an inexplicable mystery. Sebastian touched the wart with a probing forefinger. That was the tummy-button, he whispered. They looked around furtively to make sure that they were out

of earshot: navels were things that verged upon the unmentionable. Everybody's tummy-button grew inwards like that, Sebastian went on. And when she asked him, 'How do you know?' he launched out into a circumstantial account of what he had seen Dr. Carter doing to a little girl in his consulting-room, the last time Aunt Alice had taken him there about his earache. Cutting her open — that was what Dr. Carter was doing — cutting her open with a big knife and fork, to look at her tummy-button from the inside. And when you were too tough for a knife and fork, they had to use one of those saws that butchers cut bones with. Yes, really and truly, he insisted, when she expressed her horrified incredulity, really and truly. And to prove his point, he began sawing at the ball with the side of his hand. The gashed rubber parted under the pressure; the wound gaped wider and wider as the saw cut more deeply into what, for Susan, was now no longer a ball, but a little girl's tummy — for all practical purposes, her own. H-h-h-h, h-h-h-h, h-h-h-h, Sebastian went, trilling the aspirant far back in the throat. The sound was blood-curdlingly like the noise of a meat saw. And then, he went on, when they'd cut far enough, they opened you. Like this — and he pulled the two halves of the wounded ball apart. They opened you, and they turned your top flap inside out — so; and then they scrubbed the tummy-button with soap and water to get the dirt off. Furiously he scratched the mysterious wart, and his nails on the rubber made a small dry noise that, to Susan, was unspeakably horrifying. She uttered a scream and covered her ears with her hands. For years afterwards she had been terrified of Dr. Carter, had howled whenever he came near her; and even now when she knew it was all nonsense about the tummy-button, the sight of his little black bag, of those cabinets in his consulting-room, full of glass tubes and bottles and nickel-plated gadgets, filled her with a vague apprehension which she found it difficult, in spite of all her efforts at reasonableness, to dispel.

Uncle John Barnack was often away for months at a stretch travelling abroad and writing articles for that left-wing paper which Susan's father wouldn't so much as allow his fire to be lighted with. Sebastian had therefore lived a good part of his life under the care of his Aunt Alice and at closest quarters with the youngest of her children, the little girl between whom and himself there was a difference in age of only a single day. With the growth of that small body of his, that precocious and feverishly imaginative mind, the stories that he told her — or rather that he related to himself in her stimulating presence — became ever more complicated and circumstantial. Sometimes they would last for weeks and months, in an interminable series of instalments, composed as they walked back and forth from school, or ate their supper in front of the gas fire in the nursery, or sat together on the roofs of wintry buses while their elders travelled prosaically inside. For example, there was the epic that ran almost uninterruptedly through the whole of 1923 — the epic of the Larnimans. Or rather the La-a-arnimans — for the name was always pronounced in a whisper and with a horribly significant prolongation of the first syllable. Those La-a-arnimans were a family of human ogres, who lived in tunnels that radiated out from a central cavern immediately under the lion house at the Zoo.

'Listen!' Sebastian would whisper to her each time they found themselves in front of the Siberian tiger's cage.

'Listen!' And he would stamp his foot on the pavement.

'It's hollow. Don't you hear?'

And, sure enough, Susan did hear and, hearing, shuddered at the thought of the La-a-arnimans sitting there fifty feet below, at the heart of a whirring complex of machinery, counting the money they had stolen from the vaults of the Bank of England, roasting the children they had kidnapped through trap-doors in basements, breeding cobras, to let loose into the drains so that suddenly, one fine morning, just as one was about to sit down, a hooded head would pop up out of the W.C. and hiss. Not that she believed any of it, of course. But even if you didn't believe in it, it was still frightening. Those horrible La-a-arnimans with their cat's eyes and their patent electric guns and their underground switchbacks — they didn't really live under the lion house (even though the ground did sound hollow when you stamped on it). But that didn't mean that they didn't exist. The proof of their existence was the fact that she dreamed about them, that she kept a sharp look-out, each morning, for those cobras.

But the Larnimans were ancient history now. Their place had been taken, first, by a detective; then (after Sebastian had read his father's book about the Russian Revolution) by Trotsky; then by Odysseus, whose adventures, during that summer and autumn of 1926, were wilder than anything that Homer had ever reported. It was with the coming of Odysseus that girls first made their appearance in Sebastian's stories. True, they had figured to some extent in the earlier epics, but only as the victims of doctors, cannibals, cobras and revolutionaries. (Anything to make Susan's flesh creep, to elicit that horrified squeal of protest!) But in the new Odyssey they started to play another kind of part. They were pursued and kissed, they were looked at through keyholes without their clothes on, they were discovered bathing at midnight in a phosphorescent sea, and Odysseus would also go swimming.

Forbidden themes, repulsively fascinating, disgustingly attractive! Sebastian would embark on them with a quiet casualness — *pianissimo*, so to speak, and *senza espressione*, as though he were hurrying over some boring transitional passage, some patch of mere five-finger exercises interpolated into the romantic rhapsody of his Odyssey. *Pianissimo*, *senza espressione* — and then, bang! like a chord by Scriabin in the middle of a Haydn quartet, out he'd come with some frightful enormity! And in spite of all her efforts to take it casually, matter-of-factly, as Pamela would have taken it, Susan would be startled into an exclamation, a blush, a covering of the ears, a rushing away, as though she didn't mean to listen to another word. But always she did listen; and sometimes, when he broke off his narrative to ask her some direct and horribly indiscreet question, she would even speak herself about the impossible subject, muttering with averted eyes, or else in a voice uncontrolledly loud, and modulating, against her will, into a burst of laughter.

Gradually the new Odyssey had petered out. Susan had her music and her School Certificate, and Sebastian spent all his leisure reading Greek and the English poets, and writing verses of his own. There seemed to be no time for story-telling, and if ever they did find themselves together for a little, he liked to recite his latest poems. When she praised them, as she generally did — for she really did think they were wonderful — Sebastian's face would light up.

'Oh, it's not too bad,' he would say deprecatingly; but his smile and the irrepressible brightness of his eyes betrayed what he really thought. Sometimes, however, there were lines she didn't understand, or didn't like; and then, if she ventured to say so, he'd flush with anger and call her a fool and a Philistine; or else sarcastically remark that it was only to be expected, seeing that women had the minds of hens, or seeing it was notorious that musicians had no brains, only fingers and a solar plexus. Sometimes his words hurt her; but more often they only evoked a smile and made her feel, by comparison with his transparent childishness, delightfully old, wise and, in spite of his dazzling gifts, superior. When he behaved like that, Sebastian proclaimed himself an infant as well as a prodigy, and invited her to love him in yet another way — protectively and maternally.

And then suddenly, a few weeks after the beginning of the current term, the stories had started again — but with a difference; for this time they were not fiction, they were autobiography: he had begun to tell her about Mrs. Esdaile. The child in him was still there, still urgently in need of mothering, of being preserved from the consequences of his own childishness; but the grown boy she secretly worshipped with quite another passion was now the lover of a woman — older than herself and prettier, and a million times more experienced; rich too, and with lovely clothes and manicures and make-up; utterly beyond the possibility of competition and rivalry. Susan had never let him see how much she minded; but her diary had been full of bitterness, and in bed at night she had often cried herself to sleep. And tonight she would again have reason to be miserable.

Frowning, Susan glanced sideways at her companion. Sebastian was still pensively caressing his nose.

'That's it,' she burst out with a sudden uprush of resentment; 'rub your beastly little snout till you've got it all pat!'

Sebastian started and looked round. An expression of disquiet appeared on his face.

'Got what all pat?' he asked defensively.

‘All your beautiful speeches and witty repartees,’ she answered. ‘You think I don’t know you, I suppose. Why, I bet you’re too shy to say anything, even when you’re ...’ She broke off, unable to give utterance to the words that would evoke the odious picture of their love-making.

At another time this taunting reference to his timidity — to the humiliating dumbness and incoherence with which he was afflicted whenever he found himself in strange or impressive Company — would have roused him to anger. But on this occasion he was merely amused.

‘Mayn’t I tell even the tiniest lie?’ he said. ‘Just for art’s sake?’

‘You mean for your sake — to make yourself look like something out of Noel Coward.’

‘Out of Congreve,’ he protested.

‘Out of anybody you like,’ said Susan, happy to have this opportunity of venting her accumulated bitterness without betraying its real nature and cause. ‘Any old lie, so long as you don’t have to show yourself as you really are...’

‘A Don Juan without the courage of his conversation,’ he put in. It was a phrase he had invented to console himself for having cut such a lamentable figure at the Boveney’s Christmas party. ‘And you’re annoyed because I put the conversation where it ought to have been. Don’t be so horribly literal.’

He smiled at her so enchantingly that Susan had to capitulate.

‘All right,’ she grumbled. ‘I’ll believe you even when I know it’s a lie.’

His smile broadened; he was the gayest of Della Robbia angels.

‘Even when you know,’ he repeated, and laughed aloud. It was the most exquisite of jokes. Poor old Susan! She knew that the accounts of his conversational prowess were false; but she also knew that he had got talking with a beautiful dark-haired young woman on the top of a Finchley Road bus, that this woman had asked him to tea at her flat, had listened to his poetry, had told him how unhappy she was with her husband, had made an excuse to leave the drawing-room and then, five minutes later, had called him, ‘Mr. Barnack, Mr. Barnack,’ — and he had walked out after her, and across the landing and through a half-opened door into a room that was pitch dark, and suddenly had felt her bare arms round him and her lips on his face. Susan knew all that, and a great deal more besides; and the beauty of it was that Mrs. Esdaile didn’t exist, that he had found her name in the telephone book, her pale oval face in a volume of Victorian steel engravings, and all the rest in his imagination. And all that poor Susan objected to was the elegance of his conversation!

‘She was wearing black lace underclothes today,’ he improvised, carried away by his amusement into an emphatic Beardsleyism that at ordinary times he would have despised.

‘She would!’ said Susan, bitterly thinking of her own stout white cotton.

With his inward eye Sebastian was contemplating a Callipyge in needle-point, patterned all over with spidery arabesques. Like one of those ornamental china horses, on whose flanks the dapplings are leaves and tendrils. He laughed to himself.

‘I told her she was the latest archaeological discovery — the Dappled Aphrodite of Hampstead.’

‘Liar!’ said Susan emphatically. ‘You didn’t tell her anything of the kind.’

‘I shall write a poem about the Dappled Aphrodite,’ Sebastian went on, ignoring her.

A fire-works display of lovely phrases began to blaze and crackle in his mind.

‘Stippled with scrolls her withers, her velvet croup tattooed with Brussels roses. And round the barrel,’ he murmured, rubbing his nose, ‘round the rich barrel, like a net of flowery moles, gardens and trellises of bobbin-work.’

And, by golly, there was a perfectly good rhyme! Scrolls and moles — two stout pegs on which one could hang any amount of lace and goddess-skin.

‘Oh, shut up!’ said Susan.

But his lips continued to move.

‘Inked on those creamy quarters, what artful calligraphy, swelling and shrinking with each alternate movement.’

Suddenly he heard his name being shouted and the sound of running feet from behind them.

‘Who the devil ...?’

They stopped and turned round.

'It's Tom Boveney,' said Susan.

So it was! Sebastian smiled.

'I'll bet you five bob he says, "Hullo, Suse, how's the booze?"'

Six and a half feet high, three feet wide, two feet thick, sandy-haired and grinning, Tom came rushing up like the Cornish Riviera Express.

'Basty Boy,' he shouted, 'you're just the man I was looking for. Oh, and there's young Suse. — How's the booze, Suse?'

He laughed, and was delighted when Susan and Sebastian also laughed — laughed with unaccustomed heartiness.

'Well,' he went on, turning back to Sebastian, 'it's all settled.'

'What's settled?'

'The dinner problem. Seeing you're going abroad as soon as term's over, I've arranged to put it off to the end of the hols.'

He grinned and patted Sebastian's shoulder affectionately. He too, Susan said to herself. And she went on to reflect that almost everyone felt that way about Sebastian — and he exploited it. Yes, he exploited it.

'Pleased?' Tom questioned.

Basty was his mascot, his child, and at the same time the exquisite and brilliant object of a love which he was too congenitally heterosexual to avow, or even to understand and give a name to. He'd do anything to please little Basty.

But instead of beaming delightedly, Sebastian looked almost dismayed.

'But, Tom,' he stammered, 'you mustn't ... I mean, you shouldn't put yourself out for me.'

Tom laughed and gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

'I'm not putting myself out.'

'But the other fellows,' said Sebastian, clutching at every straw.

Tom pointed out that the other fellows didn't care whether his farewell party was at the beginning of the hols or at the end.

'A binge is always a binge,' he was saying philosophically, when Sebastian cut him short with a vehemence altogether unjustified by considerations of mere politeness.

'No, I wouldn't dream of it,' he cried in a tone of finality.

There was a silence. Tom Boveney looked down at him wonderingly.

'You almost sound as if you didn't want to come,' he began in bewilderment.

Sebastian realized his mistake and made haste to protest that of course there was nothing he'd have liked better. Which was true. Dinner at the Savoy, a show, and a night club to wind up with — it would be an unprecedented experience. But he had to refuse the invitation, and for the most humiliating and childish reason: he had no evening clothes. And now, when he thought that everything had been settled so satisfactorily, here was Tom reopening the question. Damn him, damn him! Sebastian positively hated the great lout for his officious friendliness.

'But if you want to come,' Tom insisted with exasperating common sense, 'what on earth are you saying no for?' He turned to Susan. 'Can you throw any light on the mystery?'

Susan hesitated. She knew, of course, all about Uncle John's refusal to get Sebastian a suit of evening clothes. It was mean of him. But after all there wasn't anything for Sebastian to be ashamed of. Why didn't he frankly come out with it?

'Well,' she said slowly, 'I suppose it's because ...'

'Shut up. Shut up, I tell you.' In his fury, Sebastian gave her arm such a pinch that she cried out in pain.

'Serves you right,' he whispered savagely, and turned again to Tom. Susan was astonished to hear him saying that of course he'd come, and it was really terribly nice of Tom to have taken all that trouble to change the date. Terribly nice — and he actually managed to give Tom one of his angelic smiles.

‘You didn’t think I’d have a party without you, Basty?’ Once more Tom Boveney squeezed the shoulder of his mascot, his only child, his infant prodigy and exquisite beloved.

‘Now of all times, when I’m going to Canada — and God knows when I shall be seeing you again. You or any of the other Haverstock fellows,’ he added hastily; and to build up the alibi, he addressed himself jocularly to Susan: ‘And if it weren’t a stag party, I’d ask you too. Plenty of booze for good old Suse.’ He slapped her on the back, and laughed.

‘And now I’ve got to fly. Oughtn’t to have stopped to talk to you by rights; but it was such a stroke of luck running into you. So long, Suse. So long, Basty.’ He turned and started to run, elegantly in spite of his size and weight, like a professional half-miler, into the darkness out of which he had come. The others resumed their walk.

‘What I can’t understand,’ said Susan, after a long silence, ‘is why you don’t just tell the truth. It isn’t your fault that you don’t have a dinner jacket. And it’s not as if there was a law against wearing your blue serge suit. They won’t turn you out of the restaurant, you know.’

‘Oh, for God’s sake!’ cried Sebastian, driven almost to frenzy by the maddening reasonableness of what she was saying.

‘But if you’d only explain to me why you don’t tell him,’ she persisted.

‘I don’t wish to explain,’ he said with a dignified finality.

Susan glanced at him, thought how ridiculous he looked, and shrugged her shoulders.

‘You mean, you can’t explain.’

In the silence that ensued, Sebastian chewed on the bitter cud of his abasement. He didn’t wish to explain because, as Susan had said, he couldn’t explain. And he couldn’t explain, not because he lacked reasons, but because the reasons he had were so excruciatingly intimate. First that old cow in the library; even that dead son was no excuse for her slobbering over him as though he were still in diapers. Then Pfeiffer and his stinking cigars. And now this last humiliation. It was not only that he looked like a child, when he knew himself to be a hundred times abler than the oldest of them. It was also that he lacked the outward accoutrement and paraphernalia belonging to his real age. If he’d had decent clothes and enough pocket money, the other humiliations would have been tolerable. By his easy spendings and the cut of his coats he could have refuted the specious evidence of his face and stature. But his father gave him only a shilling a week, made him wear his shoddy reach-me-downs till they were threadbare and short in the sleeves, and absolutely refused to get him a dinner jacket. His garments confirmed the testimony of the body they so shabbily covered; he was a child in child’s clothing. And here was that fool, Susan, asking him why he didn’t tell Tom Boveney the truth!

‘Amor Fati,’ she quoted. ‘Didn’t you say that was your motto now?’ Sebastian did not deign to make a reply.

Looking at him, as he walked beside her, his face set, his body curiously rigid and constrained, Susan felt her irritation melting away into a maternal tenderness. Poor darling! How miserable he managed to make himself! And for such idiotic reasons! Worrying about a dinner jacket! But she’d be prepared to bet that Tom Boveney didn’t have an affair with a beautiful married woman. And, remembering how he had cheered up just now at the mention of Mrs. Esdaile, Susan charitably tried again.

‘You didn’t finish telling me about those black lace underclothes,’ she said at last, breaking the dismal silence.

But this time there was no response; Sebastian merely shook his head without even looking in her direction.

‘Please,’ she cajoled.

‘I don’t want to.’ And when Susan tried to insist, ‘I tell you, I don’t want to,’ he repeated more emphatically.

There was nothing funny any longer about Susan’s gullibility. Seen soberly, in its proper light, this Esdaile business was just another of his humiliations.

His mind harked back to that hideous evening two months before. Outside the Camden Town tube station, a girl in blue, coarsely pretty, with painted mouth and a lot of yellow hair. He walked up and

down two or three times, trying to screw up his courage and feeling rather sick, just as he did before one of those ghastly interviews with the headmaster about his maths. The nausea of the threshold. But finally, when one had knocked and gone in and sat down opposite that large and extraordinarily clean-shaven face, it wasn't really so bad. 'You seem to think, Sebastian, that because you're highly gifted in one direction you're excused from working at anything you don't happen to enjoy.' And it would end up with his being kept in for two or three hours on half-holiday afternoons, or having to do a couple of extra problems every day for a month. Nothing so very bad, after all, nothing to justify that nausea. Taking courage from these reflections, Sebastian walked up to the girl in blue and said, 'Good evening.'

In the beginning she wouldn't even take him seriously. 'A kid like you! I'd be ashamed of myself.' He had to show her the inscription in his copy of the Oxford Book of Greek Verse, which he happened to be carrying in his pocket. 'For Sebastian, on his seventeenth birthday, from his uncle, Eustace Barnack. 1928.' The girl in blue read the words aloud, glanced dubiously into his face, then back at the book. From the fly-leaf she turned to a page chosen at random in the middle of the volume. 'Why, it's Yiddish!' She looked curiously into his face. 'I'd never have guessed it,' she said. Sebastian set her right. 'And you mean to tell me you can read it?' He demonstrated his ability on a chorus from the Agamemnon. That convinced her; anybody who could do that must be more than just a kid. But did he have any money? He produced his wallet and showed her the pound-note that still remained to him from Uncle Eustace's Christmas present. 'All right,' said the girl. But she had no place of her own; where did he mean to go?

Aunt Alice and Susan and Uncle Fred had all gone away for the week-end, and there was nobody left in the house except old Ellen — and Ellen always went to bed sharp at nine, and was as deaf as a post anyway. They could go to his place, he suggested; and he hailed a taxi.

Of the nightmare that followed Sebastian could not think without a shudder. That rubber corset and, when they were in his room, her body, as unresponsive as its carapace. The bored perfunctory kisses, and the breath that stank of beer and caries and onions. His own excitement, so frenzied as to be almost instantly self-stultifying; and then, irremediable, the hideously sober coldness that brought with it a disgust for what lay there beside him, a horror as though for a corpse — and the corpse laughed and offered him its derisive condolences.

On the way down to the front door, the girl asked to look at the drawing-room. Her eyes opened wide as the light revealed its modest splendours. 'Hand painted!' she said admiringly, crossing over to the fireplace and running her fingers over the varnish of the presentation portrait of Sebastian's grandfather. That seemed to settle it for her. She turned to Sebastian and announced that she wanted another quid. But he hadn't got another quid. The girl in blue sat down emphatically on the sofa. Very well, then; she'd stay there until he found one. Sebastian emptied his pockets of small change. Three and elevenpence. No, she insisted, nothing less than a quid; and in a hoarse contralto she started to chant the words, 'A quid, a quid, a quid-o,' to the tune of 'When Irish Eyes ...'

'Don't do that,' he begged. The chant swelled to full-throated song. 'A quid, a quid, a quid-o, a lovely, lovely quid ...' Almost in tears, Sebastian interrupted her: there was a servant sleeping upstairs, and even the neighbours might hear. 'Well, let them all come,' said the girl in blue. 'They're welcome.' 'But what would they say?' Sebastian's voice quavered as he spoke, his lips were trembling. The girl looked at him contemptuously, and broke out into her loud, ugly laugh. 'Serve you right, cry-baby: that's what they'd say. Wanting to go with girls, when he ought to be staying at 'ome and letting 'is mother blow 'is nose for him.' She started to beat time. 'Now, one, two, three. All together, boys. "When Irish quids are quidding ..."'

On the little table by the sofa Sebastian caught sight of that gold-mounted tortoise-shell paper-knife which had been presented to Uncle Fred on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his association with the City and Far Eastern Investment Company. Worth much more than a pound. He picked it up and tried to press it into her hands. 'Take this,' he implored. 'Yes, and 'ave them call the p'lice the moment I try to sell it.' She pushed it aside. In another key and more loudly than ever, she began again. 'When Irish

quids ...' 'Stop,' he cried despairingly, 'stop! I'll get you the money. I swear I will.' The girl in blue broke off and looked at her wrist-watch. 'I'll give you five minutes,' she said. Sebastian hurried out of the room and up the stairs. A minute later he was hammering on one of the doors that gave on to the fourth-floor landing. 'Ellen, Ellen!' There was no answer. Deaf as a post. Damn the woman, damn her! He knocked again and shouted. Suddenly, and without any warning, the door opened and there was Ellen in a grey flannelette dressing-gown, with her grey hair done up into two little pigtailed tied with tape, and no false teeth, so that her round, apple-like face seemed to have caved in and, when she asked him if the house was on fire, he could hardly understand what she said. Making a great effort, he turned on his most angelic smile — the smile with which he had always managed to get round her, all his life. 'Sorry, Ellen. I wouldn't have done it if it weren't so urgent.' 'So what?' she asked, turning her better ear towards him. 'Do you think you could lend me a pound?' She looked blank, and he had to yell at her. 'A POUND.' 'A pound?' she echoed in amazement. 'I borrowed it from a friend of mine, and he's waiting at the door.' Toothlessly, but still with her north-country intonation, Ellen enquired why he couldn't pay it back tomorrow. 'Because he's going away,' Sebastian explained. 'Going to Liverpool.' 'Oh, to Liverpool,' said Ellen in another tone, as though that cast quite a new light on the matter. 'Is he taking a ship?' she asked. 'Yes, to America,' Sebastian shouted, 'to Philadelphia.' Off to Philadelphia in the morning. He glanced at his watch. Only another minute or thereabouts, and she'd be starting that other Irish song again. He gave Ellen a yet more enchanting smile. 'Could you manage it, Ellen?' The old woman smiled back at him, took his hand and laid it for a moment against her cheek, then without a word she turned back into the room to look for her purse.

It was when they came back from that week-end — on the Monday afternoon, to be precise, while he was walking home with her from old Pfeiffer's — that he had first told Susan about Mrs. Esdaile. Exquisite, cultured, wildly voluptuous Esdaile in the arms of her triumphant young lover — the reverse of that medal whose other, real face bore the image of the girl in blue and a nauseated child, abject and blubbering.

At the corner of Glanvil Place they parted company.

'You go straight home,' said Sebastian, breaking the long silence. 'I'm going to see if Father's in.' And without waiting for Susan's comments, he turned and quickly walked away.

Susan stood there looking after him as he hurried down the street, so frail and helpless, but marching with such desperate resolution towards inevitable failure. For, of course, if the poor boy imagined he could get the better of Uncle John, he was just asking to be hurt again.

Under the street lamp at the corner, the pale hair came to life like an aureole of tousled flame; then he turned and was lost to sight. And that was life, Susan reflected as she walked on — a succession of street corners. You met with something — something strange, something beautiful and desirable; and the next moment you were at another corner; it had turned and was gone. And even when it didn't turn, it was in love with Mrs. Esdaile.

She mounted the steps of number eighteen, and rang the bell. Ellen opened the door and, before admitting her, made her wipe her feet again on the mat.

'Can't have you muddying my carpets,' she said in her ordinary tone of grumbling affection.

On her way upstairs, Susan looked in to say good-evening to her mother. Mrs. Poulshot seemed preoccupied, and her kiss was perfunctory.

'Try not to do anything to annoy your father,' she recommended. 'He's feeling a bit out of sorts this evening.'

Oh God, thought Susan, who had suffered ever since she could remember from those moods of his.

'And change into your pale blue,' Mrs. Poulshot added. 'I want Uncle Eustace to see you at your prettiest.'

A fat lot she cared if Uncle Eustace thought her pretty! And anyhow, she went on to reflect, as she climbed the stairs, what hope was there of competing with someone who had been married, who had money, who bought her clothes in Paris and was probably drenched — though oddly enough Sebastian had never mentioned the fact — in the most indecent kind of scent.

She lit the gas fire in her room, undressed and walked down half a flight to the bathroom.

The pleasure of soaking in hot water was unpleasantly tempered by Mr. Poulshot's insistence that none but carbolic soap should ever be used in his household. The result was that one came out of one's bath smelling, not like Mrs. Esdaile, but like a newly washed dog. Susan sniffed at herself as she reached for the towel, and made a wry face of disgust at the stink of her own cleanliness.

Sebastian's room was on the opposite side of the landing to hers, and, knowing him absent, she went boldly in, opened the top drawer of his dressing-table and took out the safety-razor which he had bought two months before to keep down a still hypothetical beard.

Meticulously, as though preparing for an evening in a sleeveless gown and a night of passion, she shaved her armpits; then picked out the tell-tale hairs and replaced the razor in its box.

Chapter Three

SEBASTIAN, MEANWHILE, HAD walked down Glanvil Place, frowning to himself and biting his lips. This was probably his last chance of getting those evening clothes in time for Tom Boveney's party. His father, he knew, was not expected to dinner that evening, and the next day he was going to Huddersfield, or somewhere, for a conference; wouldn't be back till Wednesday evening, and on Thursday morning they were to set out together for Florence. It must be now or never.

'Evening clothes were a class symbol, and it was a crime to spend money on useless luxuries when people as good as oneself were starving!' Sebastian knew in advance what his father's arguments would be. But behind the arguments was the man — dominating and righteous, hard on others because even harder on himself. If the man were approached in the right way, perhaps the arguments would not be pressed home to their logical conclusion. The great thing, Sebastian had learnt from long and bitter experience, was never to seem too anxious or insistent. He must ask for the dinner jacket — but in such a way that his father wouldn't think that he really longed for it. That, he knew, would be to invite a refusal — nominally, of course, on the score of economy and socialist ethics, but really, he had come to suspect, because his father took a certain pleasure in thwarting the too explicit manifestations of desire. If he managed to avoid the pitfall of over-eagerness, perhaps he would be able to talk his father out of the other, allowable reasons for refusal. But it would take good acting to bring it off, and a lot of finesse, and above all that presence of mind in which, at moments of crisis, he was always so woefully lacking. But perhaps if he worked out a plan of campaign in advance, a piece of brilliant and inspired strategy

...

Sebastian had kept his eyes fixed upon the pavement at his feet; but now he raised his head, as though the perfect, the irresistible plan were up there in the murky sky, waiting only to be seen and seized. He raised his head, and suddenly there it was on the other side of the street — not the plan, of course, but the Primitive Methodist Chapel, his Chapel, the thing that it was worth walking down Glanvil Terrace of an evening on purpose to see. But today, lost as he was in the labyrinth of his own miseries, he had forgotten all about it. And now here it confronted him, faithfully itself, the lower part of its façade suffused with the greenish gas-light of the street lamp in front of it, and the upper part growing dimmer and dimmer as it mounted from the light, until the last spiky pinnacles of Victorian brickwork hung there, opaquely black against the foggy darkness of the London sky. Bright little details and distinctions fading upwards into undifferentiated mystery; a topless darkness of the London sky. Bright little details and distinctions at its foot. Sebastian stood there, looking; and in spite of the memory of his humiliations and his dread of what might be in store for him at his father's, he felt something of that strange, inexplicable elation which the spectacle always evoked in him.

Little squalor! transfigured into Ely,
Into Bourges, into the beauty of holiness;
Burgeoning out of gas-light into Elephantia;

Out of school-treats, out of the Reverend Wilkins,
Flowering into Poetry ...

He repeated to himself the opening lines of his poem, then looked again at its subject. Built at the worst period, of the shoddiest materials. Hideous, in the day-time, beyond belief. But an hour later, when the lamps were lit, as lovely and significant as anything he had ever seen. Which was the real chapel — the little monstrosity that received the Reverend Wilkins and his flock on Sunday mornings? Or this unfathomably pregnant mystery before him? Sebastian shook his head, and walked on. The questions admitted of no answer, the only thing you could do was to re-formulate them in terms of poetry.

Little squalor! transfigured into Ely,
Into Bourges, into the beauty of holiness ...

Number twenty-three was a tall stucco-fronted house, identical with all the others in the row. Sebastian turned in under the pillared porch, crossed the hall, and with a renewal of his momentarily banished apprehension began to climb the stairs.

One flight, two flights, three flights, yet another, and he was standing at the door of his father's flat. Sebastian raised a hand to the bell button, then let it fall again. He felt sick, and his heart was beating violently. It was the blue tart over again, the headmaster, the nausea of the threshold. He looked at his watch. Six forty-seven and a half. At six forty-eight he would ring and go in and just blurt it out, anyhow.

'Father, you really must let me have a dinner jacket....' He lifted his hand again and pressed the ball of his thumb firmly against the button. Inside, the bell buzzed like an angry wasp. He waited half a minute, then rang again. There was no answer. His last chance had vanished. Disappointment was mingled in Sebastian's mind with a profound sense of relief that he had been allowed to postpone the hour of his ordeal. Tom Boveney's party was four weeks away; whereas, if his father had been at home, the dreaded interview would be going on now, at this very moment.

Sebastian had gone down only a single flight when the sound of a familiar voice made him halt.

'Seventy-two stairs,' his father was saying down there in the hall.

'Dio!' said another, a foreign voice. 'You live half-way up to paradise.'

'This house is a symbol,' the ringing, upper-class English voice continued. 'A symbol of the decay of capitalism.'

Sebastian recognized the conversational gambit. It was the one John Barnack usually played upon his visitors the first time he accompanied them up those interminable stairs.

'Once the home of a single prosperous Victorian family.' That was it. 'Now a nest of bachelors and struggling business women, with a childless couple or two thrown in for good measure.'

The voice grew louder and more distinct as its owner approached.

'... and it's a product, too, of rising unemployment and a falling birth-rate. In a word, of blighted hopes and Marie Stopes.' And on that there was the startling explosion of John Barnack's loud, metallic laughter.

'Christ!' Sebastian whispered to himself. It was the third time he had heard that joke and the subsequent outburst.

'Stope?' queried the foreign voice through the tail-end of the other's merriment. 'Do I know what it signifies, to stope? Stopare? Stopper? Stopfen?' But neither Italian, nor French, nor German seemed to throw any light.

Very elaborately, the Cambridge accent started to explain.

Not wishing it to appear that he had been eavesdropping, Sebastian started once more to run down the stairs, and when the two men came round the corner into sight, he uttered a well-simulated exclamation of astonishment.

Mr. Barnack looked up and saw in that small slender figure poised there, six steps above him, not Sebastian, but Sebastian's mother — Rosie on the evening of the Hilliards' fancy-dress dance, in the character of Lady Caroline Lamb disguised, in a monkey-jacket and tight red velvet breeches, as Byron's

page. Three months later had come the war, and two years after that she had left him for that vicious imbecile, Tom Hilliard.

‘Oh, it’s you,’ Mr. Barnack said aloud, without allowing the faintest symptom of surprise, or pleasure, or any other emotion to appear on his brown leathery face.

To Sebastian that was one of the most disquieting things about his father: you never knew from his expression what he was feeling or thinking. He would look at you straight and unwaveringly, his grey eyes brightly blank, as though you were a perfect stranger. The first intimation of his state of mind always came verbally, in that loud, authoritative, barrister’s voice of his, in those measured phrases, so carefully chosen, so beautifully articulated. There would be silence, or perhaps talk of matters indifferent; and then suddenly, out of the blue of his impassivity, a pronouncement, as though from Sinai.

Smiling uncertainly, Sebastian came down to meet them.

‘This is my youngster,’ said Mr. Barnack.

And the stranger turned out to be Professor Cacciaguida — the famous Professor Cacciaguida, Mr. Barnack added. Sebastian smiled deferentially and shook hands; this must be that antifascist man he had heard his father talking about. Well, it was a fine head, he thought, as he turned away. Roman of the best period, but with an incongruous mane of grey hair brushed romantically back from the forehead — he shot another surreptitious glance — as though the Emperor Augustus had tried to get himself up as Liszt.

But how strangely, Sebastian went on to reflect as they climbed the final flight, how pathologically even, the stranger’s body fell away from that commanding head! The emperor-genius declined into the narrow chest and shoulders of a boy, then, incongruously, into the belly and wide hips almost of a middle-aged woman, and finally into a pair of thin little legs and the tiniest of patent-leather button-boots. Like some sort of larva that had started to develop and then got stuck, with only the front end of the organism fully adult and the rest hardly more than a tadpole.

John Barnack opened the door of his flat and turned on the light.

‘I’d better go and see about supper,’ he said. ‘Seeing you’ve got to get away so early, Professor.’

It was an opportunity to talk about the dinner jacket. But when Sebastian offered to come and give a hand, his father peremptorily ordered him to stay where he was and talk to their distinguished guest.

‘Then when I’m ready,’ he added, ‘you must scuttle. We’ve got some important things to discuss.’

And having thus tersely put Sebastian in his childish place, Mr. Barnack turned and, with quick, decided steps, like an athlete going into combat, strode out of the room.

Sebastian stood hesitating for a few seconds, then made up his mind to disobey, follow his father into the kitchen and have it out with him, there and then. But at this moment the Professor, who had been looking inquisitively around the room, turned to him with a smile.

‘But how it is aseptic!’ he exclaimed in that melodious voice of his, and with that charming trace of a foreign accent, those odd and over-literary turns of phrase, which merely served to emphasize the completeness of his command of the language.

In that bare, bleak sitting-room, everything, except the books, was enamelled the colour of skim milk, and the floor was a polished sheet of grey linoleum. Professor Cacciaguida sat down in one of the metal chairs and with tremulous, nicotine-stained fingers, lighted a cigarette.

‘One awaits the arrival of the surgeon,’ he added, ‘at any moment.’

But instead, it was John Barnack who came back into the room, carrying plates and a handful of cutlery. The Professor turned in his direction, but did not speak at once; instead, he put his cigarette to his lips, inhaled, held his breath for a couple of seconds, then voluptuously spouted smoke through his imperial nostrils. After which, his craving momentarily assuaged, he called across the room to his host.

‘It’s positively prophetic!’ He indicated the room with a wave of his hand. ‘A fragment of the rational and hygienic future.’

‘Thank you,’ said John Barnack without looking up. He was laying the table with the same focussed attention, Sebastian noticed, the same exasperatingly meticulous care, as he gave to all his tasks, from

the most important to the humblest — laying it as though he were manipulating an intricate piece of apparatus in the laboratory, or (yes, the Professor was quite right) performing the most ticklish of surgical operations.

‘All the same,’ the other went on with a little laugh, ‘where the arts are concerned, I confess to being sentimental. Give me yesterday rather than tomorrow. Isabella’s apartment at Mantova, for example. Much dust, no doubt, in the mouldings. And all that sculptured wood!’ He traced a series of volutes with the smoke of his burning cigarette. ‘Full of archaeological filth! But what warmth, what wealth!’

‘Quite,’ said Mr. Barnack. He straightened himself up and stood there, upright and assertive, looking down at his guest. ‘But whose pockets did the wealth come out of?’ And without waiting for an answer, he marched back to the kitchen.

But the Professor had only just begun.

‘What do you think?’ he asked, turning to Sebastian. The words were accompanied by a genial smile; but it became sufficiently obvious, as he went on, that he took not the smallest interest in what Sebastian thought. All he wanted was an audience.

‘Perhaps dirt is the necessary condition of beauty,’ he continued. ‘Perhaps hygiene and art can never be bedfellows. No Verdi, after all, without spitting into trumpets. No Duse without a crowd of malodorous bourgeois giving one another their coryzas. And think of the inexpugnable retreats for microbes prepared by Michelangelo in the curls of Moses’ beard!’

He paused triumphantly, waiting for applause. Sebastian gave it in the form of a delighted laugh. The effortless virtuosity of the Professor’s talk delighted him; and the Italian accent, the odd unexpected vocabulary, lent an adventitious charm to the performance. But as the improvisation prolonged itself, Sebastian’s feelings towards it underwent a change. Five minutes later, he was wishing to God that the old bore would shut up.

It was the smell and sizzling of fried lamb chops which finally produced that much-desired result. The Professor threw back his noble head and sniffed appreciatively.

‘Ambrosial!’ he cried. ‘I see we have a second Baronius among the pots and pans.’

Sebastian, who did not know who the first Baronius was, turned round and looked through the open door into the kitchen. His father was standing with his back to him, his grizzled head and the broad strong shoulders bent forward as he pored over the range.

‘Not only a great mind, but a great cook as well,’ the Professor was saying.

Yes, that was the trouble, Sebastian reflected. And not only a great cook (though he had the utmost contempt for those who cared about food for its own sake), but also a great desk-tidier, a great mountain-climber, a great account-maker, a great botanizer and bird-watcher, a great letter-answerer, a great socialist, a great four-mile-an-hour walker, teetotaler and non-smoker, a great report-reader and statistics-knower, a great everything, in short, that was tiresome, efficient, meritorious, healthful, social-minded. If only he’d take a rest sometimes! If only his armour had a few chinks in it!

The Professor raised his voice a little, evidently hoping that what he was about to say would be heard even in the kitchen and through the noise of frying.

‘And the great mind is associated with an even greater heart and soul,’ he pronounced in a tone of vibrant solemnity. He leaned over and laid a small hand, very white except for the yellowed finger-tips, upon Sebastian’s knee.

‘I hope you’re as proud of your father as you ought to be,’ he went on.

Sebastian smiled vaguely and made a faint inarticulate noise of assent. But how anyone who knew his father could talk about his great heart, he really couldn’t imagine.

‘A man who could have aspired to the highest political honours under the old party system — but he had his principles, he refused to play their game. And who knows?’ the Professor added parenthetically, with a confidential lowering of the voice. ‘Perhaps he’ll get his reward very soon. Socialism is much nearer than anyone imagines — and when it comes, when it comes ...’ he raised his hand expressively, as though prophesying Mr. Barnack’s apotheosis. ‘And when one thinks,’ he went on, ‘of all those thousands he might have made at the Bar. Thousands and thousands! But he abandons all. Like San Francesco. And

what he has, he lavishes with a heroic generosity. Causes, movements, suffering individuals — he gives to all. To all,' he repeated, nodding his noble head emphatically. 'All!'

All but one, Sebastian inwardly amended. There was still money enough for political organizations and, he guessed, for exiled professors; but when it came to sending his own son to a decent school, to getting him a few decent suits and a dinner jacket — nothing doing. Sonorously, the Professor renewed his infuriating eloquence. Almost bursting with suppressed anger, Sebastian was thankful when at last the arrival of the chops cut short the panegyric and set him free.

'Tell Aunt Alice I'll be with her after dinner,' Mr. Barnack called after him as he ran down the stairs. 'And make sure that Uncle Eustace doesn't leave before I get there; I've got to make all sorts of arrangements with him.'

Outside in the street his little squalor of a chapel still darkened up into poetry, into inexplicable significance and beauty; but this time Sebastian felt so bitterly aggrieved that he would not even look at it.

Chapter Four

SHERRY-GLASS IN HAND, Eustace Barnack was standing on the hearth-rug, looking up at the portrait of his father over the mantelpiece. From its black background, the square, strong face of that cotton-spinning philanthropist glared out into vacancy like a head-lamp.

Meditatively, Eustace shook his head.

'Hundreds of guineas,' he said. 'That's what the subscribers paid for that object. And you'd be lucky if you could get a fiver for it now. Personally,' he added, turning to where his sister was sitting, slender and very upright, on the sofa, 'personally I'd be very ready to give you ten pounds for the privilege of not possessing it.'

Alice Poulshot said nothing. She was thinking, as she looked at him, how shockingly Eustace had aged since last she saw him. Grosser even than he had been three years ago. And the face was like a loose rubber mask sagging from the bones, flabby and soft and unwholesomely blotched. As for the mouth ... She remembered the brilliant, laughing boy she had once been so proud of; in him, those parted, childish lips had seemed amusing in their incongruity with the manly stature — amusing and at the same time profoundly touching. You couldn't look at him without feeling that you'd like to mother him. But now — now the sight was enough to make you shudder. The damp, mobile looseness of that mouth, its combination of senility and babyishness, of the infantile with the epicurean! Only in the humorously twinkling eyes could she discover a trace of the Eustace she had loved so much. And now the whites of those eyes were yellow and bloodshot, and under them were pouches of discoloured skin.

With a thick forefinger, Eustace tapped the canvas.

'Wouldn't he be furious if he knew! I remember how bitterly he resented it at the time. All that good money going on a mere picture, when it might have been spent on something really useful, like a drinking-fountain or a public lavatory.'

At the words 'public lavatory,' his nephew, Jim Poulshot, looked up from the Evening Standard and uttered a loud guffaw. Eustace turned and regarded him curiously.

'That's right, my boy,' he said with mock heartiness. 'It's English humour that has made the Empire what it is.'

He walked over to the sofa and cautiously lowered his soft bulk into a sitting posture. Mrs. Poulshot moved further into the corner to give him room.

'Poor old father!' he said, continuing the previous conversation.

'What's poor about him?' Alice asked rather sharply. 'I should have thought we were the poor ones. After all, he accomplished something. Where's our achievement, I'd like to know?'

‘Where?’ Eustace repeated. ‘Well, certainly not in the rubbish-heap, which is where his is. The mills working half-time because of Indian and Japanese competition. Individual paternalism replaced by State interference, which he regarded as the devil. The Liberal Party dead and buried. And earnest high-minded rationalism transformed into cynical libertinage. If the old man isn’t to be pitied, I’d like to know who is?’

‘It’s not the results that matter,’ said Mrs. Poulshot, changing her ground.

She had worshipped her father; and to defend a memory which she still revered as something all but divine, she was ready to sacrifice much more than mere logical consistency.

‘It’s motives, and intentions and hard work — yes, and self-denial,’ she added significantly.

Eustace uttered a wheezy chuckle.

‘Whereas I’m disgustingly self-indulgent,’ he said. ‘And if I happen to be fat, it’s entirely my own vicious fault. Has it ever struck you, my dear, that if Mother had lived, she’d have probably grown to be as big as Uncle Charles?’

‘How can you say such things!’ cried Mrs. Poulshot indignantly. Uncle Charles had been a monster.

‘It was in the family,’ he answered; and patting his belly complacently, ‘It still is,’ he added.

The sound of a door being opened made him turn his head.

‘Aha,’ he cried, ‘here comes my future guest!’

Still brooding on his reasons for being angry and miserable, Sebastian looked up with a start. Uncle Eustace ... in his preoccupation with his own affairs he had forgotten all about him. He stood there, gaping.

“‘In vacant or in pensive mood,’” Eustace continued genially. ‘It’s all in the great poetical tradition.’

Sebastian advanced and shook the hand extended to him. It was soft, rather damp and surprisingly cold. The realization that he was making a deplorable impression just at the very moment when he ought to have been at his best, increased his shyness to the point of rendering him speechless. But his mind continued to work. In that expanse of flabby face the little eyes, he thought, were like an elephant’s. An elegant little elephant in a double-breasted black coat and pale-grey check trousers. Oh, and even a monocle on the end of a string to make him look still more like the elderly dandy on the musical comedy stage!

Eustace turned to his sister.

‘He gets more and more like Rosie every year,’ he said. ‘It’s fantastic.’

Mrs. Poulshot nodded without speaking. Sebastian’s mother was a subject which it was best, she thought, to avoid.

‘Well, Sebastian, I hope you’re prepared for a pretty strenuous holiday.’ Once again Eustace patted his stomach. ‘You see before you the world’s champion sight-seer. Author of “Canter through Florence,” “The Vatican on Roller Skates,” “Round the Louvre in Eighty Minutes.” And my speed record for the English cathedrals has never even been challenged.’

‘Idiot!’ said Mrs. Poulshot, laughing.

Jim roared in unison, and in spite of the dinner jacket, Sebastian couldn’t help joining in. The idea of this dandified elephant galloping through Canterbury in sponge-bag trousers and a monocle was irresistibly grotesque.

Noiselessly, in the midst of their merriment, the door swung open again. Grey, lugubrious, long-faced like a horse, like his own image in a distorting mirror, Fred Poulshot entered as though on soles of felt. Catching sight of him, Jim and Sebastian checked themselves abruptly. He walked over to the sofa to greet his brother-in-law.

‘You’re looking well,’ said Eustace as they shook hands.

‘Well?’ Mr. Poulshot repeated in an offended tone. ‘Get Alice to tell you about my sinus some time.’

He turned away, and, with the scrupulous care of one who measures out a purgative, poured himself one-third of a glass of sherry.

Eustace looked at him and felt, as he had so often done in the past, profoundly sorry for poor Alice. Thirty years of Fred Poulshot — imagine it! Well, such was family life. He felt very thankful that he was now alone in the world.

Susan's headlong entrance at this moment did nothing to mitigate his thankfulness. True, she possessed the enormous adventitious advantage of being seventeen; but even the perverse and slightly comic charms of adolescence could not disguise the fact that she was a Poulshot and, like all the other Poulshots, unutterably dull. The most that could be said for her was that, up to the present at any rate, she was a cut above Jim. But then, at twenty-five, poor Jim was just an empty pigeon-hole waiting to be occupied by the moderately successful stockbroker he would be in 1949. Well, that was what came of choosing a father like Fred. Whereas Sebastian had had the wit to get himself sired by a Barnack and conceived by the loveliest of irresponsible gipsies.

'Did you tell him about my sinus?' Mr. Poulshot insisted.

But Alice pretended not to have heard him.

'Talking of canters through Florence,' she said rather loudly, 'do you ever see Cousin Mary's son when you're out there?'

'You mean Bruno Rontini?'

Mrs. Poulshot nodded.

'Why on earth she should ever have married that Italian I simply cannot imagine,' she said in a tone of disapproval.

'But even Italians are very nearly human.'

'Don't be silly, Eustace. You know exactly what I mean.'

'But how you'd hate it if I were to tell you!' said Eustace, smiling.

For what she meant, of course, was just plain prejudice and snobbery — an insular dislike of foreigners, a bourgeois conviction that all unsuccessful people must be in some way immoral.

'Father was endlessly kind to the man,' Mrs. Poulshot went on. 'When I think of all the opportunities he gave him!'

'And wise old Carlo made a mess of every one of them!'

'Wise?'

'Well, he got himself paid four pounds a week to keep out of the cotton business and go back to Tuscany. Don't you call that wisdom?'

Eustace drank the rest of his sherry and put down the glass.

'The son still runs his second-hand bookshop,' he went on. 'I'm really very fond of funny old Bruno. In spite of that tiresome religiosity of his. Nothing but the Gaseous Vertebrate!'

Mrs. Poulshot laughed. In the Barnack family, Haeckel's definition of God had been a standing joke for the past forty years.

'The Gaseous Vertebrate,' she repeated. 'But then, think how he was brought up! Cousin Mary used to take him to those Quaker meetings of hers when he was a boy. Quakers!' she repeated with a kind of incredulous emphasis.

The parlour-maid appeared and announced that dinner was served. Active and wiry, Alice was on her feet in an instant. Her brother hoisted himself up more painfully. Followed by the rest of the family, they moved towards the door. Mr. Poulshot walked over to the electric switches and, as the last person crossed the threshold, turned out the lights.

As they went downstairs to the dining-room, Eustace laid a hand on Sebastian's shoulder.

'I had the devil of a time persuading your father to let you come and stay with me,' he said. 'He was afraid you'd learn to live like the idle rich. Luckily, we were able to checkmate him with an appeal to culture — weren't we, Alice?'

Mrs. Poulshot nodded a little stiffly. She didn't like her brother's habit of discussing grown-up affairs in front of the children.

'Florence is part of a liberal education,' she said.

'Exactly. What Every Young Boy Ought to Know.'

Suddenly the staircase lights went out. Even in his blackest moods, Fred never forgot to be economical.

They entered the dining-room — red-papered still, Eustace noticed, and as uncompromisingly hideous as ever — and took their seats.

‘Mock turtle,’ said Alice as the parlour-maid set down the soup in front of him.

Mock turtle — it would be! Dear Alice had always displayed a positive genius for serving the dreariest kind of English food. On principle. With a smile at once affectionate and faintly ironic, Eustace laid a thick oedematous hand over his sister’s bony fingers.

‘Well, my dear, it’s been a long, long time since last I sat here at your festive board.’

‘No fault of mine,’ Mrs. Poulshot answered. Her voice took on a note of rather sharp and perky jocularly. ‘The Prodigal’s place was always laid for him. But I suppose he was too busy filling his belly with the caviar that the swine did eat.’

Eustace laughed with unaffected good-humour. Twenty-three years before, he had given up what everybody said was a most promising career in radical politics to marry a rich widow with a weak heart, and retire to Florence. It was an act which neither his sister nor his brother, though for different reasons, had ever forgiven. With John it was a matter of outraged political principle. But what Alice resented was the insult to her father’s memory, the wound inflicted on her family pride. Theirs was the third generation of low-living, high-minded Barnacks; and, with the exception of unmentionable Great-Uncle Luke, Eustace was the first who had ever gone over to the hostile camp of luxury and leisure.

‘Ve-ry pretty,’ he said to her in the phrase and tone of one who applauds a particularly well directed stroke at billiards.

With an income of six thousand a year, he could afford to be magnanimous. Besides, his conscience had never troubled him for what he had done. For the five years of their brief married life he had been as good a husband as poor dear Amy could expect. And why any quick-witted and sensitive person should feel ashamed of having said good-bye to politics, he couldn’t imagine. The sordid intrigues behind the scenes! The conscious or unconscious hypocrisy of every form of effective public speaking! The asinine stupidity of that interminable repetition of the same absurd over-simplifications, the same illogical arguments and vulgar personalities, the same bad history and baseless prophecy! And that was supposed to be a man’s highest duty. And if he chose instead the life of a civilized human being, he ought to be ashamed of himself.

‘Ve-ry pretty,’ he repeated. ‘But what an implacable Puritan you are, my dear! And without the smallest metaphysical justification.’

‘Metaphysics!’ said Mrs. Poulshot in the contemptuous tone of one who is above and beyond such fooleries.

The soup plates, meanwhile, had been cleared away and the saddle of mutton brought in. In silence and without in any way altering his expression of irremediable suffering, Mr. Poulshot set to work to carve the roast.

Eustace glanced at him, then back at Alice. She, poor thing, was looking at Fred with an expression of apprehensive distress — wishing, no doubt, that the sulky old baby would be on his good behaviour in front of strangers. And perhaps, Eustace went on to reflect, perhaps that was why she had been so sharp towards himself. White-washing her husband by black-washing her brother. Not very logical, no doubt, but all too human.

‘I hope it’s cooked as you like it, Fred,’ she called down the table.

Without answering or even looking up, Mr. Poulshot shrugged his narrow shoulders.

With an effort, Mrs. Poulshot adjusted her expression and turned to Eustace.

‘Poor Fred has such a dreadful time with his sinus,’ she said, trying to make amends to her husband for what she had done in the drawing-room.

As old Ellen came in with the vegetables, a half-grown kitten slipped into the room and came to rub itself against the leg of Alice’s chair. She stooped and picked it up.

‘Well, Onyegin,’ she said, tickling the little beast behind the ears. ‘We call him Onyegin,’ she explained brightly to her brother, ‘because he’s the masterpiece of our late-lamented Puss-kin.’

Eustace smiled politely.

The consolations of philosophy, he reflected, of religion, of art, of love, of politics — none of these for poor dear Alice. No, hers were the consolations of an Edwardian sense of humour and the weekly copy of *Punch*. Still it was better to make bad puns and be whimsical in the style of 1912 than to indulge in self-pity or capitulate to Fred’s black moods, as everyone else at the table had done. And, by God, it was pretty difficult not to capitulate. Sitting there behind his bulwark of mutton, Fred Poulshot fairly beamed with negativity. You could positively feel it as it beat against you — a steady, penetrating radiation that was the very antithesis of life, the total denial of all human warmth. Eustace decided to attempt a diversion.

‘Well, Fred!’ he called out in his jolliest tone. ‘How’s that City of yours? How’s the gorgeous East? Business pretty good?’

Mr. Poulshot looked up, pained but, after a moment, forgiving.

‘It could hardly be worse,’ he pronounced.

Eustace raised his eyebrows in mock alarm.

‘Heavens! How’s that going to affect my Yangtze and South China Bank dividends?’

‘They talk of reducing them this year.’

‘Oh dear!’

‘From eighty per cent. to seventy-five per cent.,’ said Mr. Poulshot gloomily; and turning away to help himself to the vegetables, he relapsed once more into a silence that engulfed the entire table.

How much less awful the man would be, Eustace was thinking, as he ate his mutton and brussels sprouts, if only he sometimes lost his temper, or got drunk, or went to bed with his secretary — though God help the poor secretary if he did! But there had never been anything violent or extreme in Fred’s behaviour. Except for being absolutely intolerable, he was the perfect husband. One who loved the routine of marriage and domestic life — carving mutton, begetting children — just as he loved the routine of being (what was it?) Secretary and Treasurer of that City and Far Eastern thingummy-bob. And in all that concerned these routines, he was the soul of probity and regularity. Swear, get angry, deceive poor dear Alice with another woman? Why, he’d as soon embezzle the company’s petty cash. No, no, Fred took it out of people in a very different way. He didn’t have to do anything; it was enough for him just to be. They shrivelled and turned black by mere infection.

Suddenly Mr. Poulshot broke the long silence, and in a dead, toneless voice asked for the red-currant jelly.

Startled as though by a summons from the other world, Jim looked wildly round the table.

‘Here you are, Jim.’ Eustace Barnack pushed the dish across to him.

Jim gave him a grateful look, and passed it on to his father. Mr. Poulshot took it without a word or a smile, helped himself, and then, with the evident intention of involving another victim in this rite of woe, handed it back, not to Jim, but to Susan, who was in the very act of raising her fork from her plate. As he had foreseen and desired, Mr. Poulshot had to wait, dish in hand and with an expression on his face of martyred patience, while Susan hastily poked the mutton into her mouth, put down her knife and fork with a clatter and, blushing crimson, accepted the proffered jelly.

From his front-row seat at the human comedy, Eustace smiled appreciatively. What an exquisite refinement of the will to power, what elegant cruelty! And what an amazing gift for that contagious gloom which damps even the highest spirits and stifles the very possibility of joy. Well, nobody could accuse dear Fred of having buried his talent.

Silence, as though there were a coffin in the room, settled all at once upon the table. Mrs. Poulshot tried desperately to think of something to say — something bright, something defiantly funny — but could find nothing, nothing at all. Fred had broken through her defences and stopped up the source of speech, of life itself, with sand and ashes. She sat there empty, conscious only of the awful fatigue accumulated during thirty years of unremitting defence and counter-attack. And as though it had

somehow become aware of her defeat, the kitten sleeping on her knee uncurled itself, stretched and jumped noiselessly to the floor.

‘Onyegin!’ she cried, and reached out a hand; but the little cat slid away, silky and serpentine, from under her fingers. If she had been less old and sensible, Mrs. Poulshot would have burst into tears.

The silence lengthened out, punctuated by the ticking, now for the first time audible, of the brass clock on the mantelpiece. Eustace, who had begun by thinking that it would be amusing to see how long the intolerable situation could last, found himself suddenly overcome by pity and indignation. Alice needed help, and it would be monstrous if that creature there, that tapeworm, were left to enjoy his triumph. He leaned back in his chair, wiped his mouth and, looking about him, gaily smiled.

‘Cheer up, Sebastian,’ he called across the table. ‘I hope you’re not going to be glum like this when you’re staying with me next week.’

The spell was broken. Alice Poulshot’s fatigue dropped away from her, and she found it once more possible to speak.

‘You forget,’ she broke in waggishly, as the boy tried to mumble something in response to his uncle’s challenge, ‘our little Sebastian’s got the poetic temperament.’ And rolling her r’s like an old-fashioned reciter, she added, “‘Tear-rs from the depth of some divine despair-r.’”

Sebastian flushed and bit his lip. He was very fond of Aunt Alice — as fond of her as she herself would ever allow anyone to be. And yet, in spite of his affection, there were times — and this was one of them — when he would have liked to kill her. It wasn’t merely himself that she outraged with this sort of remark; it was beauty, poetry, genius, everything above the level of the commonplace and the conventional.

Eustace observed the expression of his nephew’s face, and felt sorry for the poor boy. Alice could be curiously hard, he reflected — on principle, just as she preferred bad cooking. Tactfully, he tried to change the subject. Alice had quoted Tennyson; what did the young think of Tennyson nowadays?

But Mrs. Poulshot did not permit the subject to be changed. She had undertaken Sebastian’s education, and if she allowed him to indulge his native moodiness, she wouldn’t be doing her duty. It was because that silly mother of his had always given in to him that Fred now behaved as he did.

‘Or perhaps,’ she went on, her tone growing more flippant as her intention became more severely didactic, ‘perhaps it’s a case of first love. “Deep as first love, and wild with all regret.” Unless, of course, it’s Epsom Salts that the poor boy needs.’

At this reference to Epsom Salts, young Jim broke into a peal of laughter all the more explosive because of the constraint imposed upon him by his proximity to the source of gloom behind the mutton. Susan glanced with solicitude at Sebastian’s reddening face, then frowned angrily at her brother, who didn’t even notice it.

‘I’ll cap your Tennyson with some Dante,’ said Eustace, coming once again to Sebastian’s relief. ‘Do you remember? In the fifth circle of Hell:

Tristi fummo

Nell’ aer dolce che del sol s’allegra.

And because they were sad, they were condemned to pass eternity stuck there in the swamp; and their horrid little Weltschmerz came bubbling up through the mud, like marsh gas. So you’d better be careful, my lad,’ he concluded mock-menacingly, but with a smile which signified that he was entirely on Sebastian’s side, and understood his feelings.

‘He needn’t bother about the next world,’ said Mrs. Poulshot with a touch of asperity. She felt strongly about this immortality nonsense — so strongly that she didn’t like to hear it talked about, even in joke. ‘I’m thinking about what’ll happen to him when he’s grown up.’

Jim laughed again. Sebastian’s youthfulness seemed to him almost as funny as his possible need of a purge.

That second laugh spurred Mr. Poulshot into action. Eustace, of course, was just a hedonist, and even from Alice he could really expect nothing better. She had always (it was her only failing, but how enormous!) proved herself shockingly insensitive to his inner sufferings. But Jim, happily, was different.

Unlike Edward and Marjorie, who in this respect were altogether too like their mother, Jim had always shown a decent respect and sympathy. That he should now so far forget himself as to laugh twice, was therefore doubly painful — painful as an outrage to his sensibilities and an interruption to his sad and sacred thoughts; painful, too, because so disappointing, such a blow to one's faith in the boy's better nature. Raising the eyes which he had kept so resolutely fixed upon his plate, Mr. Poulshot looked at his son with an expression of sorrow. Jim flinched away from that reproachful regard and, to cover his confusion, filled his mouth with bread. Almost in a whisper, Mr. Poulshot spoke at last.

'Do you know what day this is?' he asked.

Anticipating the rebuke that was to come, Jim blushed and muttered indistinctly through the bread that he thought it was the twenty-seventh.

'March the twenty-seventh,' Mr. Poulshot repeated. He nodded slowly and emphatically. 'This day, eleven years ago, your poor grandfather was taken from us.' He looked fixedly for a few seconds into Jim's face, observing with satisfaction the symptoms of his discomfiture, then dropped his eyes and lapsed once again into silence, leaving the young man to feel ashamed of himself.

At the other end of the table Alice and Eustace were laughing together over reminiscences of their childhood. Mr. Poulshot did his best to pity them for the frivolity that made them so heartlessly insensitive to the finer feelings of others. 'Forgive them, for they know not what they do,' he said to himself; then, closing his mind against their idle chatter, he addressed himself to the task of reconstructing in detail his negotiations, on the evening of March the twenty-seventh, 1918, with the undertaker.

Chapter Five

IN THE DRAWING-ROOM, when dinner was over, Jim and Susan settled down to chess, while the others grouped themselves around the fire. Fascinated, Sebastian looked on, while his Uncle Eustace lighted the massive Romeo and Juliet which, knowing Alice's principles and Fred's economical habits, he had prudently brought with him. First the ritual of piercing; then, as he raised the cigar to his mouth, the smile of happy anticipation. Damply, lovingly, the lips closed over the butt; the match was ignited; he pulled at the flame. And suddenly Sebastian was reminded of his cousin Marjorie's baby, nuzzling with blind concupiscence for the nipple, seizing it at last between the soft prehensile flaps of its little mouth and working away, working away in a noiseless frenzy of enjoyment. True, Uncle Eustace had rather better manners; and in this case the nipple was coffee-coloured and six inches long. Images floated up before his mind's eye; words, grotesque and mock-heroic, started to arrange themselves:

Old but an infant, mouthing with lustful lip
The wet brown teat, incarnate where he sucks,
Of some imaginary, largest Queen
Of all the Hottentots ...

He was interrupted by the sudden opening and then the slam of the door. John Barnack entered the room, and strode over to where Mrs. Poulshot was sitting on the sofa.

'Sorry I couldn't be with you for dinner,' he said, laying his hand on her shoulder. 'But it was my only chance of seeing Cacciaguida. Who tells me, by the way,' he added, turning to his brother, 'that Mussolini has definitely got cancer of the throat.'

Eustace took the tobacco-teat from between his lips and smiled indulgently.

'It's the throat this time, is it? My anti-fascists seem to prefer the liver.'

John Barnack was offended, but made an effort not to show it.

'Cacciaguida has very reliable sources of information,' he said a little stiffly.

'Don't I remember somebody saying something about wishes being fathers to thoughts?' Eustace asked with exasperating mildness.

‘Of course you do,’ said John. ‘You remember it because you need an excuse for disparaging a great political cause and belittling its heroes.’ He spoke in his usual measured and perfectly articulated style, but in a tone that betrayed his inner feelings by being a trifle louder and more vibrant than usual. ‘Cynical realism — it’s the intelligent man’s best excuse for doing nothing in an intolerable situation.’

Alice Poulshot glanced from one to the other and wished to goodness that her two brothers didn’t have to quarrel every time they met. Why couldn’t John just accept the fact that Eustace was a bit of an old pig, and have done with it? But, no; he always lost his temper in that awful suppressed way of his, and then pretended it was moral indignation. And on his side Eustace deliberately provoked the explosions by waving political red rags and throwing poisoned darts. They were really incorrigible.

‘King Log or King Stork?’ Eustace was saying blandly. ‘I’m for dear old Log every time. Just keeping out of mischief — it’s the greatest of all the virtues.’

Standing there by the fireplace, his arms hanging by his sides, his feet apart, his body very straight and tense, in the posture of an athlete poised on the brink of action, John Barnack looked down at his brother with the calm unwavering regard which, in the law courts, he reserved for hostile witnesses and prevaricating defendants. It was a look which, even when directed on someone else, filled Sebastian with a shrinking terror. But Eustace merely let himself sink more deeply into the upholstery of the sofa. Closing his eyes, he tenderly kissed the end of his cigar and sucked.

‘And you imagine, I suppose,’ said John Barnack after a long silence, ‘that you’re one of the great exponents of that virtue?’

Eustace blew out a cloud of aromatic smoke, and answered that he did his best.

‘You do your best,’ John repeated. ‘But I believe you’ve got a comfortable holding in the Yangtze and South China Bank?’

Eustace nodded.

‘And along with the right to fatten on exploitation in China and Japan, a lot of jute shares — isn’t that so?’

‘Very nice shares too,’ said Eustace.

‘Very nice indeed. Thirty per cent. even in a bad year. Earned for you by Indians who are getting paid a daily wage that wouldn’t buy more than a third of one of your cigars.’

Mr. Poulshot, who had sat in gloomy silence, disregarded by all, startlingly broke into the conversation.

‘They were all right until the agitators got to work on them,’ he said. ‘Organizing unions, stirring up trouble against the owners. They ought to be shot. Yes, they ought to be shot!’ he repeated with ferocious emphasis.

John Barnack smiled ironically.

‘Don’t you worry, Fred. The City of London will see to it.’

‘What are you talking about?’ said Alice irritably. ‘The City of London isn’t in India.’

‘No; but its agents are. And they’re the fellows with the machine-guns. Fred’s agitators will duly get shot, and Eustace here will go on keeping out of mischief — keeping out of it with all the inimitable grace we’ve learnt to admire in him.’

There was a silence. Sebastian, who had dearly hoped to see his father discomfited, glanced miserably in the direction of his uncle. But instead of sitting there crushed and dejected, Eustace was heaving with noiseless laughter.

‘Admirable!’ he cried, when he had recovered breath enough to speak. ‘Quite admirable! And now, John, you should drop the sarcasm and give them five minutes of simple pathos and indignation; five heart-warming minutes of straightforward manly sentiment. After which the jury finds me guilty without even leaving the box, and adds a rider recommending that counsel for the plaintiffs be appointed Tribune of the People. Tribune of the People,’ he repeated sonorously. ‘All in classical fancy dress. And, by the way, what’s the technical name for that noble Roman toga that political gentlemen drape over the will-to-power when they want to make it look respectable? You know that, don’t you, Sebastian?’ And when Sebastian shook his head, ‘Goodness,’ he exclaimed, ‘what do they teach you nowadays? Why, its

technical name is Idealism. Yes, my dear,' he went on, addressing himself to Susan, who had looked up, startled, from her game of chess, 'that was what I said: Idealism.'

John Barnack yawned ostentatiously behind his hand.

'One gets a bit bored with this kind of cheap seventeenth-century psychology,' he said.

'And now tell us,' said Eustace, 'what do you expect to get when the right people come into power? The Attorney-Generalship, I suppose.'

'Now, Eustace,' said Mrs. Poulshot firmly, 'that's enough.'

'Enough?' Eustace repeated in a tone of mock-outrage. 'You think it's enough — a piddling little Attorney-Generalship? My dear, you underrate your brother. But now, John,' he added, in another tone, 'let's get down to more serious matters. I don't know what your plans are; but whatever happens, I've got to leave for Florence tomorrow. I'm expecting my mother-in-law on Tuesday.'

'Old Mrs. Gamble?' Alice looked up from her knitting in surprise. 'Do you mean to say she still travels about Europe? At her age?'

'Eighty-six,' said Eustace, 'and, except for being pretty well blind with cataract, as fit as a fiddle.'

'Goodness!' exclaimed Mrs. Poulshot. 'I do hope I don't have to hang on as long as that!' She shook her head emphatically, appalled by the thought of thirty-one more years of housekeeping, and Fred's black moods, and the utter pointlessness of everything.

Eustace turned back to his brother.

'And when do you two intend to start?'

'Next Thursday. But we spend a night in Turin. I have to get in touch with some of Cacciaguida's people,' John explained.

'Then you'll deliver Sebastian to me on Saturday?'

'Or rather he'll deliver himself. I'm getting off the train at Genoa.'

'Oh, you don't deign to come yourself?'

John Barnack shook his head. The boat was leaving Genoa that same evening. He'd be in Egypt for three or four weeks. Then his paper wanted him to report on the condition of the natives in Kenya and Tanganyika.

'And while you're about it,' said Eustace, 'do find out why my East African coffee shares aren't doing better.'

'I can tell you here and now,' his brother answered. 'A few years ago there was a lot of money in coffee. Result: millions of acres of new plantations, with all the Gadarene swine of London and Paris and Amsterdam and New York rushing down a steep place into coffee investments. Now there's such a surplus of beans, and the price is so low, that even sweated black labour can't give you a dividend.'

'Too bad!'

'You think so? Wait till your keeping out of mischief has brought on rebellion among the subject peoples and revolution at home!'

'Luckily,' said Eustace, 'we shall all be dead by that time.'

'Don't you be too sure.'

'We may all hang on like poor old Mrs. Gamble,' said Alice, who had been trying to imagine what Fred and she would be like in 1950.

'No need for that,' said John Barnack with manifest satisfaction. 'It's coming a great deal sooner than any of you imagine.' He looked at his watch. 'Well, I've got some work to do,' he announced. 'And tomorrow I must be up at cockcrow. So I'll say good-night, Alice.'

Sebastian's heart started to beat violently, he felt all at once rather sick. The moment had come at last, the absolutely final opportunity. He drew a deep breath, got up and walked over to where his father was standing.

'Good-night, father,' he said; and then, 'Oh, by the way,' he brought out in the most casual tone he could command, 'don't you think I might ... I mean, don't you think I really ought to have some evening clothes now?'

‘Ought?’ his father repeated. ‘Ought? It’s a case of the Categorical Imperative, eh?’ And suddenly, alarmingly, he uttered a short explosive bray of laughter.

Overwhelmed, Sebastian mumbled something to the effect that it hadn’t been necessary when he asked last time; but now ... now it was really urgent: he had been asked to a party.

‘Oh, you’ve been asked to a party,’ said Mr. Barnack; and he recalled the ecstatic tone in which Rosie used to pronounce that hated word; he remembered the brightening of her eyes as she heard the music and the confused roaring of the crowd, the all but frenzy of her wild gaiety as the evening progressed.

‘More and more categorical,’ he added sarcastically.

‘Your father’s had a lot of expense recently,’ Mrs. Poulshot interposed in a well-meant effort to cushion poor Sebastian against the impact of her brother’s intransigence. After all, it hadn’t been Rosie’s fault entirely. John had always been hard and exacting, even as a boy. And now, to make things worse, he had to poison people’s lives with these ridiculous political principles of his. But meanwhile the hardness and the principles were facts; and so was Sebastian’s sensitiveness. Her policy was to try to keep the two sets of facts from colliding. But the attempt, on this occasion, was worse than fruitless.

‘My dear Alice,’ said John Barnack in the tone of a courteous but absolutely determined debater, ‘it isn’t a question of whether I can afford to buy the boy his fancy dress.’ (The words evoked an image of the red velvet breeches of Lady Caroline Lamb as Byron’s — as young Tom Hilliard’s — page.) ‘The point at issue is whether it’s right to do so.’

Eustace took the teat out of his mouth to protest that this was worse than Savonarola.

John Barnack emphatically shook his head.

‘It has nothing in common with Christian asceticism, it’s just a question of decency — of not exploiting one’s accidental advantages. Noblesse oblige.’

‘Very nice,’ said Eustace. ‘But meanwhile, you begin by oblige-ing the noblesse. It’s just plain coercion.’

‘Sebastian has absolutely no sense of social responsibility. He’s got to learn it.’

‘Isn’t that exactly what Mussolini says about the Italian people?’

‘And anyhow,’ Mrs. Poulshot put in, glad of this opportunity of fighting Sebastian’s battle with the support of an ally, ‘why make all this fuss about a miserable dinner jacket?’

‘A paltry smoking,’ Eustace elaborated in a tone that was meant to shift the whole argument on to the level of mere farce, ‘a twopenny-halfpenny Tuxedo. Oh, and that reminds me of my young man of Peoria — you didn’t know I was a poet, did you, Sebastian?’

Who to keep up his sense of euphoria

Would don his Tuxedo

And murmur the Credo,

Along with the Sanctus and Gloria.

And here you go, John, depriving your poor child of the benefit of the sacraments.’

More loudly than usual, because of his nervousness, Sebastian started to laugh; then, at the sight of his father’s grave, unsmiling face and resolutely closed lips, he checked himself abruptly.

Eustace twinkled at him between his puffy eyelids.

‘Thank you for the applause,’ he said. ‘But I’m afraid we are not amused.’

Mrs. Poulshot intervened once more, in an attempt to undo the effects of Eustace’s false step.

‘After all,’ she said, trying to bring the discussion back to seriousness, ‘what is evening dress? Nothing but a silly little convention.’

‘Silly, I grant you,’ said John in his measured, judicious way. ‘But when it involves a class symbol, no convention can be called little.’

‘But, Father,’ Sebastian broke in, ‘all the boys of my age have got evening clothes.’ His voice was shrill and unsteady with emotion.

Bent over the chess-board, Susan heard it, recognized the danger signal, and at once raised her eyes. Sebastian’s face was darkly flushed, and his lips had started to tremble. More than ever he looked like a little boy. A little boy in distress, a helpless little boy to whom a grown-up is being cruel. Susan was

overwhelmed by loving pity. But what a mess he was making of the whole business! she thought, feeling suddenly furious with him, not in despite of her love and pity, but precisely because she cared so much. And why on earth couldn't he use a little self-control, or if that was impossible, just keep his mouth shut?

For a few seconds John Barnack looked in silence at his son — looked intently at the image of the childish wife who had betrayed him, and was now dead. Then he smiled sarcastically.

'All the other boys,' he repeated, 'every single one.' And, in the tone he employed in court to discredit the other side's star witness, he added, contemptuously ironic: 'In South Wales the sons of the unemployed miners make a point of wearing tails and white ties. Not to mention gardenias in their buttonholes. And now,' he commanded peremptorily, 'go to bed, and don't ever talk to me about this foolery again.'

Sebastian turned and, speechless, hurried out of the room.

'Your play,' said Jim impatiently.

Susan looked down again, saw the black knight standing immediately in front of her queen and took it.

'Got him!' she said ferociously. The black knight was Uncle John.

Triumphantly, Jim moved a castle across the board and, as he dropped her queen into the box, shouted, 'Check!'

Three-quarters of an hour later, in her pyjamas, Susan was squatting on the floor in front of the gas fire in her bedroom, writing her diary. 'B+ for History, B for Algebra. Which might be worse. Miss C. gave me a bad mark for untidiness, but of course didn't say a word to her beloved Gladys. Really!!! Scarlatti went better, but Pfeiffy tried to be funny with S. about cigars, and then Tom B. met us and asked him to come to his party, and S. was miserable about his wretched dinner jacket. Otherwise I should have hated him because he was with Mrs. E. again today and she was wearing black lace next her skin. But I only felt dreadfully sorry for him. And this evening Uncle J. was horrible about the dinner jacket; I really hate him sometimes. Uncle E. tried to stick up for S., but it wasn't any good.' It wasn't any good, and what made it worse was that she had to sit there, waiting till first Uncle John and then Uncle Eustace took leave; and even when she had been free to go to bed, she hadn't dared to go and comfort him, for fear her mother or Jim might hear her and come up and find her in his room, and, if it were Jim, guffaw as though he had seen her in the lavatory, or if her mother, make some little jocular remark that would be worse than death. But now — she looked at the clock on the mantelpiece — now it ought to be safe. She got up, locked the diary into the drawer of her writing-desk and hid the key in its usual place behind the looking-glass. Then she turned out the light, cautiously opened the door, and looked out. The lights on the lower landings had been extinguished; the house was so still that she could hear the heavy beating of her own heart. Three steps brought her to the door on the other side of the landing; the handle turned noiselessly, and noiselessly she slipped in. The room was not entirely dark; for the blinds had not been drawn, and the lamp across the street threw an oblong of greenish twilight across the ceiling. Susan closed the door behind her and stood, listening — listening at first only to her own heart. Then the springs of the bed creaked faintly, and there was the sound of a long sobbing inhalation of breath. He was crying. Impulsively, she moved forward; her outstretched hand touched a brass rail, moved to the blanket beyond, and, from wool, slid over to the smoothness of the turned-back sheet. The white linen was ghostly in the darkness, and against the dimly seen pillow Sebastian's head was a black silhouette. Her fingers touched the nape of his neck.

'It's me, Sebastian.'

'Get away,' he muttered angrily. 'Get away!'

Susan said nothing, but sat down on the edge of the bed. The little bristles left by the barber's clippers were electrical against her finger-tips.

'You mustn't mind, Sebastian darling,' she whispered. 'You mustn't let yourself be hurt.'

She was patronizing him, of course; she was treating him like a child. But he was utterly miserable; and besides, humiliation had gone so far that he no longer had the energy of pride to keep up his resentment. He lay still, permitting himself to enjoy the comforting reassurance of her proximity.

Susan lifted her hand from his neck and held it poised in midair, breathlessly hesitant. Did she dare? Would he be furious if she did? Her heart thumped yet more violently against her ribs. Then, swallowing hard, she made up her mind to risk it. Slowly the lifted hand moved forwards and downwards through the darkness, until the fingers were touching his hair — that pale bright hair, curly and wind-ruffled, but now invisible, no more now than a scarcely perceptible unravelling of living silk against her skin. She waited tremulously, expecting every moment to hear his angry command to let him alone. But no sound came, and, emboldened by his silence, she lowered her hand a little further.

Inert, Sebastian abandoned himself to the tenderness which at ordinary times he would never allow her to express, and in the very act of self-abandonment found a certain consolation. Suddenly and irrelevantly, it came into his mind that this was one of the situations he had always looked forward to in his dream of a love-affair with Mary Esdaile — or whatever other name one chose to give the dark-haired mistress of his imagination. He would lie there inert in the darkness, and she would kneel beside the bed, stroking his hair; and sometimes she would bend down and kiss him — or perhaps it wouldn't be her lips on his, but the touch of her naked breast. But, of course, this was only Susan, not Mary Esdaile.

She was running her hand through his hair now, openly, undisguisedly, just as she had always longed to do — the fingertips passing from the smooth taut skin behind the ears, pushing their way among the roots of his hair, while the thick resilient curls slid along between the fingers as she moved her hand up to the crown of his head. Again, again, indefatigably.

'Sebastian?' she whispered at last; but he did not answer, and his breathing was almost imperceptibly soft.

With eyes that had grown accustomed to the darkness, she looked down at the sleeping face, and the happiness she experienced, the unutterable bliss, was like what she had sometimes felt while she was holding Marjorie's baby, but with all these other things added — this desire and apprehension, this breathless sense of forbiddenness, as she felt the electrical contact of his hair against her finger-tips, this aching pleasure in her breasts. Bending down, she touched his cheek with her lips. Sebastian stirred a little, but did not wake.

'Darling,' she repeated and, sure that he could not hear her, 'my love, my precious love.'

Chapter Six

EUSTACE WOKE UP, that Saturday morning, at a few minutes before nine, after a night of dreamless sleep, induced by nothing stronger in the way of narcotics than a pint of stout taken at midnight, with two or three small anchovy sandwiches.

Waking was painful, of course; but the taste in his mouth was less brassy, and that tired ache in all his limbs decidedly less acute than it ordinarily was at this black hour of the morning. True, he coughed a bit and brought up some phlegm; but the exhausting paroxysm was over more quickly than usual. After his early cup of tea and a hot bath he felt positively young again.

Beyond the circular shaving-mirror and the image of his lathered face lay the city of Florence, framed between the cypresses of his descending terraces. Over Monte Morello hung fat clouds, like the backsides of Correggio's cherubs at Parma; but the rest of the sky was flawlessly blue, and in the flower-beds below the bathroom window the hyacinths were like carved jewels in the sunlight, white jade and lapis-lazuli and pale-pink coral.

'The pearl-grey,' he called out to his valet without looking round, and then paused to wonder which tie would go best with the suit and the gay weather. A black-and-white check? But that would be too

much the jaunty stockbroker. No; what the place and time required was something in the style of those tartans on a white ground from the Burlington Arcade. Or better still, that delicious salmon-pink fellow from Sulka's. 'And the pink tie,' he added, 'the new one.'

There were white and yellow roses on the breakfast table. Really quite prettily arranged! Guido was beginning to learn. He pulled out a virginal white bud and stuck it in his buttonhole, then addressed himself to his hot-house grapes. A bowl of porridge followed, then two poached eggs on toast, a kipper and some scones and marmalade.

As he ate, he read his letters.

A note, first of all, from Bruno Rontini. Was he back in Florence? And, if so, why not drop in at the shop one day for a chat and a glance at the books? A catalogue of the new arrivals was enclosed.

Then there were two charity appeals from England — those beastly Orphans again, and a brand-new lot of Incurables, whom he'd have to send a couple of guineas to, because Molly Carraway was on the committee. But to make up for the Incurables was a most cheering note from the manager of his Italian bank. Using the two thousand pounds of liquid capital he'd given them to play with, they'd succeeded in netting him, during the previous month, fourteen thousand lire. Just by buying and selling on the dollar-franc exchange. Fourteen thousand.... It was quite a windfall. He'd give the Incurables a fiver and buy himself a little birthday present. A few nice books perhaps; and he unfolded Bruno's catalogue. But, really, who wanted the first edition of Scupoli's *Spiritual Combat*? Or the *Opera Omnia* of St. Bonaventura edited by the Franciscans of Quaracchi? Eustace threw the catalogue aside and settled down to the task of deciphering the long illegible scribble from Mopsa Schottelius, which he had reserved to the last. In pencil and the most disconcerting mixture of German, French and English, Mopsa described for him what she was doing at Monte Carlo. And what that girl wasn't doing could have been set down on the back of a postage-stamp. How appallingly thorough these Germans always managed to be, how emphatic! In sex no less than in war — in scholarship, in science. Diving deeper than anyone else and coming up muddier. He decided to send Mopsa a picture, postcard advising her to read John Morley on 'Compromise.'

It was in accord with these same Morleian principles that he decided, when the meal was over, to smoke one of those small Larranaga claros which had pleased him so much when he tried one at his London tobacconist's that he bought a thousand of them on the spot. The doctors were always nagging at him about his cigars, and he had promised to smoke only two a day, after lunch and dinner. But these little fellows were so mild that it would take a dozen of them to produce the same effect as one of his big Romeo and Juliets. So, if he were to smoke one of them now, and another after lunch, and perhaps a third after tea, with only a single big one after dinner, he would still be well on the right side of excess. He lit his cigar and leaned back, savouring the delicate lusciousness of its aroma. Then he got up and, giving orders to the butler to ring up Casa Acciaiuoli and find out if the Contessa could receive him this afternoon, made his way to the library. The four or five books which he was simultaneously reading lay piled on the table that stood beside the chair into which he now cautiously lowered himself: Scawen Blunt's *Journals*, the second volume of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, an illustrated *History of Embroidery*, the latest novel by Ronald Firbank ... After a moment's hesitation, he decided on the Proust. Ten pages were what he usually managed to read of any book before desiring a change; but this time he lost interest after only six and a half, and turned instead to the section on the *Opus Anglicanum* in the *History of Embroidery*. Then the clock in the drawing-room struck eleven, and it was time for him to go up to the west wing and say good-morning to his mother-in-law.

Brightly painted, and dressed in the most elegant of canary-coloured tailor-mades, old Mrs. Gamble was sitting in state, having her right hand manicured by her French maid, stroking her toy Pomeranian, Foxy VIII, with her left, and listening to Sir Oliver Lodge's *Raymond* read aloud to her by her companion. At Eustace's entrance, Foxy VIII jumped down from her knee, rushed towards him and, retiring backwards as he advanced, furiously barked.

'Foxy!' cried Mrs. Gamble in a tone almost as harshly shrill as the Pomeranian's. 'Foxy!'

'Little hell-hound!' said Eustace genially; and, turning to the reader, who had broken off in the middle of a sentence, he added: 'Please don't let me interrupt you, Mrs. Thwale.'

Veronica Thwale raised her impeccably oval face and looked at him with a calm intentness.

'But it's a pleasure,' she said, 'to get back from all these ghosts to a bit of solid flesh.'

She lingered a little over the final consonant. As 'flesh-sh,' the word took on a meatier significance.

Like an Ingres madonna, Eustace reflected, as he twinkled back at her. Smooth and serene almost to the point of impersonality, and yet with all the sex left in — and perhaps even a little added.

'Too, too solid, I'm afraid.'

Chuckling, he patted the smooth convexity of his pearl-grey waistcoat.

'And how's the Queen Mother this morning?' he added, crossing over to Mrs. Gamble's chair. 'Having her claws sharpened, I see.'

The old lady uttered a thin crackling laugh. She was proud of her reputation for reckless plain speaking and malicious wit.

'You're a rascal, Eustace,' she said, and the thin old voice was still vibrant with those rasping intonations of authority which make so many rich and aristocratic old ladies sound like sublimated sergeant-majors. 'And who's talking of flesh?' she added, turning her unseeing eyes inquisitorially from where she imagined Eustace was to where Mrs. Thwale had seemed to be sitting. 'Are you putting on flesh, Eustace?'

'Well, I'm not quite as sylph-like as you are,' he answered, looking down with a smile at the blind little shrunken mummy in the chair beside him.

'Where are you?' Mrs. Gamble asked; and leaving one gnarled hand to the manicurist, she pawed with the other at the air, then found the lapel of his coat and, from that, ran her fingers over the pearl-grey bulge below. 'Heavens!' she exclaimed. 'I had no idea! You're gross, Eustace, gross!' The thin voice grated again, like a petty officer's. 'Ned was gross too,' she went on, comparing mentally the stomach under her hand with the remembered paunch that had been her husband's. 'That was why he passed on so young. Only sixty-four. No fat man ever lived even to seventy.'

The conversation had taken a turn which Eustace could not help finding a bit distasteful. He decided to laugh his way out into a more congenial subject.

'That was up to the best of your old form,' he said gaily. 'But tell me,' he added, 'what happens to fat people when they die?'

'They don't die,' said Mrs. Gamble. 'They pass on.'

'When they pass on,' Eustace amended, with an intonation that put the words between inverted commas. 'Are they still obese on the other side? I'd like to ask next time you have a séance.'

'You're being frivolous,' said the Queen Mother severely.

Eustace turned to Mrs. Thwale.

'Did you finally succeed in locating a good witch?'

'Unfortunately, most of them speak only Italian,' she answered. 'But now Lady Worplesden's given us the name of an English one, who she says is very satisfactory.'

'I'd have preferred a trumpet medium,' said Mrs. Gamble. 'But when one's travelling, one has to put up with what one can find.'

Noiselessly, the French maid rose, moved her chair over and, taking Mrs. Gamble's other hand from where it lay, clawlike, on Foxy's orange fur, began to file the pointed nails.

'That young nephew of yours is arriving today, isn't he?'

'This evening,' Eustace answered. 'We may be a little late for dinner.'

'I like boys,' the Queen Mother pronounced. 'That is, when they have decent manners, which very few of them have nowadays. And that reminds me, Veronica, of Mr. De Vries.'

'He's coming to tea this afternoon,' said Mrs. Thwale in her calm, level voice.

'De Vries?' Eustace questioned.

'You met him in Paris,' said the Queen Mother. 'At my New Year cocktail party.'

‘Did I?’ Eustace’s tone was vague. He had also met about five thousand other people on the same occasion.

‘American,’ the Queen Mother went on. ‘And he took the greatest fancy to me. Didn’t he, Veronica?’

‘He certainly did,’ said Mrs. Thwale.

‘Came to see me constantly all this winter — constantly. And now he’s in Florence.’

‘Money?’

Mrs. Gamble nodded.

‘Breakfast Food,’ she said. ‘But what he’s really interested in is science and all that kind of stuff. However, as I keep telling him, facts are facts, whatever your Mr. Einstein may say.’

‘And not only Mr. Einstein,’ said Eustace with a smile, ‘Mr. Plato, Mr. Buddha, Mr. Francis of Assisi.’

A curious little grunting sound made him turn his head. Almost voicelessly, Mrs. Thwale was laughing.

‘Did I say anything so amusing?’ he asked.

The pale oval face resumed its customary serenity.

‘I was thinking of a little joke my husband and I used to have together.’

‘About Mr. Francis of Assisi?’

For a second or two she looked at him without speaking.

‘About Brother Ass-ss,’ she said at last.

Eustace would have liked to enquire further, but thought it more tactful, seeing that Thwale was so lately dead, to refrain.

‘If you’re going down into the town this morning,’ Mrs. Gamble broke in, ‘I wish you’d take Veronica.’

‘I’d be enchanted.’

‘She’s got some shopping to do for me,’ the old woman continued.

Eustace turned to Mrs. Thwale.

‘Then let’s have lunch together at Betti’s.’

But it was the Queen Mother who declined the invitation.

‘No, Eustace, I want her to come straight back. In a taxi.’

He glanced anxiously at Mrs. Thwale to see how she was taking it. The face of the Ingres madonna was expressionlessly calm.

‘In a taxi,’ she repeated in her clear, level voice. ‘Very well, Mrs. Gamble.’

Half an hour later, in the sober elegance of her black tailor-made, Veronica Thwale walked out into the sunshine. At the foot of the front steps stood the Isotta, large, dark blue, and prodigiously expensive-looking. But Paul De Vries, she reflected as she got in, was probably at least as well off as Mr. Barnack.

‘I hope you don’t object,’ said Eustace, holding up the second of the day’s cigars.

She raised her eyelids at him, smiled without parting her lips, and shook her head; then looked back again at the gloved hands lying limply folded in her lap.

Slowly the car rolled down between the cypresses and out into the steep winding road beyond the gates.

‘Of all the specimens in my collection,’ said Eustace, breaking the long silence, ‘I think the Queen Mother is perhaps the most remarkable. A fossil scorpion out of the Carboniferous, almost perfectly preserved.’

Mrs. Thwale smiled at her folded hands.

‘I’m not a geologist,’ she said. ‘And, incidentally, the fossil is my employer.’

‘Which is the thing I find most surprising of all.’

She looked up at him enquiringly.

‘You mean, that I should be acting as Mrs. Gamble’s companion?’

The final word, Eustace noted appreciatively, was faintly emphasized, so that it took on its fullest, Brontëan significance.

'That's it,' he said.

Mrs. Thwale examined him appraisingly, taking in the tilted hat, the beautifully fitting pearl-grey suit, the Sulka tie, the rosebud in his buttonhole.

'Your father wasn't a poor clergyman in Islington,' she brought out.

'No, he was a militant anti-clerical in Bolton.'

'Oh, it's not the faith I'm thinking about,' she answered, smiling with delicate irony. 'It's what your mother-in-law calls the Facts.'

'Such as?'

She shrugged her shoulders.

'Chilblains, for example. Living in a cold house. Feeling ashamed because one's clothes are so old and shabby. But poverty wasn't the whole story. Your father didn't practise the Christian virtues.'

'On the contrary,' said Eustace, 'he was a professional philanthropist. You know — drinking-fountains, hospitals, boys' clubs.'

'Ah, but he only gave the money and had his name written up over the door. He didn't have to work in his beastly clubs.'

'Whereas you did?'

Mrs. Thwale nodded.

'From the time I was thirteen. And after I was sixteen it was four nights a week.'

'Did they force you?'

Mrs. Thwale shrugged her shoulders and did not immediately answer. She was thinking of her father — those bright eyes in the face of a consumptive Phoebus, that long thin body, stooping and hollow-chested. And beside him stood her mother, tiny and fragile, but the protector of his helpless unworldliness, the little bird-like Atlas who sustained the whole weight of his material universe.

'There's such a thing as moral blackmail,' she said at last. 'If the people around you insist on behaving like Early Christians, you've got no choice, have you?'

'Not much, I admit.'

Eustace took the cigar out of the corner of his mouth and exhaled a cloud of smoke.

'That's one of the reasons,' he added with a chuckle, 'why it's so important to eschew the company of the Good.'

'One of the Good was your stepdaughter,' said Mrs. Thwale after a little pause.

'Who, Daisy Ockham?'

She nodded.

'Oh, then your father must be that Canon What's-his-name she's always talking about.'

'Canon Cresswell.'

'That's it — Cresswell.' Eustace beamed at her. 'Well, all I can say is that you ought to hear her on the subject.'

'I have,' said Mrs. Thwale. 'Very often.'

Daisy Ockham, Dotty Freebody, Yvonne Graves — the Holy Women. One fat, two scraggy. She had once drawn a picture of them squatting at the foot of the cross on which her father was being crucified by a troop of Boy Scouts.

Eustace broke the silence with a little laugh at his stepdaughter's expense — at Canon Cresswell's too, incidentally. But there didn't seem to be any filial piety to consider in this case.

'All those deplorably good works of hers!' he said. 'But then of course,' he added commiseratingly, 'there wasn't much alternative for the poor thing, after she'd lost her husband and the boy.'

'She used to do them even before,' said Mrs. Thwale.

'So there's really no excuse!' he said.

Mrs. Thwale smiled and shook her head. Then, after a pause, she volunteered that it was Daisy Ockham who had originally introduced her to Mrs. Gamble.

'Rare privilege!' said Eustace.

'But it was at her house that I met Henry.'

'Henry?' he questioned.
'That was my husband.'
'Oh, of course.'

There was a silence, while Eustace sucked at his cigar and tried to remember what the Queen Mother had said about Henry Thwale. A partner in the firm of solicitors who managed her affairs. Very pleasant and well-bred, but had passed on of a ruptured appendix at only — what was the age she had mentioned, with her usual ghoulish accuracy about such things? Thirty-eight, he seemed to recall. So that he would have been at least twelve or fourteen years older than his wife.

'How old were you when you married?' he asked.
'Eighteen.'

'Just the right age, according to Aristotle.'

'But not according to my father. He'd have liked me to wait a couple of years.'

'Fathers are never supposed to relish the thought of their young daughters getting married.'

Mrs. Thwale looked down at her folded hands and thought of their honeymoon and summer holiday beside the Mediterranean. The swimming, the deliciously stupefying sun-baths, the long siesta hours in the aquarium twilight of their green-shuttered bedroom.

'I'm not altogether surprised,' she said, without raising her eyes.

At the memory of those extremes of pleasure and shamelessness and self-abandonment she smiled a little to herself. 'Nature's lay idiot, I taught thee to love.' And to the quotation Henry had added, as his personal testimonial, that she was a model pupil. But then he had been a good master. Which didn't prevent him, unfortunately, from having the most abominable temper and being mean about money.

'Well, I'm glad you managed to make your escape,' said Eustace.

Mrs. Thwale was silent for a little. 'After Henry died,' she said at last, 'it almost looked as if I might have to go back to where I'd come from.'

'To the Poor and the Good?'

'To the Poor and the Good,' she echoed. 'But fortunately Mrs. Gamble needed somebody to read to her.'

'So now you live with the Rich and the Bad, eh?'

'As a parasite,' said Mrs. Thwale calmly. 'As a kind of glorified lady's maid.... But it's a question of making one's choice between two evils.'

She opened her handbag, took out a handkerchief and, raising it to her nose, inhaled its perfume of civet and flowers. In her father's house there was chronically the smell of cabbage and steamed puddings, and at the Girls' Club — well, the smell of girls.

'Personally,' she said, as she put away the handkerchief again, 'I'd rather be a hanger-on in a house like yours than on my own with — what would it have been? About fifty shillings a week, I suppose.'

There was a brief silence.

'In your position,' said Eustace at last, 'perhaps I'd have made the same choice.'

'It wouldn't astonish me,' was Mrs. Thwale's comment.

'But I think I'd have drawn a line ...'

'People don't draw lines unless they can afford it.'

'Not even at fossil scorpions?'

Mrs. Thwale smiled.

'Your mother-in-law would have preferred a trumpet medium. But even she has to be content with what she can find.'

'Even she!' Eustace repeated with a wheezy laugh. 'But I must say, she was pretty lucky to find you, wasn't she?'

'Not so lucky as I was to find her.'

'And if you hadn't found one another, what then?'

Mrs. Thwale shrugged her shoulders.

'Perhaps I could have made a little money illustrating books.'

'Oh, you draw?'

She nodded.

'Secretly,' she answered.

'Why secretly?'

'Why?' she repeated. 'Partly from mere force of habit. You see, one's drawings weren't much appreciated at home.'

'On what grounds? Aesthetic or ethical?'

She smiled and shrugged her shoulders. 'Who knows?'

But Mrs. Cresswell had been so dreadfully upset by the discovery of her sketch-book that she had gone to bed for three days with a migraine headache. After that, Veronica had never done any drawing except in the W.C. and on bits of paper that could be thrown away without risk of stopping up the drains.

'Besides,' she went on, 'secrecy's such fun just for its own sake.'

'Is it?'

'Don't tell me you feel like my husband about it! Henry would have been a nudist if he'd been born ten years later.'

'But you wouldn't, even though you were born ten years later?'

She shook her head emphatically.

'I wouldn't even write out a laundry list with somebody else in the room. But Henry ... Why, the door of his study was never shut. Never! It used to make me feel quite ill even to look at him.'

She was silent for a moment.

'There's an awful prayer at the beginning of the Communion Service,' she went on. 'You know the one: "Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid." Really awful! I used to make drawings about it. Those were the ones that seemed to upset my mother most of all.'

'I can well believe it,' said Eustace with a chuckle. 'One day,' he added, 'will you show me some of your drawings?'

Mrs. Thwale glanced at him searchingly, then averted her eyes. For a few seconds she did not speak. Then, slowly and in the tone of one who has thought out a problem and come at last to a decision, she gave her answer.

'You're one of the few people I wouldn't mind showing them to.'

'I feel flattered,' said Eustace.

Mrs. Thwale opened her handbag and, from among its perfumed contents, extracted half a sheet of notepaper.

'Here's something I was working on before breakfast this morning.'

He took it and put up his monocle. The drawing was in ink and, in spite of its smallness, extraordinarily detailed and meticulous. Competent, was Eustace's verdict, but unpleasantly niggling. He peered at it closely. The drawing represented a woman, dressed in the severest and most correctly fashionable of tailor-made suits, walking, prayer-book in hand, up the aisle of a church. Behind her, at the end of a string, she trailed a horseshoe magnet — but a horseshoe magnet so curved and rounded as to suggest a pair of thighs tapering down to the knees. On the ground, a little way behind the woman, lay an enormous eyeball, as big as a pumpkin, its pupil staring wildly at the retreating magnet. From the sides of the eye sprouted two wormlike arms, ending in a pair of huge hooked hands that clawed at the floor. So strong had been the attraction and so desperate the futile effort to resist, that the dragging fingers had scored long grooves in the flagstones.

Eustace raised his left eyebrow and allowed the monocle to drop.

'There's only one thing about the parable I don't understand,' he said. 'Why the church?'

'Oh, for any number of reasons,' Mrs. Thwale answered, shrugging her shoulders. 'Respectability always heightens a woman's attractiveness. And blasphemy gives an extra spice to pleasure. And, after

all, churches are places people get married in. Besides, who tells you that that isn't the Decameron she's carrying, bound in black leather like a prayer-book?'

She took the sheet of paper and put it away again in her bag.

'It's a pity fans have gone out of fashion,' she added in another tone. 'And those big white masks they used to wear in Casanova. Or talking from behind screens, like the ladies in "The Tale of Genji." Wouldn't that be heavenly!'

'Would it?'

She nodded, her face bright with unwonted animation.

'One could do the oddest things while one was chatting with the Vicar about ... well, let's say the League of Nations. Oh, the oddest!'

'Such as?'

A little grunt of voiceless laughter was all the answer she vouchsafed. There was a pause.

'And then,' she added, 'think of the enormities one could bring out without blushing!'

'And you feel you'd like to bring out enormities?'

Mrs. Thwale nodded.

'I'd have been a good scientist,' she said.

'What's that got to do with it?'

'But can't you see?' she said impatiently. 'Can't you see? Cutting bits off frogs and mice, grafting cancer into rabbits, boiling things together in test-tubes — just to see what'll happen, just for the fun of the thing. Wantonly committing enormities — that's all science is.'

'And you'd enjoy it outside the laboratory?'

'Not in public, of course.'

'But if you were ambushed behind a screen, where the Good couldn't see you ...'

'Ambushed behind a screen,' Mrs. Thwale repeated slowly. 'And now,' she went on in another tone, 'I shall have to get out. There's a shop somewhere here on the Lungarno where you can buy rubber rats for dogs. Rats with a chocolate flavour. Foxy's very keen on the chocolate, it seems. Ah, here we are!'

She leaned forward and rapped the glass.

Eustace watched her go. Then, replacing his hat, he ordered the chauffeur to drive to Weyl's in the Via Tornabuoni.

Chapter Seven

'WEYL FRÈRES, BRUXELLES, Paris ...'

Eustace pushed open the door and walked into the crowded shop. "Where every prospect pleases," he was humming, as he always hummed on these occasions, "and only man is Weyl Frères, Bruxelles, Paris, Florence, Vienne."

But this morning it was woman, not man. Mme Weyl was engaged, as he entered, in trying to talk what was obviously an Anglo-Indian colonel into buying a Braque. The performance was so ludicrous and the performer so ravishingly pretty that Eustace simulated an interest in a particularly hideous piece of majolica in order to have an excuse to watch and listen at close quarters.

Pearly, golden, deliciously pink and plump, how had this sumptuous young creature escaped from the Rubens canvas which was so obviously her home? And how, good heavens, did it happen that a figure from Peter Paul's mythology was wearing clothes? But even in her incongruous twentieth-century frills, Weyl's Flemish Venus remained enchanting. Which only heightened the absurdity of the act she was now staging for the colonel. With the earnestness of a little girl who is doing her very best to reproduce, word-perfect, the lesson so laboriously learned by heart, she was conscientiously repeating the nonsense phrases with which her husband adorned his incomparable patter. 'Tactile Values,' 'rhythm,' 'significant forms,' 'repoussoirs,' 'calligraphic outline' — Eustace recognized all the stereotypes of contemporary

criticism, and along with them such products of Weyl's own luxuriant genius as 'four-dimensional volumes,' 'couleur d'éternité,' and 'plastic polyphony'; the whole uttered with a French accent so strong, so indecently 'cute,' so reminiscent of the naughty-naughty twitterings of a Parisian miss on the English musical comedy stage, that the colonel's ruddy face was fairly beaming with concupiscence.

Suddenly there was a rush of feet and the loud, delighted cry of 'Monsieur Eustache!' Eustace turned his head. Short, broad-shouldered, astonishingly quick and agile, it was Gabriel Weyl himself, darting towards him between the baroque statues and the cinquecento furniture. Seizing Eustace's hand in both of his, he shook it long and ardently, assured him, in a torrent of incorrigibly Belgian English, how happy he was, how proud, how deeply touched and flattered; and then, lowering his voice, whispered dramatically that he had just received something from his brother in Paris, a consignment of treasures which he had said to himself the very first moment he looked at them that he wouldn't show to anyone, not a soul, not to Pierpont Morgan himself, by God, until ce cher Monsieur Eustache had plucked the virginity of the portfolio and rifled its choicest sweets. And what sweets! Degas drawings such as nobody had ever seen the like of.

Still boiling over with enthusiasm, he led the way into the back room. On an elaborately carved Venetian table lay a black portfolio.

'There!' he cried, pointing at it with the gesture of one who, in an Old Master, somewhat superfluously calls attention to the Transfiguration or the martyrdom of St. Erasmus.

He was silent for a moment; then, changing his expression to the libidinous leer of a slave-dealer peddling Circassians to an ageing pasha, he started to undo the strings of the portfolio. The hands, Eustace noticed, were deft and powerful, their backs furred with a growth of soft black hair, their short fingers exquisitely manicured. With a flourish M. Weyl threw back the heavy flap of cardboard.

'Look!'

The tone was triumphant and assured. At the sight of those newly budded paps, that incomparable navel, no pasha, however jaded, could possibly resist.

'But look!'

Putting up his monocle, Eustace looked, and saw the charcoal sketch of a naked woman standing in a tin bath like a Roman sarcophagus. One foot, much distorted by the wearing of tight shoes, was planted on the edge of the bath, and the woman was bending down, hair and bosom falling one way, rump bonily jutting another, one knee crooked outward at the most ungraceful of all possible angles, to scrub a heel which one divined, through some unanalysable subtlety of the drawing, as yellow and, in spite of soap, chronically dirty-looking.

'Was this the face ...?' Eustace murmured.

But really there was nobody quite like Degas, nobody who could render the cosy and domestic squalors of our physiology with so much intensity and in forms so exquisitely beautiful.

'You oughtn't to have sold me that Magnasco,' he said aloud. 'How can I possibly afford one of these?'

The slave-dealer shot a glance at his pasha and saw that the Circassians were beginning to have the desired effect. But they were so cheap, he protested; and the soundest of investments — as good as shares in the Suez Canal Company. And now let Monsieur Eustache look at this one!

He removed the first drawing; and this time the face that launched the thousand ships was seen squarely from the rear, leaning forward over the tin sarcophagus and vigorously towelling the back of its neck.

Gabriel Weyl laid a thick, perfectly manicured forefinger on the buttocks.

'What values!' he breathed ecstatically, 'what volumes, what calligraphy!'

Eustace burst out laughing. But, as usual, it was M. Weyl who laughed last. Little by little the jaded pasha began to yield. He might perhaps consider it — that was to say, if the price weren't too exorbitant....

Only eight thousand lire, wheedled the slave-dealer, eight thousand for something that was not only a masterpiece, but also a gilt-edged security.

It was quite a reasonable figure; but Eustace felt bound to protest.

No, no, not a centesimo less than eight thousand. But if Monsieur Eustache would take two of them, and pay cash, he could have them for only fourteen.

Fourteen, fourteen ... After this morning's letter from the bank one might almost say that one was getting two Degases free gratis and for nothing. His conscience salved, Eustace pulled out his cheque-book.

'I'll take them with me,' he said, indicating the foot-washer and the towel-wielder.

Five minutes later, with the square flat package under his arm, he emerged again into the sunlight of the Via Tornabuoni.

From Weyl's Eustace made his way to Vieusseux's lending library, to see if they had a copy of Lamettrie's *L'Homme Machine*. But of course they hadn't; and after turning over the pages of the latest French and English reviews in the vain hope of finding something one could read, he walked out again into the jostle of the narrow streets.

After a moment of hesitation he decided to pop into the Bargello for a moment and then, on the way to lunch, to look in on Bruno Rontini and ask him to arrange about taking Sebastian round the Villa Galigai.

Ten minutes were enough to whizz through the Donatellos and, his head full of heroic bronze and marble, he strolled up the street in the direction of the bookshop.

Yes, it would have been nice, he was thinking, it would have been very nice indeed if one's life had had the quality of those statues. Nobility without affectation. Serenity combined with passionate energy. Dignity wedded to grace. But, alas, those were not precisely the characteristics that one's life had exhibited. Which was regrettable, no doubt. But of course it had its compensating advantages. Being a Donatello would have been altogether too strenuous for his taste. That sort of thing was much more John's cup of tea — John who had always seen himself as the equivalent of a mixture between Gattamelata and the Baptist. Instead of which, his actual life was ... what? Eustace cast about for the answer, and finally decided that John's life was best compared to a war picture by one of those deplorable painters who were born to be magazine illustrators but had unfortunately seen the Cubists and taken to High Art. Poor John! He had no taste, no sense of style....

But here was Bruno's corner. He opened the door and walked into the dark little book-lined cavern.

Seated at the counter, a man was reading by the light of a green-shaded lamp that hung from the ceiling. At the sound of the door-bell he put away his book and, with movements that were expressive more of resignation to the interruption than of delight at seeing a customer, got up and advanced to meet the newcomer. He was a young man in the middle twenties, tall, large-boned, with a narrow convex face like that of a rather tense and over-earnest, but still not very intelligent ram.

'Buon giorno,' said Eustace genially.

The young man returned his greeting without the trace of an answering smile. Not, Eustace felt sure, from any desire to be discourteous, but just because, to a face of that kind, smiling was all but an impossibility.

He asked where Bruno was, and was told that Bruno would be out for at least another hour.

'Gallivanting about as usual!' Eustace commented with that unnecessary and rather pointless jocularity into which the desire to display his perfect command of the Tuscan idiom so often betrayed him when he spoke Italian.

'If you like to put it that way, Mr. Barnack,' said the young man with quiet gravity.

'Oh, you know who I am?'

The other nodded.

'I came into the shop one day last autumn, when you were talking with Bruno.'

'And when I'd gone, he treated you to a thorough dissection of my character!'

'How can you say that!' the young man cried reproachfully. 'You who've known Bruno for so long.'

Eustace laughed and patted him on the shoulder. The boy was humourless, of course; but in his loyalty to Bruno, in the solemn ovine sincerity of all he said, curiously touching.

'I was only joking,' he said aloud. 'Bruno's the last person to gossip about a man when his back is turned.'

For the first time during the conversation, the young man's face brightened into a smile.

'I'm glad you realize it,' he said.

'Not only realize, but sometimes even regret it,' said Eustace mischievously. 'There's nothing that so effectively ruins conversation as charitableness. After all, nobody can be amusing about other people's virtues. What's your name, by the way?' he added, before the other had time to translate the pained disapproval of his expression into words.

'Malpighi, Carlo Malpighi.'

'No relation of Avvocato Malpighi?'

The other hesitated; an expression of embarrassment appeared on his face.

'He's my father,' he said at last.

Eustace betrayed no surprise; but his curiosity was aroused. Why was the son of a highly successful lawyer selling secondhand books? He set himself to find out.

'I expect Bruno's been very helpful to you,' he began, taking what he divined would be the shortest way to the young man's confidence.

He was not mistaken. In a little while he had young ram-face almost chattering. About his sickly and conventional mother; about his father's preference for the two older and cleverer sons; about the impact of *il Darwinismo* and his loss of faith; about his turning to the Religion of Humanity.

'The Religion of Humanity!' Eustace repeated with relish. How deliciously comic that people should still be worshipping Humanity!

From theoretical socialism the step to an active anti-fascism was short and logical — particularly logical in Carlo's case, since both his brothers were party members and climbing rapidly up the hierarchical ladder. Carlo had spent a couple of years distributing forbidden literature; attending clandestine meetings; talking to peasants and workmen in the hope of persuading them to put up some kind of resistance to the all-pervading tyranny. But nothing happened; there were no results to show for all these efforts. In private, people grumbled and exchanged whispered jokes and little obscenities about their masters; in public, they continued to shout 'Duce, Duce!' And meanwhile, from time to time, one of Carlo's associates would be caught, and either beaten up in the old-fashioned way, or else shipped off to the islands. That was all, that was absolutely all.

'And even if it hadn't been all,' Eustace put in, 'even if you'd persuaded them to do something violent and decisive, what then? There'd have been anarchy for a little while. And then, to cure the anarchy, another dictator, calling himself a communist, no doubt, but otherwise indistinguishable from this one. Quite indistinguishable,' he repeated with the jolliest of chuckles. 'Unless, of course, he happened to be rather worse.'

The other nodded.

'Bruno said something of that kind too.'

'Sensible fellow!'

'But he also said something else ...'

'Ah, I was afraid of that!'

Carlo ignored the interruption, and his face glowed with sudden ardour.

'... That there's only one corner of the universe you can be certain of improving, and that's your own self. Your own self,' he repeated. 'So you have to begin there, not outside, not on other people. That comes afterwards, when you've worked on your own corner. You've got to be good before you can do good — or at any rate do good without doing harm at the same time. Helping with one hand and hurting with the other — that's what the ordinary reformer does.'

'Whereas the truly wise man,' said Eustace, 'refrains from doing anything with either hand.'

'No, no,' the other protested with unsmiling earnestness. 'The wise man begins by transforming himself, so that he can help other people without running the risk of being corrupted in the process.'

And with the incoherence of passion he began to talk about the French Revolution. The men who made it had the best of intentions; but these good intentions were hopelessly mixed up with vanity and ambition and insensitiveness and cruelty. With the inevitable consequence that what had begun as a movement of liberation degenerated into terrorism and a squabble for power, into tyranny and imperialism and the world-wide reactions to imperialism. And this sort of thing was bound to happen wherever people tried to do good without being good. Nobody could do a proper job with dirty or misshapen instruments. There was no way out except Bruno's way. And, of course, Bruno's way was the way that had been pointed out by ...

Suddenly he broke off and, taking cognizance of Eustace as a potential customer, looked very sheepish.

'I'm sorry,' he said in a tone of apology. 'I don't know why I'm talking to you like this. I ought to have asked you what you wanted.'

'Exactly what you've given me,' said Eustace with a smile of amused and slightly ironic friendliness. 'And I'll buy any book you recommend, from Aretino to Mrs. Molesworth.'

Carlo Malpighi looked at him for a moment in hesitant silence. Then, deciding to take him at his word, he stepped over to one of the shelves and came back with a rather battered volume.

'It's only twenty-five lire,' he said.

Eustace put up his monocle, opened the book at random, and read aloud:

"Grace did not fail thee, but thou wast wanting to grace. God did not deprive thee of the operation of his love, but thou didst deprive his love of thy co-operation. God would never have rejected thee, if thou hadst not rejected him."

Golly!' He turned back to the title page. 'Treatise of the Love of God by St. François de Sales,' he read. 'Pity it isn't de Sade. But then,' he added, as he pulled out his wallet, 'it would have cost a good deal more than twenty-five lire.'

Chapter Eight

CONFIDENT THAT, AT Betti's, he would find a friend to share his meal, Eustace had made no luncheon engagement. Unwisely, as he now realized on entering the restaurant. For Mario De Lellis was swallowed up in the midst of a large convivial party, and could only wave a distant greeting. And Mopsa's father, solemn old Schottelius, was pontificating about world politics to two other Germans. And as for Tom Pewsey, he was lurching so intimately with such an extraordinarily handsome young Nordic that he failed even to notice the entry of his oldest friend.

Seated at the table assigned to him, Eustace was preparing, rather mournfully, to eat a solitary meal, when he became aware, over the top of his menu, of an intruding presence. Raising his head, he saw a slender young man looking down at him with all the focussed intentness of two very bright brown eyes and the fixedly staring nostrils of a tilted and inquisitive nose.

'I don't suppose you remember me,' said the stranger.

It was a New England voice; and its intonations curiously combined a native eagerness with a studiously academic flatness, deliberation and monotony.

Eustace shook his head.

'No, I'm afraid I don't,' he admitted.

'I had the pleasure of being introduced to you in Paris last January. At Mrs. Gamble's.'

'Oh, you're Mr. De Jong.'

'De Vries,' the young man emended. 'Paul De Vries.'

'I know all about you,' said Eustace. 'You talk to my mother-in-law about Einstein.'

Very brightly, as though he were deliberately turning on a light, the young man smiled.

'Could any subject be more exciting?'

‘None — unless it’s the subject of lunch when the clock says half-past one. Will you join me in discussing that?’

The young man had evidently been hoping for just such an invitation.

‘Thank you so much,’ he said; and, putting down the two thick volumes he was carrying, he seated himself, planted his elbows on the table and leaned forward towards his new companion.

‘Everyone ought to know something about Einstein,’ he began.

‘One moment,’ said Eustace. ‘Let’s start by deciding what we’re going to eat.’

‘Yes, yes, that’s very important,’ the other agreed, but with an obvious lack of all conviction. ‘The stomach has its reasons, as Pascal would say.’ He laughed perfunctorily, and picked up the bill-of-fare. When the waiter had taken the orders, he planted his elbows as before, and began again.

‘As I was saying, Mr. Barnack, everyone ought to know something of Einstein.’

‘Even those who can’t understand what he’s talking about?’

‘But they can,’ the other protested. ‘It’s only the mathematical techniques that are difficult. The principle is simple — and after all, it’s the understanding of the principle that affects values and conduct.’

Eustace laughed aloud.

‘I can just see my mother-in-law changing her values and conduct to fit the principles of relativity!’

‘Well, of course she is rather elderly,’ the other admitted. ‘I was thinking more of people who are young enough to be flexible. For example, that lady who acts as Mrs. Gamble’s companion ...’

Ah, so that was why he had been so assiduous in his attentions to the Queen Mother! But in that case the picture of the magnetized eye was perhaps not only a parable but a piece of history.

‘... Mathematically speaking, almost illiterate,’ the young man was saying. ‘But that doesn’t prevent her from realizing the scope and significance of the Einsteinian revolution.’

And what a revolution, he went on with mounting enthusiasm. Incomparably more important than anything that had happened in Russia or Italy. For this was the revolution that had changed the whole course of scientific thinking, brought back idealism, integrated mind into the fabric of Nature, put an end for ever to the Victorians’ nightmare universe of infinitesimal billiard balls.

‘Too bad,’ said Eustace in parenthesis. ‘I really loved those little billiard balls.’

He addressed himself to the plate of ribbon-like lasagne verdi which the waiter had set before him.

‘First-rate,’ he said appreciatively with his mouth full. ‘Almost as good as at the Pappagallo in Bologna. Do you know Bologna?’ he added, hoping to divert the conversation to more congenial themes.

But Paul De Vries knew Bologna only too well. Had spent a week there the previous autumn, having talks with all the most interesting people at the university.

‘The university?’ Eustace repeated incredulously.

The young man nodded and, putting down his fork, explained that, during the last two years, he had been making a tour of all the leading universities of Europe and Asia. Getting in touch with the really significant people working in each. Trying to enlist their co-operation in his great project — the setting up of an international clearing house of ideas, the creation of a general staff of scientific-religious-philosophic synthesis for the entire planet.

‘With yourself as the commander-in-chief?’ Eustace couldn’t resist putting in.

‘No, no,’ the other protested. ‘Only the liaison officer and interpreter. Only the bridge-building engineer.’

That was the full extent of his ambition: to be a humble bridge-builder, a pontifex. Not maximus, he added with another of his bright deliberate smiles. Pontifex minimus. And he had good hopes of succeeding. People had been extraordinarily kind and helpful and interested. And meanwhile he could assure Eustace that Bologna was living up to her ancient reputation. They were doing the most exciting work in crystallography; and in his latest lectures on Aesthetics, Bonomelli was using all the resources of modern psycho-physiology and the mathematics of many dimensions. Nothing quite like Bonomelli’s Aesthetics had ever been seen before.

Eustace wiped his mouth and drank some Chianti.

‘I wish one could say the same thing of contemporary Italian art,’ he remarked, as he refilled his glass from the big-bellied flask in its swinging cradle.

Yes, the other admitted judicially, it was quite true that easel paintings didn’t amount to much in modern Italy. But he had seen the most remarkable specimens of socialized and civic art. Classico-functional post offices, giant football stadiums, heroic murals. And after all, that was going to be the art of the future.

‘God,’ said Eustace, ‘I hope I shan’t live to see it!’

Paul De Vries signed to the waiter to remove his almost untouched plate of lasagne, hungrily lighted a cigarette and continued:

‘You’re a specimen, if I may say so, of Individualistic Man. But Individualistic Man is rapidly giving place to Social Man.’

‘I knew it,’ said Eustace. ‘Everyone who wants to do good to the human race always ends in universal bullying.’

The young man protested. He wasn’t talking about regimentation, but integration. And in a properly integrated society a new kind of cultural field would arise, with new kinds of aesthetic values coming into existence within it.

‘Aesthetic values!’ Eustace repeated impatiently. ‘That’s the sort of phrase that fills me with the profoundest mistrust.’

‘What makes you say that?’

Eustace answered with another question.

‘What’s the colour of the wall-paper in your bedroom at the hotel?’ he asked.

‘The colour of the wall-paper?’ the young man echoed in a tone of astonishment. ‘I haven’t the faintest idea.’

‘No, I thought not,’ said Eustace. ‘And that’s why I mistrust aesthetic values so much.’

The waiter brought the creamed breasts of turkey and he lapsed into silence. Paul De Vries crushed out his cigarette and took two or three mouthfuls, chewing with extraordinary rapidity, like a rabbit. Then he wiped his lips, lighted another cigarette and fixed Eustace with his bright eyes and staring nostrils.

‘You’re right,’ he said, ‘you’re entirely right. My mind is so busy thinking about values that I don’t have time to experience them.’

The admission was made with such ingenuous humility that Eustace was touched.

‘Let’s go round the Uffizi one day,’ he said. ‘I’ll tell you what I think about the paintings and you shall tell me what I ought to know about their metaphysical and historical and social implications.’

The young man nodded delightedly.

‘A synthesis!’ he cried. ‘The organismic viewpoint.’

Organismic ... The blessed word released him out of cramping actuality into the wide open spaces of the uncontaminated idea. He began to talk about Professor Whitehead, and how there was no such thing as Simple Location, only location within a field. And the more one considered the idea of the organized and organizing field, the more significant it seemed, the more richly exciting. It was one of the great bridge-ideas connecting one universe of discourse with another. You had the electro-magnetic field in physics, the individuation field in embryology and general biology, the social field among insects and human beings....

‘And don’t forget the sexual field.’

Paul De Vries looked questioningly at the interrupter.

‘It’s something that even you must have noticed,’ Eustace continued. ‘When you come into the neighbourhood of certain young ladies. Like Faraday’s tubes of force. And you don’t need a galvanometer to detect it,’ he concluded with a chuckle.

‘Tubes of force,’ the young man repeated slowly. ‘Tubes of force.’

The words seemed to have made a deep impression on him. He frowned to himself.

‘And yet of course,’ he went on after a little pause, ‘sex has its values — though I know you dislike the word.’

‘But not the thing,’ said Eustace jovially.

‘It can be refined and sublimated; it can be given wider reference.’

He made a gesture with his cigarette to indicate the wideness.

Eustace shook his head.

‘Personally,’ he said, ‘I prefer it raw and narrow.’

There was a silence. Then Eustace opened his mouth to remark that little Mrs. Thwale had a pretty powerful field around her; but before the words were out he had shut it again. No point in making trouble for oneself or other people. Besides, the oblique attack was generally the more effective; and since the Queen Mother had come to stay for a month, he would have all the time in the world to satisfy his curiosity.

Pensively, Paul De Vries began to talk about celibacy. People had come to mistrust the idea of vows and orders; but after all, they provided a simple and effective mechanism for delivering the dedicated intellectual from emotional entanglements and the distracting responsibilities of family life. Though of course, he added, certain values had to be sacrificed....

‘Not if the vows are judiciously tempered with a little fornication.’

Eustace beamed at him over the top of his wine-glass. But the young man’s expression remained obstinately serious.

‘Perhaps,’ he said, ‘there might be a modified form of celibacy. Not excluding romantic love and the higher forms of sex, but only barring marriage.’

Eustace burst out laughing.

‘But after all,’ the other protested, ‘it’s not love that’s incompatible with the life of a dedicated intellectual; it’s the whole-time job of a wife and family.’

‘And you expect the ladies to share your views?’

‘Why not — if they were dedicated to the same kind of life?’

‘You mean, the intellectuals would only sleep with female mathematicians?’

‘Why only mathematicians? Poetesses, women scientists and musicians and painters.’

‘In a word, every girl who can pass an examination or strum the piano. Or even turn out a drawing,’ he added as an afterthought. ‘You modified celibates ought to have some fun!’

But what an ass! Eustace thought, as he went on eating. And how pathetically transparent! Caught between his ideals and his desires, and trying to rationalize his way out of that absurdly commonplace situation by talking nonsense about values and dedicated intellectuals and modified celibacy. It was really pathetic.

‘Well, now that we’ve dealt with the sexual field,’ he said aloud, ‘let’s get on to the others.’

Paul De Vries looked at him for a moment without speaking, then turned on one of his bright smiles and nodded his head.

‘Let’s get on to the others,’ he repeated.

Pushing aside his half-eaten turkey, he planted his elbows on the table and in a moment was off once more into the open.

Take the case, for example, of psychic fields, and even spiritual fields. For if one looked into the matter open-mindedly and without preconceived ideas, one simply had to accept such things as facts — didn’t one?

Did one? Eustace shrugged his shoulders.

But the evidence was overwhelmingly strong. If you read the Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research, you couldn’t fail to be convinced. Which was why most philosophers so scrupulously refrained from reading them. That was what came of having to do your work within the old-fashioned academic field. You couldn’t think honestly about certain things, even if you wanted to. And, of course, if the field was a strong one, you wouldn’t want to.

‘You should talk to my mother-in-law about ghosts,’ said Eustace.

The advice was unnecessary. Paul De Vries had already sat in at a number of the old lady's séances. Bridging the gap between the phenomena of spiritualism and the phenomena of psychology and physics was one of his jobs as pontifex minimus. An uncommonly difficult job, incidentally, since nobody had yet formulated a hypothesis in terms of which you could think coherently of the two sets of facts. For the present, the best one could do was just to skip from one world to the other — hoping, meanwhile, that some day one might get a hunch, an illuminating intuition of the greater synthesis. For a synthesis there undoubtedly must be, a thought-bridge that would permit the mind to march discursively and logically from telepathy to the four-dimensional continuum, from poltergeists and departed spirits to the physiology of the nervous system. And beyond the happenings of the séance room there were the events of the oratory and the meditation hall. There was the ultimate all-embracing field — the Brahma of Sankara, the One of Plotinus, the Ground of Eckhart and Boehme, the ...

'The Gaseous Vertebrate of Haeckel,' Eustace interjected.

And within that ultimate field, the young man hurried on, determined not to be interrupted, there were subordinate fields — such as that which the Christians called the Communion of Saints and the Buddhists ...

But Eustace would not leave him in peace.

'Why stop there?' he broke in sarcastically, as he selected a cigar and prepared to light it. 'Why not the Immaculate Conception and the Infallibility of the Pope?'

He sucked at the burning match, and the smoke gushed from his nostrils.

'You remind me,' he said, 'of the Young Man of Cape Cod, who applied Quantum Theory to God ...'

And nipping in the bud the other's effort to start again, he went on to recite a selection from what he called his New World Suite — the Young Girl of Spokane, the Young Man of Peoria, the Two Young Girls of Cheyenne. Paul De Vries's laughter, he noticed, was a bit forced and perfunctory; but he went on all the same — on principle; for one really couldn't allow the fellow to get away with his pretensions. Implicitly claiming to be religious just because he could talk a lot of high-class boloney about religion. A little honest dirt would clear the air of philosophic cant and bring the philosopher down to the good old human barnyard, where he still belonged. That ram-faced boy at Bruno's might be absurd, and Bruno himself an amiable but misguided imbecile; but at least they weren't pretentious; they practised what they preached and, what was almost more remarkable, refrained from preaching what they practised. Whereas young pontifex minimus here ...

Eustace took the cigar from between his lips, blew out a cloud of smoke and, lowering his voice a little, recited his limerick about the Bishop of Wichita Falls.

Chapter Nine

FROM BETT'S, WHEN lunch was finished, he strolled over to his bank. Catching sight of him, as he stood waiting for the cashier to give him his money, the manager came running out to tell him enthusiastically that, next month, they hoped to do even better on the exchanges. The bank had a new correspondent in Berne, a certain Dr. Otto Loewe, who had a truly wonderful gift for this branch of speculation — a real genius, one might say, like Michelangelo or Marconi....

Still carrying his Degas drawings and his Treatise of the Love of God, Eustace made his way to the Piazza and, hailing a taxi, gave the driver Laurina Acciaiuoli's address. The cab started; he leaned back in his corner and sighed with a weary resignation. Laurina was one of his crosses. It was bad enough that she should be sick and importunate and embittered. But that was only the beginning. This haggard, arthritic cripple had once been the woman he had loved with an intensity of passion such as he had never experienced before or since. Another woman would have resigned herself to forget the fact. Not so Laurina. Twisting the dagger in her wound, she would spend whole afternoons talking to him about

past beauty and present hideousness, past loves and present neglect, present loneliness and misery. And when she had worked herself up sufficiently, she would turn against her visitor, pointing accusingly with her swollen fingers and, in that low voice (once so enchantingly husky, now hoarse with sickness and over-smoking and sheer hatred), telling him that he had only come to see her out of a sense of duty — worse, out of mere weakness; that he had cared for her only when her body was young and straight, and that now she was old and crippled and unhappy he could hardly bring himself even to feel pity. Challenged to deny these all too painfully obvious truths, Eustace would find himself floundering in a quagmire of hypocritical platitudes; and what he said was generally so very unconvincing that Laurina would end by laughing outright — laughing with a ferocity of sarcasm much more wounding to herself, of course, than to him; for, after all, he was not the one who had the arthritis. But even so, it was painful enough. Apprehensively, he wondered what the present afternoon would bring. Another of those unutterably boring threats of suicide, perhaps. Or else ...

‘Bebino!’ a piercing voice shouted almost in his ear. ‘Bebino!’

He turned with a start. Through the narrow, crowded street the cab was making its way at a foot pace, and trotting along beside it, her hand on the frame of the open window, was the inventor (for reasons which she and she alone could understand) of that grotesquely infantile nickname.

‘Mimi!’ he exclaimed, and hoped to God there was nobody of his acquaintance within sight or earshot.

In that extraordinary purple outfit she looked not merely like the pretty little tart she was, but like the caricature of a pretty little tart in a comic paper. Which was what he liked about her, of course. The simple and unaffected vulgarity of her style was absolutely consummate.

Leaning forward, he called to the driver; and when the cab had stopped, opened the door for her. Mimi would look less conspicuous inside than out.

‘Bebino mio!’ She snuggled up against him on the seat, and he found himself enveloped by the reek of cheap perfume. ‘Why haven’t you been to see me, Bebino?’

As the cab drove on, he began to explain that he had been in Paris for a couple of months, and after that in England. But instead of listening, she continued to overwhelm him with reproaches and questions. Such a long, long time! But that was what men were like — forchi, real parchi. Didn’t he love her any more? Was he making her horns with someone else?

‘I tell you, I was in Paris for a couple of months,’ he repeated.

‘Sola, sola,’ she broke in on a note of heart-felt grief.

‘... And then a few weeks in London,’ he went on, raising his voice in an effort to get himself heard.

‘And I who did everything you ever asked!’ There were actually tears in her brown eyes. ‘Everything,’ she insisted plaintively.

‘But I tell you I was away!’ Eustace shouted impatiently.

Abruptly changing her expression, the girl gave him a look and smile of the frankest lasciviousness and, catching up his hand, pressed it against her plump young bosom.

‘Why don’t you come with me now, Bebino?’ she cajoled. ‘I’ll make you so happy.’ And leaning towards him she whispered in baby language, ‘Hair-brush — naughty little Bebino needs the hair-brush.’

Eustace looked at her for a moment in silence, then consulted his watch. No, there wouldn’t be time, before the train arrived, to fit in both. It would have to be one or the other. The past or the present; commiseration or enjoyment. He made his choice.

‘Gather ye peaches while ye may,’ he said in English, and tapping the glass he told the driver that he had changed his mind: he wanted to be taken somewhere else, and he gave the address of Mimi’s apartment near Santa Croce. The man nodded and gave him an understanding wink.

‘I have to telephone,’ said Eustace when they arrived.

And while Mimi was changing her clothes, he rang up his house and left orders that the car was to be waiting at the main entrance of Santa Croce at a quarter to six. Then it was Laurina’s turn. Could he speak to the Contessa? Waiting for the connection, he elaborated his little fiction.

‘Eustace?’ came the low husky voice that had once had power to command him anything.

‘Chère,’ he began volubly, ‘je suis horriblement ennuyé ...’ Polite insincerity seemed to come more easily in French than in English or Italian.

He broke it to her gradually, in a spate of foreign words — the bad, bad news that he had broken the little contraption which had to take the place of his vanished teeth. Not yet a full-scale *râtelier*, thank goodness — plutôt un de ces bridges — ces petits ponts qui sont les Ponts des Soupirs qu’on traverse pour aller du palais de la jeunesse aux prisons lugubres de la sénilité. He chuckled appreciatively at his own elegant joke. Well, the long and the short of it was that he’d been compelled to go en hâte to the dentist’s, and would have to stay there until his bridge was repaired. And that, hélas, would prevent him from coming to tea.

Laurina took it a great deal better than he had dared to hope. Dr. Rossi, she told him, had imported a new kind of lamp from Vienna, a marvellous new drug from Amsterdam. For days at a time now she was almost free from pain. But that wasn’t the whole story. Passing on from the subject of her health, she remarked with a casualness of tone that was meant to mask, but actually betrayed, her sense of triumph, that D’Annunzio had recently come to see her — several times, and had talked so poetically about the past. And dear old Van Arpels had sent her his new book of poems, and with it the most charming of letters. And, talking of letters, she’d been going through her collection — and he had no idea what a lot there were, and how interesting.

‘They must be,’ said Eustace. And he thought of the almost insane intensities of feeling she had evoked in the days of her fascination, the agonies of craving and jealousy. And in such a variety of men — from pure mathematicians to company promoters, from Hungarian poets to English baronets and Estonian tennis champions. And now ... He called up the image of Laurina as she was today, twenty years after: the gaunt cripple in her invalid-chair, and those brassy yellow curls above a face that might have been Dante’s death-mask....

‘I’d got out some of your letters to read to you,’ said the voice in the microphone at his ear.

‘They must sound pretty silly now.’

‘No, no, they’re charming,’ she insisted. ‘So witty; et en même temps si tendres — così vibranti!’

‘Vibranti?’ he repeated. ‘Don’t tell me I was ever vibrant!’

A sound made him turn his head. In the open doorway stood Mimi. She smiled at him and blew him a kiss; her claret-coloured kimono fell open.

At the other end of the wire paper sharply rustled.

‘Listen to this,’ said Laurina’s husky voice. “‘You have the power of arousing desires that are infinite and, being infinite, can never be assuaged by the possession of a merely finite body and personal mind.’”

‘Golly!’ said Eustace. ‘Did I write that? It sounds like Alfred de Musset.’

Mimi was standing beside him now. With his free hand he gave her a couple of friendly pats on the buttocks. Gather ye peaches ...

The husky voice went on reading. “‘So it looks, Laurina, as though the only cure for being in love with you were to become a Sufi or a John of the Cross. God alone is commensurate with the cravings you inspire ...’”

‘Il faudrait d’abord l’inventer’ Eustace interjected with a little chuckle. But at the time, he remembered, it had seemed quite sensible to say that sort of thing. Which just showed to what a condition this damned love could reduce a reasonable being! Well, thank goodness, now he was finished with that sort of thing! He administered another gentle smack and looked up at Mimi with a smile.

‘Spicciati, Bebino,’ she whispered.

‘And here’s another adorable thing you wrote,’ said Laurina’s voice in the same instant: “‘Loving you as I do ...’”

Mimi tweaked his ear impatiently —

“‘... As though one had been born again into another and intenser kind of life,’” the voice at the telephone read on.

‘Sorry to have to interrupt my own raptures,’ said Eustace, speaking into the receiver. ‘But I’ve got to ring off.... No, no, not a moment more, my dear. Here’s the dentist. Ecco il dentista,’ he repeated for Mimi’s benefit, accompanying the words with a playful little pinch. ‘Adesso comincia la tortura.’

He hung up, turned and, pulling the girl down on to his knee, began with thick stubby fingers to tickle her well-covered ribs.

‘No, no, Bebino ... no!’

‘Adesso comincia la tortura,’ he said again through the peals of her hysterical laughter.

Chapter Ten

SEATED AT THE counter of his cavernous little shop, Bruno Rontini was engaged in pricing a newly purchased batch of books. Fifteen lire, twelve, twenty-five, forty ... His pencil moved from fly-leaf to fly-leaf. The light that fell almost vertically downwards from the hanging lamp above his head brought out black shadows within the deeply sunken sockets of the eyes and under the cheek-bones and the prominent nose. It was a beaked skull that bent over the books; but when he looked up, the eyes were blue and bright, the whole face wore an expression almost of gaiety.

Carlo had gone home, and he was alone — all alone with that which made his solitudes so pregnant with an inexpressible happiness. The noises of the street were loud beyond the window; but inside the little shop there was a core, as it were, of quintessential silence, to which every noise was an irrelevance, and which persisted through any interruption. Seated at the heart of that silence, Bruno was thinking that the crossed L which he was tracing out before the numerals on every fly-leaf stood not only for Lire, but also for Love, also for Liberation.

The door-bell rang, and a customer entered the shop. Bruno raised his head and saw a young, almost childish face. But how oddly skimped! As though Nature, suddenly parsimonious, had refused to provide a sufficiency of material for full-sized and significant features. Only the uneven and projecting teeth were large — those and the concave spectacles, through which, with a shy, sharp furtiveness, there beamed an intelligence that was obviously being used as an instrument, not for the discovery of truth, but for self-defence and, above all, for self-reassurance in humiliation.

The stranger coughed nervously and said that he wanted a good book on comparative religion. Bruno produced what he had in stock — a standard Italian text-book, a popular work in French, a translation, in two volumes, from the German.

‘I recommend the Frenchman,’ he said in his soft voice. ‘Only two hundred and seventy pages. You’ll hardly waste more than a couple of hours on him.’

He received a contemptuous smile.

‘I’m looking for something a little more solid.’

There was a little silence while the stranger turned over the pages of the other two books.

‘You’re going into teaching, I take it?’ said Bruno.

The other glanced at him suspiciously; then, finding no trace of irony or impertinence in the book-seller’s expression, he nodded.

Yes, he was going into teaching. And meanwhile he’d take the translation from the German.

‘Peccato,’ said Bruno, as he picked up the two thick volumes. ‘And when you finally get to be a university professor,’ he added, ‘what then?’

The young man held up the Italian text-book.

‘I shall write,’ he answered.

Yes, he’d write, Bruno said to himself, rather sadly. And either in despair, or out of an ingenuous respect for professors as such, some woman would have married him. And, of course, it is better to marry than to burn; but this one, it was all too obvious, would go on burning even after he was married — furtively, but with the inextinguishable violence characteristic of such frail and nervous temperaments.

And under the crust of respectability and even eminence, the life of God-eclipsing phantasy, the secret addiction to self-inflicted pleasure, would persist almost into old age. But of course, he quickly reminded himself, nothing could ever be certainly prognosticated of any human being. There was always free will, there was always a sufficiency of grace if one wished to co-operate with it.

‘I shall write with authority,’ the young man went on almost aggressively.

‘And not as the scribes and Pharisees,’ Bruno murmured with a little smile. ‘But what then?’

‘“What then?”’ the other repeated. ‘What do you mean by “what then?” I shall go on writing.’

No, there was no chink yet in that protective carapace. Bruno turned away and began to tie up the books in brown paper. Shrinking from the vulgar transference of coin from hand to hand, the young man laid out the money along the edge of the counter. For him, no physical contacts with other human beings except the sexual. And even those, thought Bruno, even those would always prove disappointing, even a bit repulsive. He tied the final knot and handed over the parcel.

‘Many thanks,’ he said. ‘And if ever you should get tired of this kind of ...’ He hesitated; in their deep sockets the blue eyes twinkled with an almost mischievous light. ‘... This kind of learned frivolity,’ he went on, laying his finger on the parcel, ‘remember, I’ve got quite a considerable stock of really serious books on the subject.’ He pointed to a section of the shelves on the opposite wall. ‘Scupoli, the Bhagavata, the Tao Teh King, the Theologia Germanica, the Graces of Interior Prayer ...’

For a few seconds the young man listened — listened with the uneasy expression of one who finds himself closeted with a potentially dangerous lunatic; then, looking at his wrist-watch, he muttered something about its being very late, and hurried out of the shop.

Bruno Rontini sighed, and went back to the pricing of his books. L for Lire, L for Liberation. Out of ten thousand only one would ever break out of his carapace completely. Not a high proportion. But out of all those galaxies of eggs, how many herrings ever came to be full-sized fish? And herrings, it was to be remembered, suffered only from external interruptions to their hatching and growth. Whereas, in this process of spiritual maturation, every human being was always his own worst enemy. The attacks came from both sides, and from within even more violently and persistently and purposefully than from without. So that, after all, the record of one growing-up in ten thousand trials was really pretty creditable. Something to be admired rather than deplored. Something in regard to which one should not, as one was so often tempted, rail against God for his injustice, but rather give thanks for that divine generosity which granted to so many a reward so incommensurably vast.

L for Liberation, L for Love.... In spite of the impatient hooting, in spite of the clang and rumble of the traffic, the silence, for Bruno Rontini, was like a living crystal. Then the door-bell rang again, and looking up, he saw, under its tilted Homburg, the broad sagging face, with its pouchy eyes and its loosely smiling, unweaned lips, of Eustace Barnack. And through the medium of that living crystal he perceived the man as entombed, as confined away from the light, as immured in an impenetrable privation of beatitude. And the walls of that sepulchre were built of the same sloths and sensualities as he had known within himself, and still knew, still had to beg God to forgive him. Filled with an enormous compassion, Bruno rose and went to greet him.

‘Found at last!’ Eustace cried. He spoke in Italian, because it was easier, when one was thus consummately acting the part of a jovial Florentine bourgeois, to preserve oneself from the danger of having to talk too seriously — and with Bruno it was particularly important that one should never be serious. ‘I’ve been looking for you all day.’

‘Yes, I heard you’d been in this morning,’ Bruno answered in English.

‘And was received,’ said Eustace, still playing his Tuscan comedy, ‘by the most ardent young disciple of yours! He even managed to sell me some edifying literature — qualche trattatine sull’ amor del Gaseous Vertebrate,’ he concluded airily.

And now the volume had taken its place between one of Pittigrilli’s novels and a dog-eared Dream Book on Mimi’s bed-table.

‘Eustace, are you well?’ Bruno asked with an earnestness that was entirely out of key with the other’s jocularly.

Eustace was startled into his native language.

'Never felt better,' he answered. And then, as Bruno continued to look at him with the same intent, distressed expression, a note of irritation and suspicion came into his voice. 'What is it?' he questioned sharply.

Could the fellow see something that permitted him to guess about Mimi? Not that Mimi was anything one had to be ashamed of. No, the intolerable thing was the intrusion on one's privacy. And Bruno, he remembered, had always had this odd, exasperating gift of knowing things without being told about them. And of course, if it wasn't clairvoyance, it might easily be smears of lipstick.

'Why do you stare at me?'

Bruno smiled apologetically.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I just thought you looked ... well, I don't know. Like people look when they're going to have a touch of flu.'

It was the face of a man entombed, and now all of a sudden menaced in his tomb. Menaced by what? Relieved that it wasn't Mimi who had been detected, Eustace relaxed into a smile.

'Well, if I get the flu,' he said, 'I shall know who wished it on me. And now don't imagine,' he went on genially, 'that I've come here just to feast my eyes on that seraphic mug of yours. I want you to get permission for me to take my young nephew to see the maze in the Galigai gardens. He's arriving this evening.'

'Which nephew?' Bruno asked. 'One of Alice's sons?'

'Those louts?' said Eustace. 'God forbid! No, no; this is John's boy. Quite a remarkable little creature. Seventeen, and childish at that; but writes the most surprising verses — full of talent.'

'John must be a pretty difficult father,' said Bruno after a little pause.

'Difficult? He's nothing but a bullying fool. And of course the boy dislikes him and loathes everything he stands for.'

Eustace smiled. It gave him real pleasure to think of his brother's shortcomings.

'Yes, if only people would realize that moral principles are like measles ...'

The soft voice tailed away into silence and a sigh.

'Like measles?'

'They have to be caught. And only the people who've got them can pass on the contagion.'

'Fortunately,' said Eustace, 'they don't always succeed in passing it on.'

He was thinking of that little Thwale woman. Any amount of contagion from the Canon and his wife; but no sign of any moral or pietistic rash on the daughter's white, voluptuous skin.

'You're right,' Bruno agreed. 'One doesn't have to catch the infection of goodness if one doesn't want to. The will is always free.'

Always free. People had been able to say no even to Filippo Neri and François de Sales, even to the Christ and the Buddha. As he named them to himself, the little flame in his heart seemed to expand, as it were, and aspire, until it touched that other light beyond it and within; and for a moment it was still in the timeless intensity of a yearning that was also consummation. The sound of his cousin's voice brought his attention back again to what was happening in the shop.

'There's nothing I enjoy more,' Eustace was remarking with relish, 'than the spectacle of the Good trying to propagate their notions and producing results exactly contrary to what they intended. It's the highest form of comedy.'

He chuckled wheezily.

Listening to that laughter coming up from the depths and darkness of a sepulchre, Bruno was moved almost to despair.

'If only you could forgive the Good!' The quiet voice was raised almost to vehemence. 'Then you might allow yourself to be forgiven.'

'For what?' Eustace enquired.

'For being what you are. For being a human being. Yes, God can forgive you even that, if you really want it. Can forgive your separateness so completely that you can be made one with him.'

‘The solid vertebrate united with the Gaseous.’

Bruno looked at him for a moment in silence. In their setting of tired soft flesh the eyes were gaily twinkling; the babyish lips were curved into a smile of irony.

‘What about the comedy of the Clever?’ he said at last. ‘Achieving self-destruction in the name of self-interest, and delusion in the name of realism. I sometimes think it’s even higher than the comedy of the Good.’

He went behind the counter, and came back with a very old Gladstone bag.

‘If you’re going to meet that young nephew of yours,’ he said, ‘I’ll go with you to the station.’

He was taking the seven-thirty train to Arezzo, he explained. There was an old retired professor there, who wanted to sell his library. And Monday was the opening day of a very important auction at Perugia. Dealers would be attending from all over the country. He hoped to pick up some of the unconsidered trifles.

Bruno turned out the lights, and they went out into a twilight that was fast deepening into night. Eustace’s car was waiting in a side street. The two men got in, and were driven slowly towards the station.

‘Do you remember the last time we drove to the station together?’ Bruno suddenly asked after a period of silence.

‘The last time we drove together to the station,’ Eustace repeated doubtfully.

And then, all at once, it came back to him. He and Bruno in the old Panhard. And it was just after Amy’s funeral, and he was going back to the Riviera — back to Laurina. No, it hadn’t been too creditable, that episode of his life. Definitely on the squalid side. He made a little grimace, as though he had caught a whiff of rotten cabbage. Then, imperceptibly, he shrugged his shoulders. After all, what did it matter? It would all be the same a hundred years hence; it would all be the same.

‘Yes, I remember,’ he said. ‘You talked to me about the Gaseous Vertebrate.’

Bruno smiled. ‘Oh no, I wouldn’t have dared to break the taboo,’ he said. ‘You began it.’

‘Perhaps I did,’ Eustace admitted.

Death and that insane passion and his own discreditable behaviour had conspired to make him do a lot of funny things at that time. He felt, all at once, extremely depressed.

‘Poor Amy!’ he said aloud, speaking under a kind of obscure compulsion that was stronger than all his resolutions to refrain, in Bruno’s presence, from being serious. ‘Poor Amy!’

‘I don’t think she was to be pitied,’ said Bruno. ‘Amy had reconciled herself to what was happening to her. You don’t have to feel sorry for people who are prepared for death.’

‘Prepared? But what difference does that make?’ Eustace’s tone was almost truculent. ‘Dying is always dying,’ he concluded, happy to be able thus to escape from seriousness into controversy.

‘Physiologically, perhaps,’ Bruno agreed. ‘But psychologically, spiritually ...’

The car came to a halt before a policeman’s outstretched arm.

‘Now, now,’ Eustace broke in. ‘No nonsense about immortality! None of your wishful thinking!’

‘And yet,’ said Bruno softly, ‘annihilation would be pretty convenient, wouldn’t it? What about the wish to believe in that?’

From the sepulchre of his privation Eustace made confident answer.

‘One doesn’t wish to believe in annihilation,’ he said. ‘One just accepts the facts.’

‘You mean, one accepts the inferences drawn from one particular set of facts, and ignores the other facts from which different inferences might be drawn. Ignores them because one really wants life to be a tale told by an idiot. Just one damned thing after another, until at last there’s a final damned thing, after which there isn’t anything.’

There was a blast of the policeman’s whistle; and as the car moved on again, the light from a shop window passed slowly across Eustace’s face, showing up every pouch and line and blotch in the loose skin. Then the darkness closed down once more, like the lid of a sarcophagus. Closed down irrevocably, it seemed to Bruno, closed down for ever. Impulsively, he laid his hand on the other’s arm.

‘Eustace,’ he said, ‘I implore you ...’

Eustace started. Something strange was happening. It was as though the slats of a Venetian blind had suddenly been turned so as to admit the sunlight and the expanse of the summer sky. Unobstructed, an enormous and blissful brightness streamed into him. But with the brightness came the memory of what Bruno had said in the shop: 'To be forgiven ... forgiven for being what you are.' With a mixture of anger and fear, he jerked his arm away.

'What are you doing?' he asked sharply. 'Trying to hypnotize me?'

Bruno did not answer. He had made his final desperate effort to raise the lid; but from within the sarcophagus it had been pulled down again. And of course, he reflected, resurrection is optional. We are under no compulsion except to persist — to persist as we are, growing always a little worse and a little worse; indefinitely, until we wish to rise again as something other than ourselves; inexorably, unless we permit ourselves to be raised.

Chapter Eleven

THE TRAIN WAS unexpectedly punctual and, when they reached the station, the passengers were already elbowing their way through the gates.

'If you see a small cherub in grey flannel trousers,' said Eustace, as he stood on tiptoes to peer over the heads of the crowd, 'that's our man.'

Bruno pointed a bony finger.

'Does that answer your description?'

'Which one?'

'That little non Anglus sed angelus behind the pillar there,'

Eustace caught sight of a familiar head of pale and curly hair and, waving his hand, pushed his way closer to the gate.

'And this is your long-lost second-cousin once removed,' he said, as he returned a minute later with the boy. 'Bruno Rontini — who sells second-hand books and would like everybody to believe in the Gaseous Vertebrate.' And as they shook hands, 'Let me warn you,' he continued in a mock-solemn tone, 'he'll probably try to convert you.'

Sebastian looked again at Bruno and, under the influence of his uncle's introduction, saw only foolishness in the bright eyes, only bigotry in that thin bony face, with its hollows under the cheekbones, its beaky protrusion of a nose. Then he turned to Eustace and smiled.

'So this is Sebastian,' said Bruno slowly. Ominously significant, it was the name of fate's predestined target.

'Somehow, I can't help thinking of all those arrows,' he went on. 'The arrows of the lusts which this beauty would evoke and would permit its owner to satisfy; the arrows of vanity and self-satisfaction and ...'

'But arrows go both ways,' said Eustace. 'This martyr will give as good as he gets — won't he, Sebastian?' He smiled knowingly, as from man to man.

Flattered by this display of confidence in his prowess, Sebastian laughed and nodded.

With an affectionate, almost a possessive gesture, Eustace laid a hand on the boy's shoulder.

'Andiamo!' he cried.

There was a note of something like triumph in his tone. Not only had he got even with Bruno for what had happened in the car; he had also cut him off from any chance of exerting an influence on Sebastian.

'Andiamo!' Bruno repeated. 'I'll take you to the car and get my bag.' Picking up Sebastian's suitcase, he started towards the exit. The others followed.

Hooting in a melodious baritone, the Isotta slowly nosed its way along the crowded street. Sebastian pulled the fur rug a little higher over his knees and thought how wonderful it was to be rich. And to think that, if it weren't for his father's idiotic ideas ...

'Funny old Bruno!' his uncle remarked in a tone of amused condescension. 'For some reason he always reminds me of those preposterous Anglo-Saxon saints. St. Willibald and St. Wunnibald, St. Winna and St. Frideswide ...'

He made the names sound so ludicrous that Sebastian burst out laughing.

'But a thoroughly kind, gentle creature,' Eustace went on. 'And considering he's one of the Good, not too much of a bore.'

Interrupting himself, he touched Sebastian's arm and pointed through the left-hand window.

'The Medici tombs are up there,' he said. 'Talk about the Sublime! I can't look at them now. Donatello's my limit these days. But of course it's quite true: the damned things are the greatest sculptures in the world. And that's Rossi's, the tailor,' he went on without transition, pointing again. 'Order decent English cloth, and the man will make you as good a suit as you can get in Savile Row, and at half the price. We'll take time off from our sight-seeing to get you measured for those evening clothes.'

Scarcely daring to believe his ears, Sebastian looked at him questioningly.

'You mean ...? Oh, thank you, Uncle Eustace,' he cried, as the other smiled and nodded.

Eustace looked at the boy and saw, by the transient light of a street lamp, that his face had reddened and his eyes were bright. Touched, he patted him on the knee.

'No need for gratitude,' he said. 'If I were in Who's Who, which I'm not, you'd see that my chief recreation was "Annoying my brother."''

They laughed together, conspirators in mischief.

'And now,' cried Eustace, 'bend down and take a squint up through this window at the second-largest egg ever laid.'

Sebastian did as he was told, and saw great cliffs of marble and, above the cliffs, an enormous dome floating up into the sky and darkening, as it rose, from the faint lamplight that still lingered about its base into a mystery more impenetrable than the night itself. It was the transfiguration, not of a little squalor this time, but of a vast harmonious magnificence.

'Light first,' said Eustace, pointing a bloated finger that travelled upwards as he spoke, 'then darkness.'

Sebastian looked at him in astonishment. He too ...?

'It's like a looking-glass equation,' the other went on. 'You start with the values of x and y, and you end with an unknown quantity. The most romantic kind of lighting.'

'I didn't know anyone else had noticed it,' said Sebastian.

'Optimist!' Eustace smiled indulgently. What fun to be young, to be convinced, each time one lost a virginity, that this sort of thing had never happened before! 'The Victorian etchers and engravers hardly noticed anything else. All their romantic Matterhorns and ruined castles are darker on top than at the bottom. Which doesn't make the looking-glass equation less amusing.'

There was a little silence. The car turned out of the cathedral square into a street even narrower and more crowded than the one by which they had come from the station.

'I wrote a poem about it,' Sebastian confided at last.

'Not one of those you sent me for Christmas?'

The boy shook his head.

'I didn't think you'd like it. It's a bit ... well, I don't know ... a bit religious; that is, if it was about religion, which it isn't. But seeing you've noticed it too ... I mean, the way things are lighted from the bottom ...'

'Can you recite it?'

Torn between shyness and a desire to show off, Sebastian hummed and hawed, then finally said yes. Little squalor! transfigured into Ely,

Into Bourges, into the beauty of holiness ...

Leaning back in his corner, Eustace listened to the still almost childish voice and, as the lights came and went, scanned the averted face as it gazed with angelic gravity, wide-eyed, into the darkness. Yes, there was talent there all right. But what touched him so profoundly, what moved him almost to tears, was the whole-heartedness, the guileless good faith, the essential purity. Purity, he insisted — even though one couldn't really say what the word meant, or even justify its use. For obviously the boy was obsessed with sex — certainly masturbated — probably had affairs, homosexual or otherwise. And yet there was a purity there, a real purity.

The recitation came to an end, there was a long silence — so long, indeed, that Sebastian began to wonder uneasily if his little squalor were really as good as he believed. Uncle Eustace had taste; and if he thought it was no good, then ... But the other spoke at last.

'That was very beautiful,' he said quietly. The words referred less to the poem than to what he himself had felt while listening to it — this unexpected uprush of high emotion and protective tenderness. 'Very beautiful.' He laid his hand affectionately on Sebastian's knee. Then, after a pause, he added, smiling, 'I used to write verses when I was a few years older than you are now.'

'You did?'

'Dowson and water,' said Eustace, shaking his head. 'With occasional flashes of Wilde and cat-piss.' He laughed. Enough of sentimentality. 'I don't rise above limericks nowadays,' he went on. 'But as Wordsworth so justly remarked,

Scorn not the Limerick, Critic, you have frowned,
Mindless of its just honours; with this key
Shakespeare unlocked his pants; th' obscenity
Of this small lute gave ease to Petrarch's wound ...
And so on — until, of course, in Milton's hand
The Thing became a strumpet; whence he blew
Soul-animating strains — alas, too few!

After which I really must tell you about the "Young Girl of Spokane."'

He did. The car, meanwhile, had emerged into a larger darkness. Lights gleamed on water; a bridge was crossed, and with gathering speed they rolled for a minute or two along a wide embankment. Then their road swung to the right, grew tortuous, began to climb. Through his window, Sebastian looked on fascinated, as the head-lamps created out of nothingness a confluent series of narrow universes. A gaunt grey goat standing up on its hind legs to munch the wistaria buds that hung across an expanse of peeling stucco; a priest in black skirts pushing a lady's bicycle up the steep hill; a great ilex tree, writhing like a wooden octopus; and at the foot of a flight of steps two startled lovers, breaking apart from their embrace and turning with a flash of eyes and laughing teeth towards the light which had evoked and now, passing, abolished them.

A moment later, the car drew up before tall iron gates. Musically, but imperiously, it hooted for admittance, and a little old man came running out of the shadows to undo the bolts.

The drive wound its way under tall cypresses; a bed of blue hyacinths appeared and vanished, then a little fountain in a shell-shaped niche. As the Isotta made its final turn, the head-lights called into existence half a dozen weathered nymphs, naked on pedestals, then came to rest, as though this were the final, the all-explaining revelation, on an orange tree growing in a very large earthenware pot.

'Here we are,' said Eustace; and at the same moment a butler in a white jacket opened the door and deferentially inclined his head.

They entered a high square vestibule, pillared and barrel-vaulted like a church. The butler took their things, and Eustace led the way up the stone staircase.

'Here's your room,' he said, throwing open a door. 'Don't be alarmed by that,' he added, pointing at the enormous canopied bed. 'It's only the carving that's antique. The mattress is contemporary. And your bathroom is in there.' He waved his hand towards another door. 'Do you think you can get yourself washed and brushed in five minutes?'

Sebastian was sure he could; and five minutes later he was downstairs again in the hall. A half-opened door invited; he entered and found himself in the drawing-room. A faint spicy perfume of potpourri haunted the air, and the lamps that hung from the coffered ceiling were reflected, in innumerable curving high-lights, from surfaces of porcelain and silver, turned wood and sculptured bronze and ivory. Mountains of glazed chintz, enormous armchairs and sofas alternated with the elaborately carved and gaily painted discomfort of eighteenth-century Venetian furniture. Underfoot, a yellow Chinese carpet lay like an expanse of soft and ancient sunshine. On the walls, the picture-frames were doorways leading into other worlds. The first he looked into was a strange, bright universe, intensely alive and yet static, definitive and serene — a world in which everything was made of innumerable dots of pure colour, and the men wore stove-pipe hats and the women's bustles were monumental like Egyptian granite. And next to it was the opening into another, a Venetian world, where a party of ladies in a gondola trailed their pink satins against the complementary jade of the Grand Canal. And here, over the mantelpiece, in a maniac's universe of candlelight and brown bituminous shadows, a company of elongated monks sat feasting under the vaults of a cathedral ...

His uncle's voice brought him back to reality.

'Ah, you've discovered my little Magnasco.'

Eustace came and took his arm.

'Amusing, isn't it?'

But before the boy could answer, he began to speak again.

'And now you must come and look at what I did yesterday,' he went on, drawing him away. 'There!'

He pointed. In an arched recess stood a black papier-maché table, painted with scrolls of gilding and inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Upon it stood a bouquet of wax flowers under a glass bell and a tall cylindrical case of stuffed humming-birds. On the wall, between and a little above these two objects, hung a small fourteenth-century painting of young men with bobbed hair and cod-pieces, shooting arrows at a St. Sebastian attached to a flowering apple tree.

'Your namesake,' Eustace said. 'But the real point is that at last one's discovered a way of using minor primitives. Obviously, it's ridiculous to treat this sort of rubbish as though it were serious art. But on the other hand, it's charming rubbish; one doesn't want to waste it. Well, here's the way out of the dilemma. Mix with Mid-Victorian! It makes the most delicious salad. And now, my dear, let's go and eat. The dining-room's over here, through the library.'

They moved away. From behind the door at the other end of the long tunnel of books came the sound of a harsh cracked voice and the clinking of silver and porcelain.

'Well, here we are at last!' Eustace cried gaily as he opened.

Dressed in a steel-blue evening gown, with seven rows of pearls about her mummied neck, the Queen Mother turned sightlessly in their direction.

'You know my habits, Eustace,' she said in her ghost of a sergeant-major's voice. 'Never wait dinner for anyone after seven forty-five. Not for anyone,' she repeated emphatically. 'We've almost finished.'

'Some more fruit?' said Mrs. Thwale softly, putting into the old woman's hand a fork, on which was impaled a quarter of a pear. Mrs. Gamble took a bite.

'Where's the boy?' she asked with her mouth full.

'Here.'

Sebastian was pushed forward, and gingerly shook the jewelled claw which was held out for him to take.

'I knew your mother,' Mrs. Gamble rasped. 'Pretty, very pretty. But badly brought up. I hope you've been brought up better.' She finished off the rest of the pear and put down the fork.

Sebastian blushed crimson, and made a deprecating, inarticulate noise to the effect that he hoped so.

'Speak up,' said Mrs. Gamble sharply. 'If there's one thing I can't tolerate, it's mumbling. All young people mumble nowadays. Veronica?'

'Yes, Mrs. Gamble?'

‘Oh, by the way, boy, this is Mrs. Thwale.’

Sebastian advanced into an aura of perfume and, raising abashed eyes from the folds of a dove-grey dress, almost cried out in amazement at what he saw. That oval face in its setting of smooth dark hair — it was Mary Esdaile’s.

‘How do you do, Sebastian?’

Oddly enough, he had never, with his inward ear, clearly heard the sound of Mary’s voice. But it was obvious, now, that these were its very tones — rather low, but clear and exquisitely distinct.

‘How do you do?’

They shook hands.

It was only in the eyes that he found a difference between his fancy and its incarnation. The Mary Esdaile of his day-dreams had always dropped her eyes when he looked at her. And how unwaveringly he was able to look in his dreams, how firmly and commandingly! Like his father. But this was not dream, but reality. And in reality he was still as shy as ever, and those dark eyes were now fixed upon him with a steady and slightly ironic scrutiny, which he found intensely embarrassing. His glance faltered, and at last flinched away.

‘You know how to speak the king’s English, Veronica,’ Mrs. Gamble creaked on. ‘Give him a few lessons while he’s here.’

‘Nothing would give me greater pleasure,’ said Veronica Thwale, as though she were reading from a book of Victorian etiquette. She raised her eyes once again to Sebastian’s face, the corners of her beautifully sculptured mouth quivered into a tiny smile. Then, turning away, she busied herself with peeling the rest of Mrs. Gamble’s pear.

‘Let the poor boy come and eat,’ called Eustace, who had sat down and was already half-way through his soup. Thankfully, Sebastian moved away to the place assigned to him.

‘I ought to have warned you about our Queen Mother,’ Eustace went on jocularly. ‘Her bite is worse even than her bark.’

‘Eustace! I never heard such impertinence!’

‘That’s because you’ve never listened to yourself,’ he answered.

The old lady cackled appreciatively, and sank her false teeth into another piece of pear. The juice ran down her chin and dropped into the bunch of cattleyas pinned to her corsage.

‘As for Mrs. Veronica Thwale,’ Eustace went on, ‘I know the young lady too little to be able to offer you advice about her. You’ll have to find out for yourself when she gives you your mumbling lessons. Do you like giving lessons, Mrs. Thwale?’

‘It depends on the intelligence of the pupil,’ she answered gravely.

‘And do you think that this one looks intelligent?’

Once more Sebastian found himself compelled to flinch away from the steady scrutiny of those dark eyes. But she was beautiful in that grey dress, and the neck was smooth like a white pillar; and the breasts were rather small.

‘Very,’ said Mrs. Thwale at last. ‘But of course,’ she added, ‘where mumbling is concerned, you can never be quite certain. Mumbling is rather special, don’t you think?’

And before Eustace could answer, she uttered her odd little snorting stertorous laugh. For a second only; then the face resumed its grave marble serenity. Delicately, she began to peel a tangerine.

Mrs. Gamble turned in the direction of her son-in-law.

‘Mr. De Vries came to see me this afternoon. So I know where you had lunch.’

‘“And from whom no secrets are hid,”’ said Eustace.

Mrs. Thwale raised her eyelids to give him a quick glance of complicity, then looked down again at her plate.

‘A most instructive young man,’ he continued.

‘I like him,’ the Queen Mother pronounced emphatically.

‘And he simply adores you,’ said Eustace with hardly veiled irony. ‘And meanwhile, how are you getting on with your Einstein, Mrs. Thwale?’

'I do my best,' she answered without lifting her eyes.

'I bet you do,' said Eustace in a tone of genial mischief.

Mrs. Thwale looked up; but this time there was no complicity in her glance, no hint of answering amusement — only stony coldness. Tactfully, Eustace changed the subject.

'I had a long talk with Laurina Acciaiuoli this afternoon,' he said, turning back to Mrs. Gamble.

'What, hasn't she passed on yet?' The Queen Mother seemed disappointed, almost aggrieved. 'I thought the woman was so desperately ill,' she added.

'Evidently not quite ill enough,' said Eustace.

'Sometimes they drag on for years,' rasped Mrs. Gamble. 'Your mother passed on some time ago, didn't she, Sebastian?'

'In 1921.'

'What?' she cried. 'What? You're mumbling again.'

'In 1921,' he repeated more loudly.

'Don't yell like that,' barked back the ghostly sergeant-major. 'I'm not deaf. Have you had any communications with her since then?'

'Communications?' he repeated in bewilderment.

'Through a medium,' Eustace explained.

'Oh, I see. No; no, I haven't.'

'Not because of religious objections, I hope?'

Eustace laughed aloud.

'What a preposterous question!'

'Not preposterous at all,' the Queen Mother snapped back. 'Seeing that my own granddaughter has religious objections. Mainly due to your father, Veronica,' she added.

Mrs. Thwale apologized for the Canon.

'No fault of yours,' said the Queen Mother generously. 'But Daisy's an idiot to listen to him. There she sits with a husband and a child on the other side, and does nothing whatever about it. It makes me sick.'

She pushed back her chair and stood up.

'We're going upstairs now,' she said. 'Good-night, Eustace.'

Since she couldn't see him, Eustace didn't bother to stand up.

'Good-night, Queen Mother,' he called back to her.

'And you, boy, you're to have a mumbling lesson tomorrow, do you understand? Now, Veronica.'

Chapter Twelve

MRS. THWALE TOOK THE old woman's arm and steered her through the door which Sebastian had opened for them. Her perfume, as she passed him, was sweet in his nostrils — sweet, but at the same time obscurely animal, as though a whiff of sweat had been perversely mingled with the gardenias and the sandalwood. He closed the door and returned to his place.

'A good joke, our Queen Mother,' said Eustace. 'But one's always rather grateful when it's over. Most people never ought to be there for more than five minutes at a time. But that little Thwale, on the contrary ... Quite a museum piece.'

He broke off to protest against the inadequacy of the portion of filleted sole to which Sebastian had helped himself. A recipe from the *Trois Faisans* at Poitiers. He had had to bribe the chef to get it. Obediently Sebastian took some more. The butler moved on to the head of the table.

'Quite a museum piece,' he repeated. 'If I were twenty years younger, or you were five years older ... Except, of course, that you don't have to be any older, do you?'

He beamed with a kind of arch significance. Sebastian did his best to return the right sort of smile.

‘Verb. sap.,’ Eustace continued. ‘And never put off till tomorrow the pleasure you can enjoy today.’ Sebastian said nothing. His pleasures, he was thinking bitterly, were only those of phantasy. When reality presented itself, he was merely terrified. Couldn’t he at least have looked her in the eyes?

Wiping the sauce from his large loose lips, Eustace drank some of the champagne which had been poured into his glass.

‘Roederer 1916,’ he said. ‘I’m really very pleased with it.’

Acting the part of a relishing connoisseur, Sebastian took an appreciative sip or two, then gulped down half a glassful. It had the taste, he thought, of an apple peeled with a steel knife.

‘It’s awfully good,’ he said aloud. Then, remembering Susan’s latest piece, ‘It’s ... it’s like Scarlatti’s harpsichord music,’ he forced himself to bring out, and blushed because it sounded so unnatural.

But Eustace was delighted by the comparison.

‘And I’m so glad,’ he added, ‘that you don’t take after your father. That indifference to all the refinements of life — it’s really shocking. Just Calvinism, that’s all. Calvinism without the excuse of Calvin’s theology.’

He swallowed the last mouthful of his second helping of fish and, leaning back in his chair, looked round with pleasure at the beautifully appointed table, at the Empire furniture, at the Domenichino landscape over the mantelpiece, the life-sized goats by Rosa di Tivoli above the sideboard, at the two men-servants working with the noiseless precision of conjurers.

‘No Calvin for me,’ he said. ‘Give me Catholicism every time. Father Cheeryble with his thurible; Father Chatterjee with his liturgy. What fun they have with all their charades and conundrums! If it weren’t for the Christianity they insist on mixing in with it, I’d be converted tomorrow.’

He leaned forward and, with a surprising deftness and delicacy of touch, rearranged the fruits in the silver bowl between the candlesticks.

“‘The beauty of holiness,’” he said, “‘the beauty of holiness.’ I’m delighted you used that phrase in your poem. And, remember, it doesn’t apply only to churches. There, that’s better.’ He made a final adjustment on the hot-house grapes, and leaned back again in his chair. ‘I used to have a darling old butler once — never hope to find his equal.’ He sighed and shook his head. ‘That man could make a dinner-party go off with the solemn perfection of High Mass at the Madeleine.’

Creamed chicken succeeded the fish. Eustace made a brief digression on the subject of truffles, then returned to the beauty of holiness, and from that proceeded to life as a fine art.

‘But an unrecognized fine art,’ he complained. ‘Its masters aren’t admired; they’re regarded as idlers and wasters. The moral codes have always been framed by people like your father — or, at the very best, people like Bruno. People like me have hardly been able to get a word in edgeways. And when we do get our word in — as we did once or twice during the eighteenth century — nobody listens to us seriously. And yet we demonstrably do much less mischief than the other fellows. We don’t start any wars, or Albigensian crusades, or communist revolutions. “Live and let live” — that’s our motto. Whereas their idea of goodness is “die and make to die” — get yourself killed for your idiotic cause, and kill everybody who doesn’t happen to agree with you. Hell isn’t merely paved with good intentions; it’s walled and roofed with them. Yes, and furnished too.’

To Sebastian, after his second glass of champagne, this remark seemed, for some reason, extremely funny, and he broke into a giggle that ended embarrassingly in a belch. This stuff was as bad as ginger beer.

‘You’re familiar, of course, with the Old Man of Moldavia?’

‘You mean the one who wouldn’t believe in Our Saviour?’

Eustace nodded.

“‘So he founded instead,’” he quoted, “‘with himself as the head,” — though that’s out of character, mark you; he wouldn’t want to be the head; he’d just want to enjoy himself quietly and have good manners— “the cult of Decorous Behaviour.” Or, in other words, Confucianism. But, unfortunately, China was also full of Buddhists and Taoists and miscellaneous war-lords. People with bullying temperaments, and people with inhibited, scrupulous temperaments. Horrible people like Napoleon, and other

horrible people like Pascal. There was an Old Man of Corsica who would not believe in anything but power. And an Old Man of Port Royal who tortured himself by believing in the God of Abraham and Isaac, not of the philosophers. Between them, they don't give the poor Old Man of Moldavia a dog's chance. Not in China or anywhere else.'

He paused to help himself to the chocolate soufflé.

'If I had the knowledge,' he went on, 'or the energy, I'd write an outline of world history. Not in terms of geography, or climate, or economics, or politics. None of these is fundamental. In terms of temperament. In terms of the eternal three-cornered struggle between the Old Man of Moldavia, the Old Man of Corsica, and the Old Man of Port Royal.'

Eustace broke off to ask for some more cream; then continued. Christ, of course, had been an Old Man of Port Royal. So were Buddha and most of the other Hindus. So was Lao-Tsu. But Mahomet had had a lot of the Old Man of Corsica in him. And the same, of course, was true of any number of the Christian saints and doctors. So you got violence and rapine, practised by proselytizing bullies and justified in terms of a theology devised by introverts. And meanwhile the poor Old Men of Moldavia got kicked and abused by everybody. Except perhaps among the Pueblo Indians, there had never been a predominantly Moldavian society — a society where it was bad form to nourish ambitions, heretical to have a personal religion, criminal to be a leader of men, and virtuous to have a good time in peace and quietness. Outside of Zuñi and Taos, the Old Men of Moldavia had had to be content with registering a protest, with applying the brakes, with sitting down on their broad bottoms and refusing to move unless dragged. Confucius had had the best success in moderating the furies of the Corsicans and Port Royalists; whereas, in the West, Epicurus had become a by-word; Boccaccio and Rabelais and Fielding were disregarded as mere men of letters; and nobody bothered to read Bentham any more, or even John Stuart Mill. And recently the Old Men of Port Royal had begun to be treated as badly as those of Moldavia. Nobody read Bentham any more; but equally nobody now read À-Kempis. Traditional Christianity was in process of becoming almost as discreditable as Epicureanism. The philosophy of action for action, power for the sake of power, had become an established orthodoxy. 'Thou hast conquered, O go-getting Babbitt.'

'And now,' he concluded, 'let's go and have our coffee where we can be a bit more comfortable.'

Moving delicately and deliberately within his fragile world of incipient tipsiness, Sebastian followed his uncle into the drawing-room.

'No, thank you,' he said politely to the offer of a cigar even larger and darker than Dr. Pfeiffer's.

'Then take a cigarette,' said Eustace, as he helped himself to a Romeo and Juliet. Damply, lovingly the unweaned lips closed on the object of their desire. He sucked at the flame of the little silver lamp, and a moment later the teat was yielding its aromatic milk, his mouth was full of smoke. Eustace breathed a sigh of contentment. The taste of the tobacco was as new, as exquisitely a revelation as it had seemed when he was a young man; it was as though his palate were virgin and this were its first astounding introduction to pleasure. 'You should hurry up,' he said, 'and acquire the cigar habit. It's one of the major happinesses. And so much more lasting than love, so much less costly in emotional wear and tear. Though of course,' he added, remembering Mimi, 'even love can be considerably simplified. Very considerably.' He took Sebastian's arm affectionately. 'You haven't seen the prize exhibit yet.' And leading him across the room, he turned a switch. Under the light a lovely fragment of mythology sprang into existence. In a green glade, with the Mediterranean in the distance, and a couple of Capris off-shore, Adonis lay asleep among his sleeping dogs. Bending over him a blonde and amorous Venus was in the act of drawing aside the veil of gold-embroidered gauze which was his only covering, while a Cupid in the foreground playfully menaced her left pap with an arrow from the young hunter's quiver.

'The incandescent copulations of gods,' Sebastian said to himself as he gazed enchanted at the picture. Other phrases began to come to him. 'Bright with divine lust.' 'The pure lascivious innocence of heaven.' But what made this particular incandescence so delightful was the fact that it was rendered with a touch of irony, a hint (subtly conveyed by the two white rabbits in the left-foreground, the bullfinch among the oak-leaves overhead, the three pelicans and the centaur on the distant beach) that it was all a tiny bit absurd.

‘Real love-making,’ Eustace remarked, ‘is seldom quite so pretty as Piero di Cosimo’s idea of it.’ He turned away and began to unwrap the drawings he had bought that morning at Weyl’s. ‘It’s a good deal more like Degas.’ He handed Sebastian the sketch of the woman drying the back of her neck.

‘When you’re seduced,’ he said, ‘it’ll probably be by someone like this rather than like that.’ He jerked his head in the direction of Piero’s Venus.

From within his private universe of champagne Sebastian answered with a giggle.

‘Or perhaps you have been seduced already?’ Eustace’s tone was jocular. ‘But of course it’s none of my business,’ he added, as Sebastian giggled again and blushed. ‘Three words of advice, however. Remember that your talent is more important than your amusement. Also that a woman’s amusement may sometimes be incompatible not only with your talent, but even with your fun. Also that, if this should happen, flight is your only strategy.’

He poured out some brandy into the two enormous glasses that had been brought in, sugared one of the cups of coffee, and, settling heavily into the sofa, beckoned to the boy to sit down beside him.

Professionally, Sebastian twirled the liquor in his glass and sipped. It tasted like the smell of methylated spirits. He dipped a piece of sugar in his coffee and nibbled at it, as he would have done after a dose of ammoniated quinine. Then he looked again at the drawing.

‘What’s its equivalent in poetry?’ he said reflectively. ‘Villon?’ He shook his head. ‘No. This isn’t tragic. Donne’s a little more like it — except that he’s a satirist, and this man isn’t.’

‘And Swift,’ put in Eustace, ‘doesn’t know how to convey the beauty of his victims. The fascinating contours of the dowager’s hind-quarters, the delicious greens and magentas in a schoolgirl’s complexion — he doesn’t even see these things, much less make us see them.’

They laughed together. Then Eustace gulped down what remained of his brandy and helped himself to some more.

‘What about Chaucer?’ said Sebastian, looking up from another examination of the drawing.

‘You’re right!’ Eustace cried delightedly. ‘You’re absolutely right. He and Degas — they knew the same secret: the beauty of ugliness, the comedy of holiness. Now, suppose you were given the choice,’ he went on. ‘The Divine Comedy or The Canterbury Tales — which would you rather have written?’ And without leaving Sebastian time to answer, ‘I’d choose The Canterbury Tales,’ he said. ‘Oh, without hesitation! And as a man — how infinitely one would prefer to be Chaucer! Living through the forty disastrous years after the Black Death with only one reference to the troubles in the whole of his writings — and that a comic reference! Being an administrator and a diplomat, and not regarding the fact as having sufficient importance to require even a single mention! Whereas Dante has to rush into party politics; and, when he backs the wrong horse, he spends the rest of his life in rage and self-pity. Revenging himself on his political opponents by putting them into hell, and rewarding his friends by promoting them to purgatory and paradise. What could be sillier or more squalid? And of course, if he didn’t happen to be the second greatest virtuoso of language that ever lived, there’d be nobody to say a good word for him.’

Sebastian laughed and nodded his agreement. The alcohol and the fact that his uncle was taking him seriously, was listening to his opinions with respect, made him feel very happy. He drank some more brandy, and as he munched on the sugar with which he took the taste of it away, he looked again at the drawing of the woman with the towel. Elation quickened his faculties, and almost in a flash he had a quatrain. Pulling out his pencil and his scribbling pad, he started to write.

‘What are you up to?’

Sebastian made no answer in words, but tore off the page and handed it to his uncle. Eustace put up his monocle and read aloud:

To make a picture, others need
All Ovid and the Nicene Creed;
Degas succeeds with one tin tub,
Two buttocks and a pendulous bub.
He clapped Sebastian on the knee.

‘Bravo,’ he cried, ‘bravo!’

He repeated the last line, and laughed until he coughed.

‘We’ll make an exchange,’ he said, when the fit was over and he had drunk another cup of coffee and some more brandy. ‘I’ll keep the poem, and you shall have the drawing.’

‘Me?’

Eustace nodded. It was really a pleasure to do things for somebody who responded with such wholehearted and unfeigned delight.

‘You shall have it when you go up to Oxford. A drawing by Degas over the mantelpiece — it’ll give you almost as much prestige as rowing in your college eight. Besides,’ he added, ‘I know you’ll love the thing for its own sake.’

Which was a great deal more, it suddenly struck him, than could be said of his stepdaughter. He himself had only a life-interest; after his death, everything would go to Daisy Ockham. Not merely the stocks and shares, but this house and all that was in it, the furniture, the carpets, the china — yes, even the pictures. His absurd little St. Sebastian, his two delicious Guardis, his Magnasco, his Seurat, his Venus and Adonis — which Daisy would certainly consider too indecent to hang up in her drawing-room, in case her Girl Guides, or whatever they were, should see it and get ideas into their heads. And perhaps she’d bring the creatures out here, to the villa. Swarms of female puberties, pasty-faced and pimpled, wandering through his house and giggling in barbarous incomprehension at everything they saw. The very thought of it was sickening. But, after all, Eustace reminded himself, he wouldn’t be there to care. And being sickened in advance, with no immediate reason for one’s feelings, were merely silly. No less silly was thinking about death. So long as one was alive, death didn’t exist, except for other people. And when one was dead, nothing existed, not even death. So why bother? Particularly as he was taking very good care to postpone the event. Smoking only one of these heavenly Romeo and Juliets, drinking only one glass of brandy after dinner ... But no; he’d already drunk two. This one that he was just raising to his lips was the third. Well, never mind; he’d see that it didn’t happen again. Tonight he was celebrating Sebastian’s arrival. It wasn’t every day that one welcomed an infant prodigy. He took a sip, and rolled the spirit round his mouth; on tongue and palate it consummated the happiest of marriages with the clinging aroma of his cigar.

He turned to Sebastian.

‘A penny for your thoughts.’

The other laughed with a touch of embarrassment and answered that they weren’t worth it. But Eustace insisted.

‘Well, to begin with,’ said Sebastian, ‘I was thinking ... well, I was thinking how extraordinarily decent you’d been to me.’ It wasn’t quite true; for his fancy had been busy with the gifts, not with the giver. ‘And then,’ he continued rather hurriedly; for he realized, too late as usual, that this perfunctory tribute didn’t sound very convincing, ‘I was thinking of the things I’d do when I had some evening clothes.’

‘Such as taking the entire Gaiety chorus out to supper at Ciro’s?’

Caught in the discreditable act of day-dreaming, Sebastian blushed. He had been imagining himself at the Savoy, not indeed with the whole Gaiety chorus, but very definitely with the two girls who were going to be at Tom Boveney’s party. And then one of the girls had turned into Mrs. Thwale.

‘Am I right?’

‘Well ... not exactly,’ Sebastian answered.

‘Not exactly,’ Eustace repeated with benevolent irony. ‘Of course, you realize,’ he added, ‘that you’ll always be disappointed?’

‘With what?’

‘With girls, with parties, with experience in general. Nobody who has any kind of creative imagination can possibly be anything but disappointed with real life. When I was young, I used to be miserable because I hadn’t any talents — nothing but a little taste and cleverness. But now I’m not sure one isn’t happier that way. People like you aren’t really commensurable with the world they live in. Whereas

people like me are completely adapted to it.' He removed the teat from between his large damp lips to take another sip of brandy.

'Your business isn't doing things,' he resumed. 'It isn't even living. It's writing poetry. Vox et praeterea nihil, that's what you are and what you ought to be. Or rather voces, not vox. All the voices in the world. Like Chaucer. Like Shakespeare. The Miller's voice and the Parson's voice, Desdemona's and Caliban's and Kent's and Polonius's. All of them, impartially.'

'Impartially,' Sebastian repeated, slowly.

Yes, that was good; that was exactly what he'd been trying to think about himself, but had never quite succeeded, because such thoughts didn't fit into the ethical and philosophical patterns which he had been brought up to regard as axiomatic. Voices, all the voices impartially. He was delighted by the thought.

'Of course,' Eustace was saying, 'you could always argue that you live more intensely in your mental world-substitute than we who only wallow in the real thing. And I'd be inclined to admit it. But the trouble is that you can't be content to stick to your beautiful ersatz. You have to descend into evening clothes and Ciro's and chorus girls — and perhaps even politics and committee meetings, God help us! With lamentable results. Because you're not at home with these lumpy bits of matter. They depress you, they bewilder you, they shock you and sicken you and make a fool of you. And yet they still tempt you; and they'll go on tempting you, all your life. Tempting you to embark on actions which you know in advance can only make you miserable and distract you from the one thing you can do properly, the one thing that people value you for.'

It was interesting to be talked about in this way; but the stimulative effects of the alcohol had worn off, and Sebastian felt himself almost suddenly invaded by a kind of stupor that obliterated all thoughts of poetry, voices, evening clothes. Surreptitiously he yawned. His uncle's words came to him through a kind of fog that thickened and then thinned again, permitting the significance to shine through for a little, then rolled in once more, obscuring everything.

'... Fascinatio nugacitatis,' Eustace was saying. 'It's translated quite differently in the English version of the Apocrypha. But how wonderful in the Vulgate! The magic of triviality — the being spellbound by mere footling. How well I know the fascination! And how frightfully intense it is! Trifles for trifles' sake. And yet, what's the alternative? Behaving like the Old Man of Corsica, or some kind of horrible religious fanatic....'

Once again darkness invaded Sebastian's mind, a stupor diversified only by quivering streaks of dizziness and a faint nausea. He yearned to be in bed. Very distinct and silvery, a clock struck the half-hour.

'Half-past ten,' Eustace proclaimed. "'Time, time and half a time. The innocent and the beautiful have no enemy but time.'" He gave vent to a belch. 'That's what I like about champagne — it makes one so poetical. All the lovely refuse of fifty years of indiscriminate reading comes floating to the surface. O lente, lente currite, noctis equi!'

O lente, lente ... Funerally slow black horses moved through the fog. And suddenly Sebastian realized that his chin had dropped involuntarily on to his chest. He woke up with a start.

'Faith,' his uncle was saying, 'they can never do without a faith. Always the need of some nonsensical ideal that blinds them to reality and makes them behave like lunatics. And look at the results in our history!' He took another swig of brandy, then sucked voluptuously at his cigar. 'First it's God they believe in — not three Gaseous Vertebrates, but one Gaseous Vertebrate. And what happens? They get the Pope, they get the Holy Office, they get Calvin and John Knox and the wars of religion. Then they grow bored with God, and it's war and massacre in the name of Humanity. Humanity and Progress, Progress and Humanity. Have you ever read Bouvard et Pécuchet, by the way?'

Rather belatedly, Sebastian started out of his coma and said no.

'What a book!' the other exclaimed. 'Incomparably the finest thing Flaubert ever did. It's one of the great philosophical poems of the world — and probably the last that will ever be written. For, of course, after Bouvard et Pécuchet there just isn't anything more to say. Dante and Milton merely

justify the ways of God. But Flaubert really goes down to the root of things. He justifies the ways of Fact. The ways of Fact as they affect, not only man, but God as well — and not only the Gaseous Vertebrate, but all the other fantastic products of human imbecility, including, of course, our dear old friend, Inevitable Progress. Inevitable Progress!’ he repeated. ‘Only one more indispensable massacre of Capitalists or Communists or Fascists or Christians or Heretics, and there we are — there we are in the Golden Future. But needless to say, in the very nature of things, the future can’t be golden. For the simple reason that nobody ever gets anything for nothing. Massacre always has to be paid for, and its price is a state of things that absolutely guarantees you against achieving the good which the massacre was intended to achieve. And the same is true even of bloodless revolutions. Every notable advance in technique or organization has to be paid for, and in most cases the debit is more or less equivalent to the credit. Except of course when it’s more than equivalent, as it has been with universal education, for example, or wireless, or these damned aeroplanes. In which case, of course, your progress is a step backwards and downwards. Backwards and downwards,’ he repeated; and, taking the cigar out of his mouth, he threw back his head and gave vent to a long peal of wheezy laughter. Then, all at once, he broke off, and his large face screwed itself up into a grimace of pain. He raised a hand to his chest.

‘Heartburn,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘That’s the trouble with white wine. I’ve had to give up Hock and Riesling completely; and sometimes even champagne....’

Eustace made another grimace, and bit his lip. The pain subsided a little. With some difficulty he heaved himself up out of his deep seat.

‘Luckily,’ he added, with a smile, ‘there’s almost nothing that a little bicarbonate of soda won’t set right.’

He reinserted the teat and walked out of the drawing-room, across the hall and along the little passage that led to the downstairs lavatory.

Left to himself, Sebastian rose, uncorked the brandy and poured what remained in his glass back into the bottle. Then he drank some soda-water and felt distinctly better. Going to one of the windows, he pushed aside the curtain and looked out. A moon was shining. Against the sky, the cypresses were obelisks of solid darkness. At their feet stood the pale gesticulating statues, and behind and below, far off, were the lights of Florence. And doubtless there were slums down there, like the slums of Camden Town, and tarts in blue at the street corners, and all the stink and the stupidity, all the miseries and humiliations. But here was only order and intention, significance and beauty. Here was a fragment of the world in which human beings ought to be living.

Suddenly, in an act of pure intellectual apprehension, he was aware of the poem he was going to write about this garden. Not of its accidents — the metrical arrangements, the words and sentences — but of its essential form and animating spirit. The form and spirit of a long pensive lyric; of a poetical reflection intensified to the point of cry and song, and sustained in its intensity by a kind of enduring miracle. For a moment he knew it perfectly, his unwritten poem — and the knowledge filled him with an extraordinary happiness. Then it was gone.

He let the curtain drop, walked back to his chair and sat down to wrestle with the problems of composition. Two minutes later he was fast asleep.

There was an onyx ashtray on the lavatory window-sill. Very carefully, so as not to disturb its faultless combustion, Eustace put down his cigar, then turned and opened the door of the little medicine cupboard above the wash-basin. It was always kept well stocked, so that, if ever during the day he had any need of internal or external first aid, it would be unnecessary for him to go upstairs to his bathroom. In ten years, he liked to say, he had spared himself as much climbing as would have taken him to the top of Mount Everest.

From the row of medicaments on the upper shelf he selected the bicarbonate of soda, unscrewed the stopper and shook out into his left palm four of the white tablets. He was in the act of replacing the bottle, when another spasm of this strangely violent heartburn made him decide to double the dose. He filled a glass, and began to swallow the tablets one by one, with a sip of water after each. Two, three, four, five, six ... And then suddenly the pain was like a red-hot poker boring through his chest. He

felt dizzy, and a whirling blackness obscured the outside world. Groping blindly, his hands slid across the wall and found the smooth enamelled cistern of the toilet. He lowered himself unsteadily on to the seat and almost immediately felt a good deal better. 'It must have been that bloody fish,' he said to himself. The recipe called for a lot of cream, and he had taken two helpings. He swallowed the last two tablets, drank the rest of the water and, reaching out, set down the glass on the windowsill. Just as his arm was at full stretch the pain returned — but in a new form; for it had now become, in some indescribable way, obscene as well as agonizing. And all at once he found himself panting for breath and in the clutch of a terror more intense than any fear he had ever experienced before. It was terror, for a few seconds, absolutely pure and unmotivated. Then all at once the pain shot down his left arm — nauseating, disgusting, like being hit in the wind, like getting a blow in the genitals — and in a flash the causeless fear crystallized into a fear of heart failure, of death.

Death, death, death. He remembered what Dr. Burgess had told him last time he went for a consultation. 'The old pump can't put up with indefinite abuse.' And his wife — she too ... But with her it hadn't come suddenly. There had been years and years of sofas and nurses and strophanthine drops. Quite an agreeable existence, really. He wouldn't mind that at all; he'd even give up smoking altogether.

More excruciating than ever, the pain returned. The pain and the awful fear of death.

'Help!' he tried to call. But all the sound he could produce was a faint hoarse bark. 'Help!' Why didn't they come? Bloody servants! And that damned boy there, just across the hall in the drawing-room.

'Sebastian!' The shout produced no more than a whisper. 'Don't let me die. Don't let me ...' Suddenly he was gasping with a strange crowing noise. There was no air, no air. And suddenly he remembered that beastly glacier where they had taken him climbing when he was a boy of twelve. Whooping and gasping in the snow, and vomiting his breakfast, while his father stood there with John and the Swiss guide, smiling in a superior sort of way and telling him it was only a touch of mountain sickness. The memory vanished; and nothing remained but this crowing for breath, this pressure on the darkened eyes, this precipitated thudding of blood in the ears, and the pain increasing and increasing, as though some pitiless hand were gradually tightening a screw, until at last — ah, Christ! Christ! but it was impossible to scream — something seemed to crack and give way; and suddenly there was a kind of tearing. The stab of that redoubled anguish brought him to his feet. He took three steps towards the door and turned the key backwards in the lock; but before he could open, his knees gave way and he fell. Face downwards on the tiled floor, he continued to gasp for a little, more and more stertorously. But there was no air; only a smell of cigar smoke.

With a sudden start Sebastian woke into a consciousness of pins and needles in his left leg. He looked around him and, for a second or two, was unable to remember where he was. Then everything fell into place — the journey, and Uncle Eustace, and the strange disquieting incarnation of Mary Esdaile. His eye fell on the drawing, which was lying where his uncle had left it, on the sofa. He leaned over and picked it up. 'Two buttocks and a pendulous bub.' A genuine Degas, and Uncle Eustace was going to give it to him. And the evening clothes too! He would have to wear them secretly, hide them in the intervals. Otherwise his father would be quite capable of taking them away from him. Susan would let him keep them in her room. Or Aunt Alice, for that matter; for in this case Aunt Alice was as much on his side as Susan herself. And luckily his father would still be abroad when Tom Boveney gave his party.

Musically the clock on the mantelpiece went ding-dong, and then repeated itself, ding-dong, ding-dong. Sebastian looked up and was amazed to see that the time was a quarter to twelve. And it had been only a little after half-past ten when Uncle Eustace left the room.

He jumped up, walked to the door and looked out. The hall was empty, all the house was silent.

Softly, for fear of waking anybody, he ventured a discreet call.

'Uncle Eustace!'

There was no answer.

Did he go upstairs and never come down again? Or perhaps, Sebastian speculated uneasily, perhaps he had come back, found him asleep and left him there — as a joke. Yes, that was probably what had

happened. And tomorrow he'd never hear the end of it. Curled up in the armchair like a tired child! Sebastian felt furious with himself for having succumbed so easily to a couple of glasses of champagne. The only consolation was that Uncle Eustace wouldn't be unpleasantly sarcastic. Just a bit playful, that was all. But the danger was that he might be playful in front of the others — in front of that horrible old she-devil, in front of Mrs. Thwale; and the prospect of being treated as a baby in front of Mrs. Thwale was particularly distasteful and humiliating.

Frowning to himself, he rubbed his nose in perplexed uncertainty. Then, since it was obvious that Uncle Eustace had no intention of coming down again at this hour, he decided to go to bed.

Turning out the lights in the drawing-room, he made his way upstairs. Someone, he found, had unpacked for him while he was at dinner. A pair of faded pink pyjamas had been neatly laid out on the majestic bed; the celluloid comb with the three broken teeth and the wood-backed hair-brushes had taken their place incongruously among the crystal and silver fittings of the dressing-table. At the sight he winced. What must the servants think? As he undressed, he wondered how much he would have to tip them when he went away.

It was late; but the luxurious opportunity of taking a midnight bath was not to be missed. Carrying his pyjamas over his arm, Sebastian entered the bathroom, and having, by unthinking force of habit, carefully locked the door behind him, turned on the water. Lying there in the deliciously enveloping warmth, he thought about that garden in the moonlight and the poem he intended to write. It would be something like 'Tintern Abbey,' like Shelley's thing on Mont Blanc — but of course quite different and contemporary. For he would use all the resources of non-poetic as well as of poetic diction; would intensify lyricism with irony, the beautiful with the grotesque. 'A sense of something far more deeply interfused' — that might have been all right in 1800, but not now. It was too easy now, too complacent. Today the something interfused would have to be presented in conjunction with the horrors it was interfused with. And that, of course, meant an entirely different kind of versification. Changeable and uneven to fit a subject matter that would modulate from God Flat Minor to Sex Major and Squalor Natural. He chuckled over his little invention and conjured up the picture of Mary Esdaile in that moonlit garden. Mary Esdaile among the statues, as pale as they, and, between the meshes of her black lace, much nakeder.

But why Mary Esdaile? Why not her incarnation, her real presence? Real to the point of being disquieting, but beautiful, terribly desirable. And perhaps Mrs. Thwale was as passionate as her imaginary counterpart, as unashamedly voluptuous as the Venus in Uncle Eustace's picture. Three comic pelicans and a centaur — and in the foreground the pure lascivious innocence of heaven, the incandescent copulation of a goddess, who certainly knew what she wanted, with her mortal lover. What self-abandonment, what laughter and light-heartedness! Voluptuously he imagined himself a consenting Adonis.

Chapter Thirteen

THERE WAS NO pain any longer, no more need to gasp for breath, and the tiled floor of the lavatory had ceased to be cold and hard.

All sound had died away, and it was quite dark. But in the void and the silence there was still a kind of knowledge, a faint awareness.

Awareness not of a name or person, not of things present, not of memories of the past, not even of here or there — for there was no place, only an existence whose single dimension was this knowledge of being ownerless and without possessions and alone.

The awareness knew only itself, and itself only as the absence of something else.

Knowledge reached out into the absence that was its object. Reached out into the darkness, further and further. Reached out into the silence. Illimitably. There were no bounds.

The knowledge knew itself as a boundless absence within another boundless absence, which was not even aware.

It was the knowledge of an absence ever more total, more excruciatingly a privation. And it was aware with a kind of growing hunger, but a hunger for something that did not exist; for the knowledge was only of absence, of pure and absolute absence.

Absence endured through ever-lengthening durations. Durations of restlessness. Durations of hunger. Durations that expanded and expanded as the frenzy of insatiability became more and more intense, that lengthened out into eternities of despair.

Eternities of the insatiable, despairing knowledge of absence within absence, everywhere, always, in an existence of only one dimension....

And then abruptly there was another dimension, and the everlasting ceased to be the everlasting.

That within which the awareness of absence knew itself, that by which it was included and interpenetrated, was no longer an absence, but had become the presence of another awareness. The awareness of absence knew itself known.

In the dark silence, in the void of all sensation, something began to know it. Very dimly at first, from immeasurably far away. But gradually the presence approached. The dimness of that other knowledge grew brighter. And suddenly the awareness had become an awareness of light. The light of the knowledge by which it was known.

In the awareness that there was something other than absence the anxiety found appeasement, the hunger found satisfaction.

Instead of privation there was this light. There was this knowledge of being known. And this knowledge of being known was a satisfied, even a joyful knowledge.

Yes, there was joy in being known, in being thus included within a shining presence, in thus being interpenetrated by a shining presence.

And because the awareness was included by it, interpenetrated by it, there was an identification with it. The awareness was not only known by it but knew with its knowledge.

Knew, not absence, but the luminous denial of absence, not privation, but bliss.

There was hunger still. Hunger for yet more knowledge of a yet more total denial of an absence.

Hunger, but also the satisfaction of hunger, also bliss. And then as the light increased, hunger again for profounder satisfactions, for a bliss more intense.

Bliss and hunger, hunger and bliss. And through ever-lengthening durations the light kept brightening from beauty into beauty. And the joy of knowing, the joy of being known, increased with every increment of that embracing and interpenetrating beauty.

Brighter, brighter, through succeeding durations, that expanded at last into an eternity of joy.

An eternity of radiant knowledge, of bliss unchanging in its ultimate intensity. For ever, for ever.

But gradually the unchanging began to change.

The light increased its brightness. The presence became more urgent. The knowledge more exhaustive and complete.

Under the impact of that intensification, the joyful awareness of being known, the joyful participation in that knowledge, was pinned against the limits of its bliss. Pinned with an increasing pressure until at last the limits began to give way and the awareness found itself beyond them, in another existence. An existence where the knowledge of being included within a shining presence had become a knowledge of being oppressed by an excess of light. Where that transfiguring interpenetration was apprehended as a force disruptive from within. Where the knowledge was so penetratingly luminous that the participation in it was beyond the capacity of that which participated.

The presence approached, the light grew brighter.

Where there had been eternal bliss there was an immensely prolonged uneasiness, an immensely prolonged duration of pain and, longer and yet longer, as the pain increased, durations of intolerable anguish. The anguish of being forced, by participation, to know more than it was possible for the participant to know. The anguish of being crushed by the pressure of that too much light — crushed

into ever-increasing density and opacity. The anguish, simultaneously, of being broken and pulverized by the thrust of that interpenetrating knowledge from within. Disintegrated into smaller and smaller fragments, into mere dust, into atoms of mere nonentity.

And this dust and the ever-increasing denseness of that opacity were apprehended by the knowledge in which there was participation as being hideous. Were judged and found repulsive, a privation of all beauty and reality.

Inexorably, the presence approached, the light grew brighter.

And with every increase of urgency, every intensification of that invading knowledge from without, that disruptive brightness thrusting from within, the agony increased, the dust and the compacted darkness became more shameful, were known, by participation, as the most hideous of absences.

Shameful everlastingly in an eternity of shame and pain.

But the light grew brighter, agonizingly brighter.

The whole of existence was brightness — everything except this one small clot of untransparent absence, except these dispersed atoms of a nothingness that, by direct awareness, knew itself as opaque and separate, and at the same time, by an excruciating participation in the light, knew itself as the most hideous and shameful of privations.

Brightness beyond the limits of the possible, and then a yet intenser, nearer incandescence, pressing from without, disintegrating from within. And at the same time there was this other knowledge, ever more penetrating and complete, as the light grew brighter, of a clotting and a disintegration that seemed progressively more shameful as the durations lengthened out interminably.

There was no escape, an eternity of no escape. And through ever-longer, through ever-decelerating durations, from impossible to impossible, the brightness increased, came more urgently and agonizingly close.

Suddenly there was a new contingent knowledge, a conditional awareness that, if there were no participation in the brightness, half the agony would disappear. There would be no perception of the ugliness of this clotted or disintegrated privation. There would only be an untransparent separateness, self-known as other than the invading light.

An unhappy dust of nothingness, a poor little harmless clot of mere privation, crushed from without, scattered from within, but still resisting, still refusing, in spite of the anguish, to give up its right to a separate existence.

Abruptly, there was a new and overwhelming flash of participation in the light, in the agonizing knowledge that there was no such right as a right to separate existence, that this clotted and disintegrated absence was shameful and must be denied, must be annihilated — held up unflinchingly to the radiance of that invading knowledge and utterly annihilated, dissolved in the beauty of that impossible incandescence.

For an immense duration the two awarenesses hung as though balanced — the knowledge that knew itself separate, knew its own right to separateness, and the knowledge that knew the shameful of absence and the necessity for its agonizing annihilation in the light.

As though balanced, as though on a knife-edge between an impossible intensity of beauty and an impossible intensity of pain and shame, between a hunger for opacity and separateness and absence and a hunger for a yet more total participation in the brightness.

And then, after an eternity, there was a renewal of that contingent and conditional knowledge: ‘If there were no participation in the brightness, if there were no participation ...’

And all at once there was no longer any participation. There was a self-knowledge of the clot and the disintegrated dust; and the light that knew these things was another knowledge. There was still the agonizing invasion from within and without, but no shame any more, only a resistance to attack, a defence of rights.

By degrees the brightness began to lose some of its intensity, to recede, as it were, to grow less urgent. And suddenly there was a kind of eclipse. Between the insufferable light and the suffering awareness of

the light as a presence alien to this clotted and disintegrated privation, something abruptly intervened. Something in the nature of an image, something partaking of a memory.

An image of things, a memory of things. Things related to things in some blessedly familiar way that could not yet be clearly apprehended.

Almost completely eclipsed, the light lingered faintly and insignificantly on the fringes of awareness. At the centre were only things.

Things still unrecognized, not fully imagined or remembered, without name or even form, but definitely there, definitely opaque.

And now that the light had gone into eclipse and there was no participation, opacity was no more shameful. Density was happily aware of density, nothingness of untransparent nothingness. The knowledge was without bliss, but profoundly reassuring.

And gradually the knowledge became clearer, and the things known more definite and familiar. More and more familiar, until awareness hovered on the verge of recognition.

A clotted thing here, a disintegrated thing there. But what things? And what were these corresponding opacities by which they were being known?

There was a vast duration of uncertainty, a long, long groping in a chaos of unmanifested possibilities.

Then abruptly it was Eustace Barnack who was aware. Yes, this opacity was Eustace Barnack, this dance of agitated dust was Eustace Barnack. And the clot outside himself, this other opacity of which he had the image, was his cigar. He was remembering his Romeo and Juliet as it had slowly disintegrated into blue nothingness between his fingers. And with the memory of the cigar came the memory of a phrase: 'Backwards and downwards.' And then the memory of laughter.

Words in what context? Laughter at whose expense? There was no answer. Just 'backwards and downwards' and that stump of disintegrating opacity. 'Backwards and downwards,' and then the cachinnation, and the sudden glory.

Far off, beyond the image of that brown slobbered cylinder of tobacco, beyond the repetition of those three words and the accompanying laughter, the brightness lingered, like a menace. But in his joy at having found again this memory of things, this knowledge of an identity remembering, Eustace Barnack had all but ceased to be aware of its existence.

Chapter Fourteen

SEBASTIAN HAD DRAWN back the curtains when he went to bed, and a little after half-past seven an entering shaft of sunlight touched his face and awoke him. Outside the window there was a sound of birds and church bells, and between the little grey and white clouds the sky was so brilliantly blue that he decided, in spite of the deliciousness of his enormous bed, to go and do a little exploring before anyone else was about.

He got up, took a bath, examined his chin and cheeks to see if there was any need to use his razor, and deciding that there was no need, dressed himself with care in a clean shirt, the newer of his grey flannel trousers and the less shabby of the two outgrown tweed jackets which his father had said must last till June. Then, after giving his rebellious hair a final brushing, he went downstairs and out through the front door.

Hardly less romantic than it had seemed under the moon, the garden revealed itself in all the details of its architectural design, with all the colours of its foliage and April flowers. Six goddesses stood sentinel on the terrace, and between the central pair a great flight of steps went down from landing to paved and parapeted landing, down, between colonnades of cypresses, to a green lawn bounded by a low semicircular wall, beyond which the eye travelled down and on to a distant chaos of brown and rosy roofs, and, floating high above them, in the very centre of the vista, the dome of the cathedral. Sebastian walked down to the bottom of the steps and looked over the retaining wall. Below it stretched a sloping

field of vines, still leafless, like an acre of dead men's arms reaching up frantically towards the light. And here, beyond the cypresses, grew an ancient fig tree, all knees and knuckles, with elbowed branches pale as bones against the sky. What intricacies of blue and white when one looked up into it! 'Snatches of heaven,' he whispered to himself, 'seen through an ossuary. A pendent ossuary of arthropods.' And there were those church bells again, and a smell of wood smoke and hyacinths, and the first yellow butterfly. And when one walked back to the foot of the steps and looked up, it was like being inside something by Milton. Like walking about in Lycidas, through one of the similes in Paradise Lost. Majestic symmetries! And at the top, on their high pedestals, Artemis and Aphrodite stood pale against the foreshortened façade of the house. Beautiful, and at the same time slightly absurd. The appropriate phrases began to come to him.

Dian with dog, and Venus modestly
Screening her pubic lichen and the green
Moss on her limestone paps ...

And then suddenly he perceived that, without intending it, he had discovered the Open Sesame to his entire poem. 'Limestone' — it had come out casually, as a simple descriptive epithet. But in fact it was the password to his unwritten masterpiece, the key and guiding clue. And, of all people, old walrus-whiskered Macdonald, the science master, was his Ariadne. He remembered the words which had roused him for a moment from the coma into which he habitually sank during his physics and chemistry lessons. 'The difference between a piece of stone and an atom is that an atom is highly organized, whereas the stone is not. The atom is a pattern, and the molecule is a pattern, and the crystal is a pattern; but the stone, although it is made up of these patterns, is just a mere confusion. It's only when life appears that you begin to get organization on a larger scale. Life takes the atoms and molecules and crystals; but, instead of making a mess of them like the stone, it combines them into new and more elaborate patterns of its own.'

The others had only heard the oddities of old Mac's Dundee accent. For weeks, 'the putterns of utoms' had been a standing joke. But for Sebastian the joke had made some kind of obscure unrecognized sense. And now suddenly here the sense was, clear and comprehensible.

The primal pattern. And then the chaos made of patterns. And then the living patterns built up out of fragments of the chaos. And then what next? Living patterns of living patterns? But man's world was chaotically ugly and unjust and stupid. More hopelessly refractory than even the lump of stone. For that suffered itself to be carved into breasts and faces. Whereas five thousand laborious years of civilization had resulted only in slums and factories and offices. He reached the top of the stairs and sat down on the smooth flagstones at the foot of Venus's pedestal.

'And human individuals,' he was thinking. As living patterns in space, how incredibly subtle, rich and complex! But the trace they left in time, the pattern of their private lives — God, what a horror of routine! Like the repeats on a length of linoleum, like the succession of identical ornamental tiles along the wall of a public lavatory. Or if they did try to launch out into something original, the resulting scrolls and curlicues were generally atrocious. And anyhow most of them quickly ended in a smudge of frustration — and then it was linoleum and lavatory tiles, lavatory tiles and linoleum, to the bitter end.

He looked up at the house and wondered which of all the shuttered windows was Mrs. Thwale's. If that horrible old hag really wanted him to take lessons in speaking, it would give him an opportunity of talking to her. Would he have the nerve to tell her about Mary Esdaile? It would obviously be a wonderful opening. He imagined a conversation beginning with a witty and ironical confession of his own adolescent phantasies and ending — well, ending practically anywhere.

He sighed, looked down between the cypresses at the distant cupola, then up at the statue above him. What a curious worm's-eye view of a goddess! A green iridescent rose beetle was crawling slowly across her left knee. Or so it seemed to him. But what would the beetle say it was doing? Feeling the sixfold rhythm of its legs, the pull of gravity on its right side, the fascination of strong light on its left eye, the warmth and hardness of a surface diversified with pits and jagged stalagmites and vegetable growths, rank, but uninteresting, since the smell was not one that made it, willy-nilly, cut round holes

in leaves or burrow between the petals of flowers. And what, Sebastian wondered, was he himself doing at this moment? Crawling over what enormous knee? Towards what future event, what premeditated flick of a giant's finger-nail?

He got up, dusted the seat of his trousers; then, reaching up, gave the beetle a little fillip. It fell on to the pedestal and lay there on its back, its legs waving. Sebastian bent down to look at it, and saw that its plated belly was covered with minute crawling ticks. Disgustedly, he turned the creature over on to its feet and walked away towards the house. The sun, which had passed for a moment behind a cloud, came out again, and all the garden glowed, as though every leaf and flower had been illumined from within. Sebastian smiled with pleasure, and started to whistle the tune of the first movement of Susan's Scarlatti sonata.

As he opened the front door, he was surprised to hear a confused noise of talk, and, stepping across the threshold, he found the hall full of people — half a dozen servants, two old peasant women with shawls over their heads, and a dark-eyed little girl of ten or twelve, carrying a baby in one arm and, with the other hand, holding by the feet, head downwards and inert, a large speckled hen.

Suddenly they all fell silent. From a dark vaulted passage on the right came a sound of laboured shuffling; and a moment later, walking backwards with a pair of grey-trousered legs under his arm, emerged the butler, and then, stooping under the weight of the body, the footman and the chauffeur. One thick yellowish hand trailed palm upwards on the floor, and as the men turned to take their burden up the stairs, Sebastian caught sight of the black gape of an open mouth and two lustreless and discoloured eyes, fixed and mindlessly staring. Then step by step the body was heaved up, out of sight. Dangling from the child's hand, the speckled hen uttered a feeble squawk and tried to flap its wings. The baby broke into crowing laughter.

Sebastian turned and hurried away into the drawing-room. The first animal reaction of surprise and horror had left his stomach turned, his heart violently beating. He sat down and covered his face with his hands. It was as bad as that ghastly time at school when old Mac had made them dissect the dog-fish and he had been sick in one of the laboratory sinks. And this was poor Uncle Eustace. Suddenly snuffed out, reduced to the likeness of that awful Thing they had hauled up the stairs. Like men moving a piano. And it must have happened while he himself was sleeping, here, in this very chair. Perhaps Uncle Eustace had called for him; and perhaps, if he had heard, he could have done something to save his life. But he hadn't heard; he'd just gone on sleeping. Sleeping like a hog, while this man who was his friend, this man who had been more decent to him than almost anyone he could think of, who had treated him with such extraordinary generosity ...

Suddenly, like a thunderbolt, the thought came to him that now he wouldn't have his evening clothes. Yesterday Uncle Eustace had promised; but today there was nobody to keep the promise. It was good-bye to Tom Boveney's party; good-bye to those girls before he had even known them. The whole structure of that particular set of day-dreams — so rational and substantial since Uncle Eustace had pointed out the tailor's shop on the way from the station — disintegrated into less than nothing. The pang of his disappointment and self-pity brought tears to Sebastian's eyes. Had anyone ever had such bad luck?

Then he remembered Uncle Eustace — remembered him, not as the dispenser of dinner jackets, but as that kindly, lively person who last night had been his friend and now was only a revolting thing — remembered, and was overcome by shame at his own monstrous selfishness.

'God, I'm awful,' he said to himself; and to keep his mind on the real tragedy, he whispered the word, 'Dead, dead,' over and over again.

And then suddenly he caught himself wondering what excuse he could invent for Tom Boveney. That he was ill? That he was in mourning for his uncle?

A bell rang, and through the open door Sebastian saw the footman crossing the hall to the front entrance. A few Italian phrases were exchanged, and then a tall thin man, elegantly dressed and carrying a little black bag, was ushered up the stairs. Evidently the doctor, called in to write the death-certificate.

But if he had been called last night, Uncle Eustace might have been saved. And the reason why the doctor wasn't called, Sebastian reminded himself, was that he had been asleep.

The servant came down again and vanished into the kitchen regions. Time passed. Then the clock on the mantelpiece gave vent to four ding-dongs, and struck nine. A moment later, the footman entered through the library door, came to a halt in front of the chair on which Sebastian was sitting, and said something which, because of the distant aroma of coffee and fried bacon, the latter interpreted as an announcement of breakfast. He said 'thank you,' got up and walked into the dining-room. The nausea of surprise and horror had worn off, and he was feeling hungry again. He sat down to eat. The scrambled eggs were absolutely delicious; the bacon, crisp between the teeth and exquisitely pungent; the coffee, a dream.

He had just helped himself for the second time to marmalade when a luminous idea occurred to him. That Degas drawing, which Uncle Eustace had given him ... What on earth could he do with it for the next few years? Hang it up in his bedroom and have old Ellen complain that it was 'rude'? Put it away until he went to Oxford? But wouldn't it really be much more sensible to sell the thing and use the money to get a suit of evening clothes?

The opening of the door made him look up. Dressed in black, with white ruffles at the neck and wrists, Mrs. Thwale had quietly entered. Sebastian jumped to his feet and, hastily wiping his mouth, said good-morning. With the sheet of notepaper she held in her hand Mrs. Thwale waved him back into his chair, and herself sat down beside him.

'You know what's happened, of course?'

Sebastian nodded, guiltily.

'One feels ... well, one feels almost ashamed of oneself.'

He was trying to atone for not having given a thought to poor Uncle Eustace during the whole of breakfast.

'You know,' he went on, 'ashamed of being alive.'

Mrs. Thwale looked at him for a moment in silence, then shrugged her shoulders.

'But that's what living happens to be,' she said. 'The physiological denial of reverence and good manners and Christianity. And you're not even a Christian, are you?'

He shook his head. Mrs. Thwale continued with an apparently irrelevant question.

'How old are you?'

'Seventeen.'

'Seventeen?'

Once more she looked at him; looked at him so intently, with an expression of such disquietingly impersonal amusement, that he started to blush, and dropped his eyes.

'In that case,' she went on, 'it's doubly silly of you to feel ashamed of living. At your age one's quite old enough to know what the essence of life really is. Shamelessness, that's all; pure shamelessness.'

Her beautiful steel-engraving face puckered itself into a comic mask, and she uttered the delicate little grunt of her laughter. Then, suddenly serene again, she opened her handbag and took out a pencil.

'There's a whole sheaf of telegrams to be sent,' she went on in a calm, business-like voice. 'You can help me with some of the addresses.'

A few minutes later the butler came in and announced that he had been able to reach Mr. Pewsey on the telephone, and that Mr. Pewsey had offered to make all the necessary arrangements for the funeral.

'Thank you, Guido.'

The butler inclined his head almost imperceptibly, turned and silently went out again. The ritual of his service remained flawless; but Sebastian could see that he had been crying.

'Well, that's a great relief,' said Mrs. Thwale.

Sebastian nodded.

'All that rigmarole of funerals,' he said. 'It's too awful.'

'But evidently less awful than the realization that dying is even more shameless than living.'

'More shameless?'

‘Well, at least you don’t putrefy when you make love, or eat, or excrete. Whereas when you die ...’ She made a little grimace. ‘That’s why people are ready to spend such fortunes on last sacraments and embalmers and lead coffins. But what about these telegrams?’ She looked back at her list of names. ‘Mrs. Poulshot,’ she read out. ‘Where can she be reached?’

Sebastian was uncertain. Aunt Alice and Uncle Fred were on a motor tour in Wales. Better send the wire to London and hope for the best.

Mrs. Thwale took down the address at his dictation.

‘Talking of shamelessness,’ she said, as she reached for another telegraph form, ‘I knew a girl once who lost her virginity on the night of Good Friday, at Jerusalem — just above the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Now, what about your father?’

‘He left for Egypt yesterday evening,’ Sebastian began. Suddenly through the open door there came a harsh imperious call of ‘Veronica, Veronica!’

Without answering or making any remark, Mrs. Thwale rose and, followed by Sebastian, walked into the drawing-room. A storm of shrill barking greeted them. Retreating step by step as they advanced, Foxy VIII almost screamed his defiance. Sebastian glanced from the dog to its mistress. Her rouged face seeming more fantastically gaudy by contrast with the black of her dress and hat, the Queen Mother was standing, small and shrivelled, beside the stolid figure of her maid.

‘Quiet!’ she called blindly in the direction of the noise. ‘Pick him up, Hortense.’

In Hortense’s arms Foxy contented himself with an occasional growl.

‘Is the boy there too?’ Mrs. Gamble enquired, and when Sebastian came forward, ‘Well, boy,’ she said almost triumphantly, ‘what do you think of all this?’

Sebastian murmured that he thought it was terrible.

‘I told him only yesterday,’ the Queen Mother went on in the same tone. ‘No fat man has ever lived even to seventy. Much less to any reasonable age. You’ve sent a wire to Daisy, have you?’

‘It’s going off with the others in a few minutes,’ said Mrs. Thwale.

‘And to think that that goose is inheriting everything!’ exclaimed the Queen Mother. ‘What can she do with it, I’d like to know? All Eustace’s pictures and furniture. I always told Amy not to let her have everything.’

Suddenly she turned on the maid.

‘What on earth are you standing here for, Hortense? Go away and do something useful. Can’t you see I don’t need you?’

Silently the woman started to go.

‘Where’s Foxy?’ shouted the Queen Mother in the direction of the retreating footsteps. ‘Give him to me.’

She held out a pair of jewelled claws. The dog was handed over.

‘Little Foxy-woxy,’ Mrs. Gamble rasped affectionately, bending down to rub her cheek against the animal’s fur. Foxy responded with a lick. The Queen Mother cackled shrilly and wiped her face with her fingers, smudging the rouge across her sharp and rather hairy chin. ‘Only fifty-three,’ she went on, turning back to the others. ‘It’s ridiculous. But what else could you expect with a stomach like that? Boy!’ she rapped out sharply. ‘Give me your arm.’

Sebastian did as he was bidden.

‘I want you to show me the place where he actually passed on.’

‘You mean ...?’ he began.

‘Yes, I do,’ barked the Queen Mother. ‘You can stay here, Veronica.’

Slowly and cautiously Sebastian set off towards the door. ‘Why don’t you talk?’ Mrs. Gamble demanded after they had walked a few yards in silence. ‘I know a great deal about football, if that’s what interests you.’

‘Well, not really ... I’m more interested in ... well, in poetry and things like that.’

‘Poetry?’ she repeated. ‘Do you write poetry?’

‘A little.’

‘Very peculiar,’ said the Queen Mother. Then after a pause, ‘I remember one time,’ she went on, ‘I was staying at a house where Mr. Browning was one of the guests. I never saw anyone eat so much for breakfast. Never. Except perhaps King Edward.’

They passed out of the hall into the dark little passage. The door at the end was still ajar. Sebastian pushed it open.

‘This is the place,’ he said.

Mrs. Gamble let go of his arm and, still holding the dog, groped her way forward. Her hand made contact with the washbasin; she turned on a tap and turned it off again; then groped on, touched and flushed the toilet. Foxy began to bark.

‘Which was that Roman emperor?’ she asked through the yapping and the noise of the rushing water. ‘The one who passed on in the W.C. Was it Marcus Aurelius or Julius Caesar?’

‘I think it was Vespasian,’ Sebastian ventured.

‘Vespasian? I never heard of him,’ said the Queen Mother emphatically. ‘It smells of cigar smoke here,’ she added. ‘I always told him he smoked too many cigars. Give me your arm again.’

They walked back through the hall and into the drawing-room.

‘Veronica,’ said the Queen Mother, speaking at random into the darkness that constituted her world, ‘did you ring up that tiresome woman again?’

‘Not yet, Mrs. Gamble.’

‘I wonder why she didn’t answer.’ The old lady’s tone was fretful and aggrieved.

‘She was out,’ said Mrs. Thwale quietly. ‘Giving a séance perhaps.’

‘Nobody has séances at nine in the morning. And anyhow, she ought to have left somebody to take her calls.’

‘She probably can’t afford a servant.’

‘Nonsense!’ barked the Queen Mother. ‘I’ve never known a good medium who couldn’t afford a servant. Particularly in Florence, where they’re dirt-cheap. Ring her up again, Veronica. Ring her up every hour until you get her. And now, boy, I want to walk up and down the terrace for a little, and you shall talk to me about poetry. How do you start writing a poem?’

‘Well,’ Sebastian began, ‘I usually ...’

He broke off.

‘But it’s really too difficult to explain.’

He turned and gave her one of his irresistible, his angelic smiles.

‘What a stupid answer!’ exclaimed the Queen Mother. ‘It may be difficult, but it certainly isn’t impossible.’

Remembering too late that she couldn’t see his smile, and feeling very foolish indeed, Sebastian relaxed his facial muscles into seriousness.

‘Go on!’ commanded the old lady.

Stammering, he did his best.

‘Well, it’s as if you ... I mean, it’s like suddenly hearing something. And then it seems to grow by itself — you know, like a crystal in a super-saturated solution.’

‘In a what?’

‘A super-saturated solution.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Oh, well, it’s ... it’s the thing that crystals grow in. But as a matter of fact,’ he hastily added, ‘that isn’t quite the right metaphor. It’s more like flowers coming up from seed. Or even like sculpture — you know: adding on little bits of clay and at last it’s a statue. Or, still better, you might compare it to ...’

The Queen Mother cut him short.

‘I don’t understand a word you’re saying,’ she rasped. ‘And you mumble worse than ever.’

‘I’m awfully sorry,’ he muttered, yet more inaudibly.

‘I shall tell Veronica to give you a lesson in talking the king’s English every afternoon, while I’m having my rest. And now start again about your poetry.’

Chapter Fifteen

‘BACKWARDS AND DOWNWARDS,’ the laughter and the cigar. For long durations there was nothing else. This was all of himself that he possessed, all of himself that he had been able to find. Nothing but the memory of three words, of a sudden glory and a slobbered cylinder of tobacco. But it sufficed. The knowledge was delightful and reassuring.

Meanwhile, on the fringes of awareness, the light still lingered; and suddenly, between two rememberings, he perceived that it had somehow changed.

In the beginning the brightness had been everywhere, and everywhere the same, a shining silence, boundless and uniform. And essentially it was still without flaw, still indeterminate. And yet, while it remained what it had always been, it was as though that calm boundlessness of bliss and knowledge had been limited by the interpenetration of an activity. An activity that was at the same time a pattern, a kind of living lattice; ubiquitous, infinitely complex, exquisitely delicate. A vast ubiquitous web of beknottednesses and divergences, of parallels and spirals, of intricate figures and their curiously distorted projections — all shining and active and alive.

Once more his single fragment of selfhood came back to him — the same as ever, but in some way associated, this time, with a particular figure in that bright lattice of intricate relationships, located, as it were, on one of its innumerable nodes of intersecting movement.

‘Backwards and downwards,’ and then the sudden glory of laughter.

But this pattern of intersections was projected from another pattern, and within that other pattern he suddenly found another, larger fragment of himself — found the remembered image of a small boy, scrambling up out of the water of a ditch, wet and muddy to above the knees. And ‘Sucks, John, sucks!’ he remembered himself shouting; and when the boy said, ‘Jump, you coward,’ he only shouted ‘Sucks!’ again, and howled with laughter.

And the laughter brought back the cigar, all slobbered, and along with the cigar, somewhere else in the heart of that ubiquitous lattice, the memory of the feeling of a thumb between the lips, the memory of the pleasure of sitting interminably in the W.C., reading the Boy’s Own Paper and sucking on a stringy length of liquorice.

And here, going back from projection to projector, was the image of an enormous, firm-fleshed presence, smelling of disinfectant soap. And when he failed to do Töpfchen, Fräulein Anna laid him deliberately across her knees, gave him two smacks, and left him lying face downwards on the cot, while she went to fetch the Sprite. Yes, the Spritze, the Spritze And there were other names for it, English names; for sometimes it was his mother who inflicted the pleasure-anguish of the enema. And when that happened the looming presence smelt, not of disinfectant, but of orris root. And though, of course, he could have done Töpfchen if he had wanted to, he wouldn’t — just for the sake of that agonizing pleasure.

The lines of living light fanned out, then came together in another knot; and this was no longer Fräulein Anna or his mother; this was Mimi. Spicciati, Bebino! And with an uprush of elation he remembered the claret-coloured dressing-gown, the warmth and resilience of flesh beneath the silk.

Through the interstices of the lattice he was aware of the other aspect of the light — of the vast undifferentiated silence, of the beauty austerely pure, but fascinating, desirable, irresistibly attractive.

The brightness approached, grew more intense. He became part of the bliss, became identical with the silence and the beauty. For ever, for ever.

But with participation in the beauty there went participation in the knowledge. And suddenly he knew these recovered fragments of himself for what they so shamefully were; knew them for mere clots and disintegrations, for mere absences of light, mere untransparent privations, nothingnesses that had to be annihilated, had to be held up into the incandescence, considered in all their hideousness by the light of that shining silence, considered and understood and then repudiated, annihilated to make place for the beauty, the knowledge, the bliss.

The claret-coloured dressing-gown fell apart, and he discovered another fragment of his being — a memory of round breasts, wax-white, tipped with a pair of blind brown eyes. And in the thick flesh, deeply embedded, the navel, he recalled, had the absurd primness of a Victorian mouth. Prunes and prisms. Adesso comincia la tortura.

Abruptly, almost violently, the beauty of the light and the anguish of participating in its knowledge were intensified beyond the limits of possibility. But in the same instant he realized that it was in his power to avert his attention, to refuse to participate. Deliberately, he limited his awareness to the claret-coloured dressing-gown. The light died down again into insignificance. He was left in peace with his little property of memories and images. To treasure and enjoy them interminably — to enjoy them to the point of identification, to the point of being transubstantiated into them. Again and again, through comfortable durations of cigars and dressing-gowns and laughter and Fräulein Anna, and then cigars again and dressing-gowns....

Then suddenly, within the framework of the lattice, there was an abrupt displacement of awareness, and he was discovering another fragment of himself.... They were sitting in that church at Nice, and the choir was singing Mozart's Ave Verum Corpus — the men's voices filling all the hollow darkness with a passion of grief and yearning, and the boyish trebles passing back and forth between them, harmonious but beautifully irrelevant with the virginal otherness of things before the Fall, before the discovery of good and evil. Effortlessly, the music moved on from loveliness to loveliness. There was the knowledge of perfection, ecstatically blissful and at the same time sad, sad to the point of despair. Ave Verum, Verum Corpus. Before the motet was half over, the tears were streaming down his cheeks. And when he and Laurina left the church, the sun had set and above the dark house-tops the sky was luminous and serene. They found the car and drove back to Monte Carlo along the Comiche. At a bend of the road, between two tall cypresses, he saw the evening star. 'Look!' he said. 'Like the boys singing!' But twenty minutes later they were in the Casino. It was the evening Laurina had her extraordinary run of luck. Twenty-two thousand francs. And in her room, at midnight, she had spread the money all over the carpet — hundreds of gold pieces, dozens and dozens of hundred-franc notes. He sat down beside her on the floor, put an arm round her shoulders and drew her close. 'Ave Verum Corpus,' he said, laughing. This was the true body.

And now he was at another but an almost identical intersection of the lattice, remembering himself lying in the long grass beside the cricket field at school. Looking up sleepily, through half-closed eyelids, at the hazy, almost tangible blueness of an English summer afternoon. And as he looked, something extraordinary happened. Nothing moved, but it was as though there had been an enormous circular gesture, as though something like a curtain had been drawn back. To all outward seeming that blue nostalgic canopy just above the tree-tops remained unruffled. And yet everything was suddenly different, everything had fallen to bits. The half-holiday afternoon, the routine of the game, the friendliness of familiar things and happenings — all were in bits. Shattered, for all that they were physically intact, by an inward and invisible earthquake. Something had broken through the crust of customary appearance. A lava gush from some other, more real order of existence. Nothing had changed; but he perceived everything as totally different, perceived himself as capable of acting and thinking in totally new ways appropriate to that revolutionary difference in the world.

'What about going down town when the game's over?'

He looked up. It was Timmy Williams — but even Timmy Williams, he suddenly perceived, was something other, better, more significant than the ferret-faced creature he enjoyed talking literature and smut with.

'Something rather queer happened to me this afternoon,' he was confiding, half an hour later, as they sat at the confectioner's, eating strawberries and cream.

But when the story was told Timmy merely laughed and said that everybody had spots in front of their eyes sometimes. It was probably constipation.

It wasn't true, of course. But now that the shattered world had come together again, now that the curtain had fallen into place and the lava gush had flowed back to where it had come from, how nice

and comfortable everything was! Better to leave well enough alone. Better to go on behaving as one had always behaved, not risk having to do anything strange or uncomfortable. After a moment's hesitation, he joined in the laughter.

Probably constipation. Yes, probably constipation. And, as though endowed with a life of its own, the refrain began to chant itself to the tune of 'Under the Bamboo Tree.'

Probably constip,
Probably constip,
Probably constipaysh;
Probably const,
Probably const,
Probably constipay, pay, pay.

And da capo, da capo — like that barrel organ which was playing the tune outside the Kensington Registry Office the morning he and Amy were married.

Under the bamboo,
Under the bamboo,
Probably constipaysh ...

Chapter Sixteen

'WELL,' SAID MRS. THWALE, as Foxy's barking and the thin croak of the Queen Mother's endearments died away into the distance, 'now you're my pupil. Perhaps I ought to have provided myself with a birch. Do you get birched at school?'

Sebastian shook his head.

'No? What a pity! I've always thought that birching had considerable charm.'

She looked at him with a faint smile; then turned away to sip her coffee. There was a long silence.

Sebastian raised his eyes and surreptitiously studied her averted face — the face of Mary Esdaile come to life, the face of the woman with whom, in imagination, he had explored what he believed to be the uttermost reaches of sensuality. And here she sat, decorously in black among all the coloured richness of the room, utterly unaware of the part she had played in his private universe, the things she had done and submitted to. Messalina inside his skull, Lucretia inside hers. But of course she wasn't Lucretia, not with those eyes of hers, not with that way of silently impregnating the space around her with her physically feminine presence.

Mrs. Thwale looked up.

'Obviously,' she said, 'the first thing is to discover why you mumble, when it's just as easy to speak clearly and coherently. Why do you?'

'Well, if one feels shy ...'

'If one feels shy,' said Mrs. Thwale, 'the best thing to do, I've always found, is to imagine how the person you're shy of would look if he or she were squatting in a hip bath.'

Sebastian giggled.

'It's almost infallible,' she continued. 'The old and ugly ones look so grotesque that you can hardly keep a straight face. Whereas the young, good-looking ones look so attractive that you lose all alarm and even all respect. Now, shut your eyes and try it.'

Sebastian glanced at her, and the blood rushed up into his face.

'You mean ...?'

He found himself unable to finish the question.

'I have no objection,' said Mrs. Thwale composedly.

He shut his eyes; and there was Mary Esdaile in black lace, Mary Esdaile on a pink divan in the attitude of Boucher's Petite Morphil.

‘Well, do you feel less shy now?’ she asked when he had reopened his eyes.

Sebastian looked at her for a moment; then, overwhelmed by embarrassment at the thought that she now knew something of what was happening in the world of his phantasy, emphatically shook his head.

‘You don’t?’ said Mrs. Thwale, and the low voice modulated upwards on a rising coo. ‘That’s bad. It almost looks as if yours were a case for surgery. S-surgery,’ she repeated, and took another sip of coffee, looking at him all the time with bright ironic eyes over the top of her cup.

‘However,’ she added, as she wiped her mouth, ‘it may still be possible to achieve a cure by psychological methods. There’s the technique of outrage, for example.’

Sebastian repeated the words on a tone of enquiry.

‘Well, you know what an outrage is,’ she said. ‘A non sequitur in action. For example, rewarding a child for being good by giving it a sound whipping and sending it to bed. Or better still, whipping it and sending it to bed for no reason at all. That’s the perfect outrage — completely disinterested, absolutely platonic.’

She smiled to herself. Those last words were the ones her father liked to use when he talked about Christian charity. That damned charity, with which he had poisoned all her childhood and adolescence. Surrounding himself, in its name, with a rabble of the unfortunate and the worthy. Turning what should have been their home into a mere waiting-room and public corridor. Bringing her up among the squalors and uglinesses of poverty. Blackmailing her into a service she didn’t want to give. Forcing her to spend her leisure with dull and ignorant strangers, when all she desired was to be alone. And as though to add insult to injury, he made her recite I Corinthians xiii every Sunday evening.

‘Absolutely platonic,’ Mrs. Thwale repeated, looking up again at Sebastian. ‘Like Dante and Beatrice.’ And after a second or two she added pensively: ‘One day that pretty face of yours is going to get you into trouble.’

Sebastian laughed uncomfortably, and tried to change the subject.

‘But where does shyness come in?’ he asked.

‘It doesn’t,’ she answered. ‘It goes out. The outrage drives it out.’

‘What outrage?’

‘Why, the outrage you commit when you simply don’t know what else to do or say.’

‘But how can you? I mean, if you’re shy ...’

‘You’ve got to do violence to yourself. As if you were committing suicide. Put the revolver to your temple. Five more seconds, and the world will come to an end. Meanwhile, nothing matters.’

‘But it does matter,’ Sebastian objected. ‘And the world doesn’t really come to an end.’

‘No; but it’s really transformed. The outrage creates an entirely novel situation.’

‘An unpleasant situation.’

‘So unpleasant,’ Mrs. Thwale agreed, ‘that you can’t think of being shy any more.’

Sebastian looked doubtful.

‘You don’t believe me?’ she said. ‘Well, we’ll stage a rehearsal. I’m Mrs. Gamble asking you to tell me how you write a poem.’

‘God, wasn’t that ghastly!’ cried Sebastian.

‘And why was it ghastly? Because you didn’t have the sense to see that it was the sort of question that couldn’t be answered except by an outrage. It made me laugh to hear you humming and hawing over psychological subtleties which the old lady couldn’t possibly have understood even if she had wanted to. Which, of course, she didn’t.’

‘But what else could I have done? Seeing that she wanted to know how I wrote.’

‘I’ll tell you,’ said Mrs. Thwale. ‘You shouldn’t have spoken for at least five seconds; then very slowly and distinctly you should have said: “Madame, I do it with an indelible pencil on a roll of toilet paper.” Now, say it.’

‘No, I can’t ... really ...’

He gave her one of his appealing, irresistible smiles. But, instead of melting, Mrs. Thwale contemptuously shook her head.

‘No, no,’ she said, ‘I’m not a bit fond of children. And as for you, you ought to be ashamed of playing those tricks. At seventeen a man ought to be begetting babies, not trying to imitate them.’

Sebastian blushed and uttered a nervous laugh. Her frankness had been horribly painful; and yet with a part of his being he was glad that she should have spoken as she did, glad that she didn’t want, like all the rest, to treat him as a child.

‘And now,’ Mrs. Thwale went on, ‘this time you’ll say it — do you understand?’

The tone was so coolly imperious that Sebastian obeyed without further protest or demur.

‘Madame, I do it with an indelible pencil,’ he began.

‘That’s not an outrage,’ said Mrs. Thwale. ‘That’s a bleat.’

‘I do it with an indelible pencil,’ he repeated more loudly.

‘Fortissimo!’

‘... With an indelible pencil on a roll of toilet paper....’

Mrs. Thwale clapped her hands.

‘Excellent!’

She uttered a delicate grunt of laughter. More boisterously, Sebastian joined in.

‘And now,’ she went on, ‘I ought to box your ears. Hard, so that it hurts. And you’ll be so startled and angry that you’ll shout, “You bloody old bitch,” or words to that effect. And then the fun will begin. I’ll start screeching like a macaw, and you’ll start ...’

The door of the drawing-room was thrown open.

‘Il Signor De Vries,’ announced the footman.

Mrs. Thwale broke off in the middle of her sentence and instantaneously readjusted her expression. It was a grave madonna who faced the new arrival as he hurried across the room towards her.

‘I was out all morning,’ said Paul De Vries, as he took her extended hand. ‘Didn’t get your phone message till I came back to the hotel after lunch. What a shocking piece of news!’

‘Shocking,’ Mrs. Thwale repeated, nodding her head. ‘By the way,’ she added, ‘this is poor Mr. Barnack’s nephew, Sebastian.’

‘This must be a dreadful blow to you,’ said De Vries as they shook hands.

Sebastian nodded and, feeling rather hypocritical, mumbled that it was.

‘Dreadful, dreadful,’ the other repeated. ‘But of course one must never forget that even death has its values.’

He turned back to Mrs. Thwale.

‘I came up here to see if there was anything I could do to help you.’

‘That was very kind of you, Paul.’

She lifted her eyelids and gave him an intent, significant look; the unparted lips trembled into a faint smile. Then she looked down again at the white hands lying folded in her lap.

Paul De Vries’s face lit up with pleasure; and suddenly, in a flash of insight, Sebastian perceived that the fellow was in love with her, and that she knew it and permitted it.

He was overcome with a fury of jealousy, jealousy all the more painful for knowing itself futile, all the more violent because he was too young to be able to avow it without making a fool of himself. If he told her what he felt, she would simply laugh at him. It would be another of his humiliations.

‘I think I ought to go,’ he muttered, and began to move towards the door.

‘You’re not running away, are you?’ said Mrs. Thwale.

Sebastian halted and looked round. Her eyes were fixed upon him. He flinched away from their dark enigmatic regard.

‘I’ve got to ... to write some letters,’ he invented; and turning, he hurried out of the room.

‘Do you see that?’ said Mrs. Thwale as the door closed. ‘The poor boy’s jealous of you.’

‘Jealous?’ the young man repeated in a tone of incredulous astonishment.

He hadn't noticed anything. But then, of course, he seldom did notice things. It was a fact about himself which he knew and was even rather proud of. When one's mind is busy with really important, exciting ideas, one can't be bothered with the trivial little events of daily life.

'Well, I suppose you're right,' he said with a smile. "'The desire of the moth for the star.'" It's probably very good for the boy,' he added in the tone of a wise, benevolent humanist. 'Hopeless passions are part of a liberal education. That's the way adolescents learn how to sublimate sex.'

'Do they?' said Mrs. Thwale with a seriousness so absolute that a more perspicacious man would have divined the underlying irony.

But Paul De Vries only nodded emphatically.

'By discovering the values of romantic love,' he said. 'That's how they achieve sublimation. Havelock Ellis has some beautiful things to say about it in one of his ...'

Becoming suddenly aware that this wasn't at all what he really wanted to talk to her about, he broke off.

'Damn Havelock Ellis!' he said; and there was a long silence.

Mrs. Thwale sat quite still, waiting for what she knew was going to happen next. And, sure enough, he suddenly sat down on the sofa beside her, took her hand and squeezed it between both of his.

She raised her eyes, and Paul De Vries gazed back at her with a tremulous little smile of the most intense yearning. But Mrs. Thwale's face remained unalterably grave, as though love were too serious a thing to be smiled over. With those nostrils of his, she was thinking, he looked like one of those abjectly sentimental dogs. Ludicrous, but at the same time a bit distasteful. But then it was always a question of choosing between two evils. She looked down again.

The young man raised her unresponsive fingers to his lips and kissed them with a kind of religious reverence. But her perfume had a kind of sultry and oppressive sweetness; her neck was flawlessly round and smooth and white; under the stretched black silk he could imagine the firmness of the small breasts. Yearning came sharply into focus as desire. He whispered her name and, abruptly, rather clumsily, put one arm round her shoulders and with the other hand raised her face towards his own. But before he could kiss her Mrs. Thwale had drawn away from him.

'No, Paul. Please.'

'But, my darling ...'

He caught hold of her hand and tried once again to draw her towards him. She stiffened and shook her head.

'I said no, Paul.'

Her tone was peremptory: he desisted.

'Don't you care for me at all, Veronica?' he said plaintively.

Mrs. Thwale looked at him in silence, and for a moment she was tempted to answer the fool as he deserved. But that would be silly. Gravely, she nodded.

'I'm very fond of you, Paul. But you seem to forget,' she added with a sudden smile and change of tone, 'that I'm what's known as a respectable woman. Sometimes I wish I weren't. But there it is!'

Yes, there it was — an insurmountable obstacle in the way of modified celibacy. And meanwhile he loved her as he had never loved anyone before. Loved uncontrollably, beyond reason, to the verge of insanity. Loved to the point of being haunted by the thought of her, of being possessed by the lovely demon of her desirableness.

The small inert hand which he had been holding came suddenly to life and was withdrawn.

'Besides,' she went on gravely, 'we're forgetting poor Mr. Barnack.'

'Damn Mr. Barnack!' he couldn't help snapping.

'Paul!' she protested, and her face took on an expression of distress. 'Really ...'

'I'm sorry,' he said, between his teeth.

Elbows on knees, head between hands, he stared unseeingly at the patch of Chinese carpet between his feet. He was thinking, resentfully, how the demon would break in upon him while he was reading. There was no preservative or exorcism; even the most excitingly new and important books were powerless

against the obsession. Instead of quantum mechanics, instead of the individuation field, it would suddenly be the pale oval of her face that filled his mind, it would be her voice, and the way she looked at you, and her perfume, and the white roundness of her neck and arms. And yet he had always sworn to himself that he would never get married, that he'd give all his time and thought and energies to this great work of his, to the bridge-building which was so obviously and providentially his vocation.

All at once he felt the touch of her hand on his hair and, looking up, found her smiling at him, almost tenderly.

'You mustn't be sad, Paul.'

He shook his head.

'Sad, and mad, and probably bad as well.'

'No, don't say that,' she said, and with a quick movement she laid her fingers lightly over his mouth. 'Not bad, Paul; never bad.'

He caught her hand and covered it with kisses. Unprotestingly, she abandoned it for a few seconds to his passion, then gently took it back.

'And now,' she said, 'I want to hear all about your visit to that man you were telling me about yesterday.'

His face brightened.

'You mean Loria?'

She nodded.

'Oh, that was really exciting,' said Paul De Vries. 'He's the man who's been carrying on Peano's work in mathematical logic.'

'Is he as good as Russell?' asked Mrs. Thwale, who recalled an earlier conversation on the same subject.

'That's just the question I've been asking myself,' the young man cried delightedly.

'Great minds think alike,' said Mrs. Thwale.

Smiling an enchantingly playful smile, she rapped with her knuckles first on her own forehead, then on his.

'And now I want to hear about your exciting Professor Loria.'

Chapter Seventeen

TO THE TUNE of 'Under the Bamboo Tree,' to the accompaniment of Timmy Williams's knowing laughter, again, again:

Probably constip,

Probably constip,

Probably constipaysh ...

But of course it wasn't true. He had always known that it wasn't true.

There was an awareness once more of an all-pervading silence that shone and was alive. Beautiful with more than the beauty of even Mozart's music, more than the beauty of the sky after sunset, of the evening star emerging into visibility between the cypresses.

And from those cypresses he found himself moving across the lattice to the discovery of himself at Paestum in the dusk of a windy autumn twilight, to a memory of the Vale of the White Horse as the July sunshine poured down with a kind of desperate intensity out of a blue gulf between mountainous continents of thunder-cloud. And here was the Maize God from Copan, and the 'Last Communion of St. Jerome.' And that thing of Constable's at the Victoria and Albert, and — yes! — 'Susanna and the Elders.'

But this wasn't Tintoret's pale silhouette of a marbly and majestic nakedness. This was Mimi. Mimi as she squatted on the divan, short-legged, opaquely white against the garish cushions.

And suddenly he was participating once more in that relentless knowledge of an absence so hideous that there could be nothing but self-abhorrence, nothing but shame, judgment, condemnation.

To escape from the pain he turned once more towards the parting of the dressing-gown, towards the fondlings and the dandlings, the cigar and the laughter. But this time the light refused to be eclipsed. Instead, it grew brighter, impossibly; grew unendurably more beautiful.

Terror modulated into resentment, into a passion of rage and hatred. And as though by magic he had, at one stroke, repossessed himself of all his four vocabularies of obscenity — the native English, the painstakingly acquired German and French and Italian.

The uprush of his anger, the torrent of those words, brought him immediate relief. The urgency of the light diminished, and there was no more participation in the knowledge, by which he was compelled to judge himself shameful. Nothing remained but that beauty, far off in the background, like the sky after sunset. But now he had seen through its loveliness, knew it was only a bait to lure one on into some horrible kind of suicide.

Suicide, suicide — they were all trying to persuade one to commit suicide. And here was the fragment of himself represented by Bruno in the bookshop, Bruno on the way to the station. Looking at one with those eyes of his, talking so gently about the need of allowing oneself to be forgiven, even trying to hypnotize one. To hypnotize one into self-destruction.

Slipping sideways, as it were, on to another plane of the lattice, he found himself all of a sudden in contact with a knowledge which he knew immediately as Bruno's. The knowledge, dim and irrelevant, of a bare hotel bedroom and, at the same time, overpoweringly, of the light. Tenderly blue, this time. Blue and somehow musical. A systole and diastole of radiance, singing voicelessly within the whorls of an unseen shell.

Beauty and peace and tenderness — immediately recognized and immediately rejected. Known, only to be hated, only to be defiled, idiomatically, in four languages.

St. Willibald saying his prayers in the bedroom of a fourth-rate hotel. St. Wunnibald staring at his navel. It was asinine. It was contemptible. And if the fool imagined that, by playing these tricks, he could shame one into wanting to commit suicide, he was entirely mistaken. Who did he think he was, fooling about with that damned light? But whatever he might think, the fact remained that he was just old man Bruno, just a scrubby little bookseller with a half-baked intelligence and a gift of the gab.

And then he was aware that Bruno was not alone, that Bruno's knowledge of the light was not the only knowledge. There was a whole galaxy of awarenesses. Bright by participation, made one with the light that gave them their being. Made one and yet recognizable, within the Universal Possibility, as possibilities that had actually been realized.

In the hotel bedroom the knowledge of that tender and musical radiance was growing more complete. And as it did so, the blueness brightened up towards a purer incandescence, the music modulated from significance through heightened significance into the ultimate perfection of silence.

'Willibald, Wunnibald. In a fourth-rate hotel. And let's hope there's a couple of German honeymooners in the next room.' Showing off what he could do with the light! But that didn't prevent him from being a silly little rag-and-bone merchant, a pedlar of mouldy rubbish. 'And if he seriously imagines he can browbeat one into feeling ashamed ...'

Abruptly, Eustace was aware of what the other knew. Was aware by acquaintance, not from the outside only, but in an act of identification. And in the same instant he became aware again of the unutterable ugliness of his own opaque and fragmentary being.

Shameful, shameful... But he refused to feel ashamed. He'd be damned if he'd let himself be dragged into suicide. Yes, he'd be damned, he'd be damned!...

In the brightness and the silence his thoughts were like lumps of excrement, like the noise of vomiting. And the more repulsive they seemed, the more frantic became his anger and hatred.

Damned light! Bloody little rag-and-bone man! But now there was no longer any rest or respite to be found in being angry. His hatred blazed, but blazed in the face of an unobscured radiance. The four

vocabularies of obscenity vomited themselves out in a silence with which in some sort he was identified, a silence that merely emphasized the hideousness of that which interrupted it.

All the elation of anger and hatred, all the distracting excitement, died away, and he was left with nothing but the naked, negative experience of revulsion. Painful intrinsically and at the same time a cause of further pain. For the unobscured light and the uninterrupted silence, which were the objects of his loathing, compelled him once again to know himself to sit in judgment, to condemn.

Other fragments of himself made their appearance. Ten pages of Proust, and a trot round the Bargello; St. Sebastian among the Victorian ornaments, and the Young Man of Peoria. Fascinatio nugacitatis. But all the trifling which had once enchanted him was now not only profoundly wearisome, but also, in some negative way, profoundly evil. And yet it had to be persisted in; for the alternative was a total self-knowledge and self-abandonment, a total attention and exposure to the light.

So now it was Mimi again. And in the brightness, with which he was now unescapably identified, those too had to be persisted in — those long afternoons in the little flat behind Santa Croce. Interminable cold frictions; the strigil rasping and rasping, but without titillation. Adesso comincia la tortura. And it never stopped, because he couldn't allow it to stop, for fear of what might happen if he did. There was no escape, except along this path which led him yet further into captivity.

Suddenly Bruno Rontini stirred a little and coughed. Eustace was aware, at one remove, of a heightened awareness of the bleak little bedroom and the noise of the traffic climbing in low gear up the steep approaches to Perugia. Then this irrelevant knowledge was quietly put aside, and there was only silence again and brightness.

Or was there perhaps another path? A way that would lead one around these excremental clots of old experience and the condemnation they imposed? The silence and the brightness were pregnant with the unequivocal answer: there was no way round, there was only the way through. And of course he knew all about it, he knew exactly where it led.

But if that way were followed, what would happen to Eustace Barnack? Eustace Barnack would be dead. Stone dead, extinct, annihilated. There'd be nothing but this damned light, this fiendish brightness in the silence. His hatred flared up again; and then, almost instantly, the delightful and exhilarating heat was quenched. Nothing was left him but a frigid and frightened revulsion and, along with the revulsion, the excruciating knowledge that his hatred and his revulsion were equally disgusting.

But better this pain than its alternative; better this knowledge of his own hatefulness than the extinction of all knowledge whatsoever. Anything rather than that! Even these eternities of empty foolery, these eternities of a lust devoid of all pleasure. Ten pages of Proust, and the juxtaposition of wax flowers and St. Sebastian. Again and again. And after that the repetitions of those corpse-cold sensualities, the fondlings, the dandlings, the endless obligatory fumbings, to the accompaniment of 'Probably Constip' and 'The Young Man of Peoria.' Thousands of times, hundreds of thousands of times. And the little joke about St. Willibald, the little joke about St. Wunnibald. And Mr. Cheeryble with his thurible, Mr. Chatterjee with his Mr. Chatterjee with his Mr. Chatterjee with ... And again the same ten pages of Proust, the same wax flowers and St. Sebastian, the same blind brown breast-eyes and the torture of compulsory lust, while the Young Man of Peoria kept on murmuring the Credo, murmuring the Sanctus, murmuring a string of flawlessly idiomatic obscenities in a luminous silence which made each one of their million repetitions seem yet more senseless than the last, yet more drearily disgusting.

But there was no alternative, no alternative except giving in to the light, except dying out into the silence. But anything rather than that, anything, anything....

And then suddenly there was salvation. A knowledge, first of all, that there were other knowledges. Not like Bruno's beastly conspiracy with the light. Not like that galaxy of awarenesses within the knowledge of all possibility. No, no. These other awarenesses were cosily similar to his own. And all of them were concerned with himself, with his own beloved and opaque identity. And their concern was like the fluttering shadow of a host of wings, like the cry and chatter of innumerable agitated little birds, shutting out that insupportable light, shattering that accursed silence, bringing respite and relief, bringing the blessed right to be himself and not ashamed of the fact.

He rested there in the delicious, twittering confusion, of which he had become the centre, and would have been happy so to rest for ever. But better things were reserved for him. Suddenly and without warning there dawned a new, more blissful phase of his salvation. He was in possession of something infinitely precious, something of which, as he now realized, he had been deprived throughout the whole duration of these horrible eternities — a set of bodily sensations. There was an experience, thrillingly direct and immediate, of the warm, living darkness behind closed eyelids; of faint voices, not remembered, but actually heard out there in front; of a touch of lumbago in the small of the back; of a thousand obscure little aches and pressures and tensions from within and from without. And what an odd kind of heaviness in the lower inwards! What curiously unfamiliar sensations of weight and constriction out there in front of the chest!

‘I think she’s gone under,’ said the Queen Mother in a harsh stage whisper.

‘She certainly seems to be breathing very stertorously,’ Paul De Vries agreed. ‘Snoring is always indicative of relaxation,’ he added instructively. ‘That’s why thin nervous people so seldom ...’

Mrs. Gamble cut him short.

‘Kindly let go of my hand,’ she said. ‘I want to blow my nose.’

Her bracelets tinkled in the darkness. There was a rustling and a snort.

‘Now, where are you?’ she asked, clawing for his hand. ‘Ah, here! I hope everybody’s holding tight.’

‘I certainly am,’ said the young man.

He spoke gaily; but the squeeze he administered to the soft hand on his right was lingeringly tender. To his delight the pressure was faintly, but quite perceptibly, returned.

Ambushed in the darkness, Mrs. Thwale was thinking of the shameless essence of love.

‘And what about you, Sebastian?’ she asked, turning her head.

‘I’m all right,’ he answered with a nervous giggle. ‘I’m still holding on.’

But so was that stinking De Vries! Holding on and being held on to. Whereas if he were to squeeze her hand, she’d probably announce the fact to the rest of the company, and they’d all simply howl with laughter. All the same, he had a good mind to do it in spite of everything. As an outrage — just as she had said. De Vries was in love with her and, for all he knew, she was in love with De Vries. Very well, then; the biggest non sequitur possible in the circumstances would be for him to say or do something to show that he was in love with her. But when it came to actually committing the outrage of squeezing her hand, Sebastian found himself hesitant. Did he have the nerve or didn’t he? Was it really worth it, or wasn’t it?

‘They say that holding hands does something to the vibrations,’ announced the Queen Mother from her end of the row.

‘Well, it’s not impossible,’ said Paul De Vries judicially. ‘In the light of the most recent researches into the electric potentials of the various muscle groups ...’

In five seconds, Sebastian was saying to himself, with the imaginary pistol barrel pressed once again to his temple, in five seconds the world would have come to an end. Nothing mattered any more. But still he didn’t act. Nothing mattered, nothing mattered, he was still despairingly repeating, when all at once he felt her hand coming to life within his own. Then, startlingly, her finger-tips began to trace little circles on his palm. Again, again, deliciously, electrically. Then without warning she dug her pointed nails into his flesh. For a second only, after which the fingers straightened out and relaxed, and he found himself holding a hand as limp and passive and inert as it had been before.

‘And then,’ Paul De Vries was saying, ‘one has to consider the possibility of mitotic radiations as a factor in the phenom ...’

‘Sh-sh! She’s saying something.’

Out of the darkness in front of them came a squeaky childish voice.

‘This is Bettina,’ it said. ‘This is Bettina.’

‘Good-evening, Bettina,’ cried the Queen Mother, in a tone that was intended to be gay and ingratiating. ‘How are things over on the other side?’

‘Fine!’ said the squeak, which belonged, as Mrs. Byfleet had explained before the lights were turned out, to a little girl who had passed on in the San Francisco earthquake. ‘Everything’s fine. Everyone’s feeling good. But poor old Gladys here — she’s quite sick.’

‘Yes, we’re all so sorry that Mrs. Byfleet shouldn’t be feeling well.’

‘Not feeling good at all.’

‘Most unfortunate!’ replied the Queen Mother with hardly disguised impatience. It was she who had insisted on Mrs. Byfleet’s giving the séance in spite of her indisposition. ‘But I hope it won’t interfere with the communications.’

The squeak said something about ‘doing our best,’ and tailed off into incoherence. Then the medium sighed profoundly and snored a little. There was a silence.

What did it mean, Sebastian was wondering. What on earth could it mean? His heart was beating like a sledge-hammer. Once again the barrel of the revolver was pressed against his forehead. In five seconds the world would come to an end. One, two, three ... He squeezed her hand. Waited a second. Squeezed it again. But there was no responsive pressure, no indication of any kind that she had even noticed what he had done. Sebastian felt himself overcome by the most excruciating embarrassment.

‘I always like to have my first séance as soon after the funeral as possible,’ the Queen Mother remarked. ‘Even before it, if the thing can be arranged. Nothing like striking the iron while it’s hot.’

There was a pause. Then, eager but monotonously flat, Paul De Vries’s voice broke in.

‘I keep thinking,’ he said, ‘of Mr. Pewsey’s address at the graveside this afternoon. Most touching, didn’t you think? And so felicitously worded. “Friend of the arts and artist in friendship.” He couldn’t have phrased it better.’

‘Which doesn’t prevent him,’ rasped the Queen Mother, ‘from having the most disgusting habits. If it weren’t for Veronica and that boy, I’d tell you a few of the things I happen to know about Tom Pewsey.’

‘There’s somebody here,’ the squeak startingly announced. ‘He’s very anxious to get in touch with you folks.’

‘Tell him we’re waiting,’ said the Queen Mother in the tone of one who gives orders to the footman.

‘Only just come over,’ the squeak went on. ‘Seems he doesn’t rightly know he’s passed on.’

For Paul De Vries the words were like the fresh scent of a rabbit to a nosing dog; he was off in a flash.

‘Isn’t that interesting!’ he exclaimed. ‘He doesn’t know he’s passed on. But they all say that, from the Mahayana Buddhists down to ...’

But the squeak had begun to mutter something.

‘Can’t you stop interrupting?’ said the Queen Mother.

‘I’m sorry,’ he murmured.

In the darkness Mrs. Thwale sympathetically pressed his right hand and, in the same instant, disinterested and platonic, crooked a delicate forefinger and across the centre of Sebastian’s left palm traced out the four letters, L, O, V, E, and then another, unavowable combination, and another. An effervescence of soundless laughter bubbled up within her.

‘He’s so glad you folks are all here,’ said the squeak, becoming suddenly articulate. ‘He can’t say how happy it makes him.’

‘Not that one would have expressed it with quite so much pathetic emphasis,’ Eustace was thinking. ‘But substantially it’s the truth.’

That damned light was now definitively out; and with these newly recovered sensations hopping and twittering like twenty thousand sparrows, there was no question any more of silence. And how delightful even lumbago could be, even this obscure and unfamiliar belly-ache! And the Queen Mother’s nutmeg-grater voice — no Mozart had ever sounded sweeter! Of course, it was unfortunate that, for some reason, everything had to pass through the filter of this intermediate knowledge. Or rather this intermediate ignorance; for it was just a lump of organized imbecility, that was all. You gave it the choicest of your little jokes, and four times out of five it came out with unadulterated nonsense. What

a hash, for example, it made of the things he said when that American fellow started talking about psychic factors, or whatever it was! And when he wanted to quote Sebastian's line about two buttocks and a pendulous bub, it kept on talking in a bewildered way about pendulums — bucks and pendulums. Too idiotic! However, he did at least manage to get in one good dig at the Queen Mother, to get it in almost verbatim; for even a half-wit couldn't make a mistake about the word 'claws.'

And then something very curious happened.

'Is it true,' Mrs. Thwale suddenly enquired in a tone of excessive and altogether improbable innocence, 'is it true that, where you are, there isn't any marrying or giving in marriage?'

The words seemed to touch a trigger; there was a kind of mental jerk, an almost violent displacement of consciousness — and Eustace found himself aware, as though in vivid memory, of events which had not happened to himself, events which, he somehow knew, had not as yet happened at all. Wearing a broad-shouldered fur coat and a preposterous hat like something out of a Winterhalter portrait of the Empress Eugenie, Mrs. Thwale was sitting on a platform with a lot of naval officers, while a man with tousled hair and a Middle Western accent bellowed into a microphone. 'Liberty Ship,' he kept saying, 'four hundred and fifty-ninth Liberty Ship.' And, sure enough, that enormous precipice of iron out there to the left was a ship's prow. And now Mrs. Thwale was on her feet swinging a champagne bottle on the end of a string. And then the precipice began to move away, and there was a lot of cheering. And while she was smiling up at an Admiral and some Captains, De Vries came running up and began to talk to them about the exciting new developments in ballistics ...

'I'm not the one who's thinking about marriage,' he said jocularly.

But what the imbecile actually uttered was, 'We don't think about marriage over here.'

Eustace began to protest, but was distracted from his irritation by the emergence of another of those clear memories of what had not yet happened. Little Thwale on a sofa with a very young officer, like those beardless children one used to see during the war. And really, really, the things she permitted herself! And always with that faintly ironical smile, that expression of detached curiosity in the bright dark eyes, which always remained wide open and observant, whatever might be happening. Whereas the boy, in his effort to hold the pleasure in, to shut the shame and the embarrassment out, kept his eyes tightly closed.

The moving images faded into nothingness and, at the thought of De Vries's horns and the inevitable connection between war and lust, between the holiest crusades and the most promiscuous copulations, Eustace started to laugh. 'Backwards and downwards, Christian soldiers,' he said in the interval between two paroxysms of amusement.

'He says we're all Christian soldiers,' pronounced the squeak; and then, almost immediately, 'Good-bye, folks,' it called, 'good-bye, good-bye.'

Laughter, a crescendo of laughter. Then, all of a sudden, Eustace realized that the blissful experience of sensation was beginning to ebb away from him. The voices from outside grew dimmer and more confused; the small obscure awarenesses of pressure, touch and tension faded away. And at last there was nothing left, not even the lumbago, not even the idiot interpreter. Nothing but the hunger for what he had lost and, emerging again from its long eclipse behind the opacity and the delicious noise, that pure, shining silence of the light. Brighter, ever more urgently, ever more austere and menacingly beautiful. Perceiving his danger, Eustace directed all his attention to little Thwale and her uniformed adolescent, to the enormous, cosmic joke of crusades and copulation. 'Downwards and backwards, Christian soldiers,' he repeated. Making a deliberate effort, he laughed more heartily than ever.

Chapter Eighteen

IT WAS ONLY a little after seven when Sebastian came down next morning for another solitary stroll in the garden — another wandering through Lycidas in the direction of his own as yet unnamed

and unwritten poem. It would begin, he had decided, with the Venus of the balustrade — shaped by a mind out of the shapelessness of stone. Order born of a chaos that itself was composed of innumerable lesser orders. And the statue would be the emblem of an individual life in its possible and ideal excellence, just as the garden as a whole would stand for the ideally excellent life of a society. From the ideally excellent he would pass to the actualities of ugliness, cruelty, ineptitude, death. After which, in a third part, ecstasy and intelligence would build the bridges leading from the actual to the ideal — from the blue tart and his father's severities to Mrs. Thwale and Mary Esdaile, from the corpse in the lavatory to Theocritus and Marvell.

Precisely how all this would be put across without becoming a bore he wouldn't know until he had actually got to work among the words in which it was to be expressed. Hitherto the only words that had come to him were connected with poor old Uncle Eustace and last night's séance, and would take their place somewhere in the second part.

'This Thing was once a man,' he repeated to himself, as he walked up and down the terrace in the early sunshine.

This Thing was once a man —

Take it for all in all,

Like the old piano ...

No, no, that was wrong: make it 'old Bechstein.'

Like the old Bechstein, auctioned off for nothing;

And men in aprons come for it with a van,

Shuffling across the hall.

Of the lines that followed, he still felt a bit uncertain.

But somebody in the empty drawing-room,

Strumming the non-existent keys ...

He shook his head. 'Non-existent' was journalistic. The word to aim at was 'absence.' 'Strumming the absence of its keys.' Or, better perhaps, 'strumming an absence of departed keys.'

But somebody in the empty drawing-room,

Strumming an absence of departed keys,

Still plays the old Chaconne and Für Elise

And Yes, sir, she's my baby, yes, sir, she's

My baby, yes, sir, till the crack of doom.

Which was certainly what it had seemed like at the séance, with that idiotic squeak quoting Uncle Eustace's smallest jokes, and even misquoting, as Sebastian had finally realized, his own little effort about Degas. But meanwhile there was that 'crack of doom' to be considered. Did circumstances justify the cliché? Or mightn't it be better to protract the sentence a little to lead it on, winding and serpentine, through 'tomb,' perhaps, or alternatively through an interrogatory 'whom?' into further recesses of the subject?

Sebastian was still debating the question, when something happened to interrupt the flow of his thoughts. The small girl he had seen that dreadful morning in the hall suddenly appeared at the top of the steps carrying, not a baby this time or a chicken, but a large basket. Startled by his unexpected presence, she halted and looked at him for a few seconds with an expression of uncertainty, almost of fear. Sebastian gave her a smile. Reassured by this display of benevolence on the part of one of the terrifying signori, the little girl smiled back and, walking in an excess of deference on the very tips of her clumsy boots, crossed the terrace and began to weed the flower-bed which ran in a narrow strip of colour and perfume at the foot of the villa's long façade.

Sebastian continued his promenading. But the presence of the child was an insurmountable obstacle to further composition. It was not that she made any noise, or indulged in any violence of movement. No, the trouble lay deeper. What distracted him was the fact that she was working messily in the earth, while he strolled up and down with his hands in his pockets. The proximity of the poor always made him feel uncomfortable, and to discomfort was added, when they worked and he apparently did nothing,

a sense of shame. These were feelings which ought, he supposed, to have made him want to follow in his father's footsteps. But politics always seemed so futile and unimportant. His ordinary reaction from the shame and discomfort was a flight from the situation which had occasioned them. And today the situation was even worse than usual. For the worker was a child, who ought to have been playing; and the poverty, contrasted with this surrounding magnificence, seemed peculiarly outrageous. Sebastian glanced at his watch and, in case she might be looking at him (which she wasn't), overacted the part of one who suddenly realizes that he is late for an important business appointment and hurried away. Half-way to the front door he suddenly remembered that he actually had a reason to hurry. He was going down into the town after lunch. Nominally to do some sight-seeing. But really, he had already decided, to get himself measured for his evening clothes — that was to say, if he could first sell the Degas.

He ran up to his room and came down again with his dispatch-case. The drawing-room was empty, and the old persistent whiff of Uncle Eustace's cigars had so far faded that it smelt only of potpourri. A long pencil of sunlight crossed the room and, as though with some mysterious purpose, lit up the three pelicans in the background of Piero's picture.

The drawings were lying on the marble-topped table that stood in the embrasure of the central window. Sebastian walked over, unfolded the brown paper, and from between the two protecting sheets of cardboard withdrew his legacy. Two buttocks and a pendulous bub. He placed the drawing in his dispatch-case and closed the lid. Then, very carefully, he folded the paper as it had been before. Degas and dinner jacket — now that poor old Uncle Eustace was dead, they were nobody's business but his own.

A thin little noise of treble singing made him start. He looked out through the open window. There, almost immediately below him, squatted the child from whom he had just fled. Her small grubby hands moved delicately among the hyacinths, pulling up here a groundsel, there a couple of blades of grass, so that all might be perfect and in order for the signori.

'Gobbo rotondo,' she sang to herself, 'che fai in questo mondo?'

Then, becoming somehow aware of the alien presence above her, she looked up and saw Sebastian. An expression of guilt and terror came into her eyes; the almost colourless cheeks flushed crimson.

'Scusi, signore,' she muttered in a trembling voice. 'Scusi.'

Sebastian, who was almost as much embarrassed as the little girl, withdrew his head abruptly and, moving away from the window, bent down to pick up his dispatch-case.

'What are you doing?' a low clear voice enquired behind him.

He started and turned. But without waiting for his answer, Mrs. Thwale had gone over to the window and was looking out.

'Cosa fai?' she asked.

From the terrace outside, the frightened voice made some incomprehensible answer.

Mrs. Thwale shrugged her shoulders and came back into the room.

'What were you talking to the child about?'

'I wasn't,' Sebastian stammered. 'I was just ... well, she was singing.'

'So you listened, and now you're going to sit down and do a slight Wordsworth about it?'

He laughed uncomfortably.

'And those are your manuscripts, I suppose?'

She indicated the dispatch-case.

Only too grateful for the suggestion, Sebastian nodded.

'Well, put them down and come out into the garden.'

Obediently he followed her across the hall and through the front door.

'And how did you enjoy the séance?' she asked, as he came up with her on the terrace.

'Oh, it was interesting,' he answered non-committally.

'Interesting?' she repeated. 'Only that?'

Sebastian blushed and averted his eyes. She was giving him an opportunity to say something about what had happened last night — to ask her what it had meant, to tell her about Mary Esdaile. But the words wouldn't come. They simply wouldn't come.

Mrs. Thwale glanced at the red, agonized face beside her, and almost laughed aloud. What exquisitely comic situations could arise with a person too timid to speak! The most outrageous actions, and not a word uttered, no reference ever made to them. Officially nothing would have happened; for there wouldn't be any communiqué. But actually, actually ...

'What a Punch and Judy show!' she said at last, breaking the long silence.

'You mean the séance?'

Mrs. Thwale nodded.

'All the same, it seemed genuine, didn't it? I mean, sometimes,' Sebastian added, hedging a little for fear of finding himself compelled to defend a too explicit opinion.

But the precaution was unnecessary.

'Perfectly genuine,' she agreed. 'Death cocking snooks at reverence and piety in exactly the same way as life does.'

They had reached the head of the steps, and she halted to look down, between the cypresses, at the roofs of Florence. Shamelessness at the core; but on the surface Brunelleschi and Michelangelo, good manners and Lanvin clothes, art and science and religion. And the charm of life consisted precisely in the inconsistency between essence and appearance, and the art of living in a delicate acrobacy of sauts périlleux from one world to the other, in a prestidigitation that could always discover the obscenity of rabbits at the bottom of even the glossiest high hat and, conversely, the elegant decency of a hat to conceal even the most pregnant and lascivious of rodents.

'Well, we can't stand here for ever,' Mrs. Thwale said at last. They moved on. As though casually and unreflectingly, she laid a hand on Sebastian's shoulder.

Chapter Nineteen

'A DRAWING TO sell?'

M. Weyl put on the bored, contemptuous expression he always assumed on these occasions. But when the boy opened his case and revealed the Degas that had been sold to ce pauvre Monsieur Eustache only four days before, he could not restrain a start of surprise.

'From where have you got this drawing?' he asked.

'It was given to me,' Sebastian answered.

'Given?'

'Tout est possible,' M. Weyl said to himself. But there had never been any suggestion that the old man was a homosexual.

Conscious that he had become an object of suspicion, Sebastian blushed.

'By my uncle,' he said. 'You probably knew him. Mr. Barnack.'

'Your uncle?'

M. Weyl's expression changed. He smiled; he seized Sebastian's hand in both of his and shook it.

One of his most valued clients. One of his truest friends, he ventured to say. He had been bouleversé by the tragic news. An irreparable loss to art. He could only offer his sincerest condolences.

Sebastian stammered his thanks.

'And the good uncle, he gave you this drawing?'

The other nodded.

'Just a few hours before ...'

'Before the supreme adieu,' said Gabriel Weyl poetically. 'What a sentimental value it must possess for you!'

Sebastian blushed a deeper crimson. To justify himself, he mumbled something about his having no place to hang the drawing. Besides, there was a sum of money which had to be paid out immediately — almost a debt of honour, he added as a picturesque afterthought. Otherwise he wouldn't have dreamt of parting with his uncle's present.

M. Weyl nodded sympathetically; but his eyes were bright with calculation.

'Tell me,' he asked, 'for what reason did you address yourself to me in this affair?'

'For no reason,' Sebastian answered. M. Weyl's happened to be the first art dealer's shop he had seen as he walked up the Via Tornabuoni.

That meant that he didn't know where the drawing had been bought. M. Weyl laughed gaily and patted Sebastian on the shoulder.

'The hazard,' he said sententiously, 'is often our surest guide.'

He looked down at the drawing, screwed up his eyelids and critically cocked his head.

'Pretty,' he said, 'pretty. Though hardly the master's best work.' He laid his finger on the buttocks. 'One remarks the effects of failing sight, hein?'

'Well, I didn't think so,' said Sebastian, in a manful effort to defend his property from disparagement. There was a little pause.

'If your good uncle gave you other things,' said M. Weyl in a casual tone, without looking up, 'I would be more than happy to make an offer. Last time I had the honour of visiting his collection, I recall that I was struck by some of the Chinese bronzes.' His thick, agile hands came together at the level of his face, as though he were clasping and cherishing some almost sacred object. 'What volumes!' he cried enthusiastically. 'What rhythmic sensuality! But small, quite small. One could almost carry them in the pockets.'

Turning to Sebastian, he smiled ingratiatingly.

'I could make you a very good offer for the bronzes,' he said.

'But they're not mine. I mean ... he only gave me this.'

'Only this?' the other repeated in a tone of incredulity.

Sebastian dropped his eyes. That smile, that insistent bright regard, made him feel uncomfortable. What was the fellow trying to suggest?

'Nothing except this,' he insisted, wishing to God that he had picked on another dealer. 'But of course, if you're not interested ...'

He started to put the drawing away again.

'But no, but no!' cried M. Weyl, laying a restraining hand on his sleeve. 'On the contrary. I interest myself in everything that Degas ever did — even in the smallest things, the most unimportant.'

Ten minutes later it was all over.

'... Nineteen, twenty, twenty-one and twenty-two. Correct, hein?'

'Thank you,' said Sebastian. He took the thick wad of hundred-lire notes and crammed them into his wallet. His face was flushed; his eyes shone with excitement and irrepressible triumph. The man had begun by offering only a thousand. Greatly daring, he had demanded three. They had compromised at last on two thousand two hundred. Ten per cent, above the figure that would have split the difference between demand and offer. Feeling that he had a right to be proud of himself, Sebastian put the wallet back into his pocket and looked up, to find the dealer smiling at him with almost paternal benevolence.

'A young man who knows how to sell his article of commerce,' said M. Weyl, patting him once more. 'In business you will have the most brilliant career.'

'No business for me,' Sebastian said. And when the other questioningly raised his eyebrows, 'You see,' he added, 'I'm a poet.'

A poet? But that had been M. Weyl's own youthful ambition. To express the lyricism of a heart which suffers ...

Les chants désespérés sont les chants les plus beaux,

Et j'en sais d'immortels qui sont de purs sanglots.

'De purs sanglots,' he repeated. 'Mais, hélas, the duty led me elsewhere.'

He sighed, and went on to question Sebastian about his family. Doubtless, in so cultivated a milieu, there was a tradition of poetry and the fine arts? And when the boy answered that his father was a barrister, he insisted on Mr. Barnack's being one of those legal luminaries who devote their leisures to the Muses.

The idea of his father ever having any leisures or, if he had, devoting them to anything but Blue books, was so funny that Sebastian laughed aloud. But M. Weyl looked offended; and he hastily broke off in order to offer an explanation for his merriment.

'You see,' he said, 'my father's rather peculiar.'

'Peculiar?'

Sebastian nodded, and in his broken incoherent style embarked upon an account of John Barnack's career. And somehow, in his present mood, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to make the picture heroic — to harp on his father's successes as an advocate, to magnify his political importance, to stress the greatness of his self-sacrifice.

'But what generosity!' cried M. Weyl.

Sebastian responded to the words as if they had been a compliment addressed to himself. A tingling warmth ran up his spine.

'He has lots of money,' he went on. 'But he gives it all away. To political refugees and that kind of thing.'

The pleasure of vicariously boasting had made him momentarily forget his hatred of those blood-suckers who took what rightfully should have been his and left him without even a dinner jacket.

'There's a chap called Cacciaguida, for example ...'

'You mean the Professor?'

Sebastian nodded. M. Weyl cast a quick glance round the shop and, though it was empty, resumed the conversation in a lower tone.

'Is he a friend of your father's?'

'He came to dinner with us,' Sebastian answered importantly, 'just before we started for Florence.'

'Personally,' M. Weyl whispered, after taking another look round the shop, 'I find him a great man. But permit me to give you a good advice.'

He winked expressively, raised a forefinger to his floridly sculptured lips, and shook his head. 'The silence is of gold,' he pronounced oracularly.

The sudden jangling of the door-bell made them turn with a start, like a pair of conspirators. Two ladies in the early forties, one rather plump and dark, the other fair, sunburnt and athletic, were entering the shop. An expression of rapturous delight appeared on M. Weyl's face.

'Gnädige Baronin!' he cried, 'y la reina de Buenos Aires!'

Pushing Sebastian aside, he jumped over a cassetone, ducked under the right arm of a life-sized crucified Christ and, rushing up to the two ladies, ecstatically kissed their hands.

Unobtrusively, Sebastian slipped out of the shop and, whistling, walked jauntily up the Via Tornabuoni in the direction of the cathedral and Uncle Eustace's tailor.

Chapter Twenty

CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS, COPULATING soldiers; and all those wars, those holy wars, while echo answers, 'Whores, whores, whores!' The God of Battles is always the God of Brothels, always and inevitably the God of Brothels....

For Eustace Barnack, there was no longer any need to force the laughter. It pealed now of its own accord, shattering what remained of that detestable silence, darkening and dissipating the last far gleams of the light.

The whole universe quivered with amusement, rumbled with enormous hilarities. And through the laughter echo kept answering, 'Whores and Brothels, Whores and Brothels.'

A whole section of his intellectual being was suddenly restored to him. He remembered his collection of Historical Jokes. A million casualties and the Gettysburg Address, and then those abject, frightened negroes one sees in the little towns of Georgia and Louisiana. The crusade for liberty, quality, fraternity, and then the rise of Napoleon; the crusade against Napoleon, and then the rise of German nationalism; the crusade against German nationalism, and now those unemployed men, standing, like half-animated corpses, at the corners of mean streets in the rain.

And this was John's voice that he now remembered — vibrant with repressed enthusiasm, talking about the end of laissez-faire and production for use and the Russian Revolution. In other words, two and a half times the population of London exterminated, in order that political power might be taken from one set of ruffians and given to another set; in order that a process of industrialization might be made a little more rapid and a great deal more ruthless than it otherwise would have been. 'Downwards and backwards, Anti-Christian soldiers!' Laughter swelled to a crescendo. He was filled with an enormous elation, with the glory of universal derision, the ecstasy of contempt for everyone.

Silliness and murder, stupidity and destruction! He found the phrases waiting for him. And the motive was always idealism, the instruments were always courage and loyalty — the heroic courage and loyalty without which men and women would never be able to persevere in their long-drawn suicides and assassinations.

And all those treasures of knowledge placed so unhesitatingly at the service of passion! All the genius and intelligence dedicated to the attempt to achieve ends either impossible or diabolic! All the problems inherited from the last crusade and solved by methods that automatically created a hundred new problems. And each new problem would require a new crusade, and each new crusade would leave fresh problems for yet further crusades to solve and multiply in the good old way.

And then there were the Triumphs of Religion and Science. Reforming Protestantism — sponsor of capitalistic exploitation. Francis of Assisi miraculously upholding a Mystical Body that was also a political machine and a business concern. Faraday and Clerk Maxwell working indefatigably that the ether might at last become a vehicle for lies and imbecility.

And then the Triumph of Education — that deity to which his poor father had offered fifty thousand pounds and a Polytechnic Institute in yellow brick. Education, compulsory and gratuitous. Everybody had been taught to read, and the result was Northcliffe and advertisements for cigarettes and laxatives and whisky. Everybody went to school, and everywhere the years of schooling had been made a prelude to military conscription. And what fine courses in false history and self-congratulation! What a thorough grounding in the religions of nationalism! No God any more; but forty-odd infallible Foreign Offices.

Once again, the whole universe shook with laughter.

Chapter Twenty-One

IT WAS TO be a small, informal dinner; and Eustace, after all, was only a relation by marriage, not blood. The Queen Mother had therefore seen no reason for cancelling her acceptance of Lady Worplesden's invitation. And as for staying at home to be with Daisy when she arrived that evening — why, the idea simply didn't occur to her.

'You'll have to entertain my granddaughter single-handed,' she announced to Sebastian at tea-time.

'Single-handed? But I thought Mrs. Thwale ...?'

'I'm taking Veronica with me, of course.'

Mrs. Thwale put in a word of reassurance.

'You won't find her in the least formidable.'

'Formidable!' The Queen Mother's tone was contemptuous. 'She's like blancmange.'

‘So there’ll be no excuse for mumbling. Or for not saying anything at all,’ Mrs. Thwale added casually, reaching out for a lump of sugar as she spoke. ‘Which is a slight defect of yours that I seem to have noticed.’

‘That reminds me,’ said the Queen Mother. ‘How’s he getting on with his mumbling lessons?’

‘I’m hoping he’ll give you a demonstration one of these days,’ Mrs. Thwale answered gravely.

‘A demonstration? What demonstration?’

There was no immediate answer. Sebastian raised his eyes and gave Mrs. Thwale a look of agonized entreaty. But the smile she returned was one of bright, impersonal amusement — as if she were looking on at some delicate comedy of manners.

‘How do you write a poem?’ she murmured under her breath.

‘What’s that you’re saying?’ asked the Queen Mother sharply.

On its withered tortoise’s neck the old head turned questioningly from side to side in a succession of quick blind movements.

‘What’s that?’

‘Please.’ Sebastian implored, framing the word voicelessly with lips that trembled in distress. ‘Please!’

For an awful second he was left in uncertainty of what she was going to do next. Then she turned to Mrs. Gamble.

‘It’s nothing,’ she said. ‘Just a silly little joke we have together at our mumbling lessons.’

‘I don’t like people having jokes together,’ the old woman rasped in a harsh resentful tone. With unseeing eyes she glared ferociously at Mrs. Thwale across the tea-table. ‘I don’t like it,’ she repeated: ‘I don’t like it at all.’

In silence Mrs. Thwale examined the fossil scorpion from the Carboniferous.

‘It shan’t happen again, Mrs. Gamble,’ she said at last.

But as she thought of what the submissive words really signified, her eyes brightened and her lips twitched into a little smile of secret triumph. That morning a special messenger had brought her a letter from Paul De Vries — six pages, typewritten, of frenzy and long words. Not yet specifically a proposal of marriage. But it was pretty obvious that Mrs. Gamble would soon have to find herself a new companion.

She got up, stepped softly over to the back of Sebastian’s chair and, singling out one of those scandalously charming curls of his, gave it a short but very painful tug. Then, without even glancing at him, she moved on to where the Queen Mother was sitting and took the cup from between her claw-like hands.

‘Let me give you some fresh tea,’ she said in her low musical voice.

Another woman might have been vexed to find herself treated in this off-hand and discourteous fashion. But Daisy Ockham was so singularly lacking in a sense of her own importance that she was hardly even surprised when the butler gave her Mrs. Gamble’s message.

‘My grandmother’s gone out to dinner,’ she explained to her companion. ‘So we shall be alone this evening.’

The other inclined his head and, in an accent which betrayed that he had not been educated at one of the more ancient and expensive seats of learning, said that it was a pleasure he looked forward to.

Thin, sharp-featured and middle-aged, with brown, damp hair brushed back over a bald spot on the top of his head, Mr. Tendring was dressed for the part of an eminent barrister or Harley Street specialist, but unfortunately without much verisimilitude; for the dark striped trousers had been shoddy even in their palmiest days, the black jacket was manifestly readymade. Only the collar came up to professional standards — high, with flaring wings and an inordinately wide opening through which Mr. Tendring’s neck, with its protuberant Adam’s apple, looked pathetically stringy and at the same time rather unpleasantly naked, almost indecent. A black leather brief-case, too important to be handed over to the footman, who had relieved him of his overcoat, was carried under the right arm.

‘Well, I expect you’d like to go up to your room before dinner,’ said Mrs. Ockham.

Again he inclined his head, this time without speaking.

As they followed the butler towards the staircase, Mr. Tendring looked about him with small appraising eyes — took in the pillars and barrel vaulting of the hall, darted, through the tall double doors, a glance down the long rich vista of the drawing-room, observed the pictures on the walls, the porcelain, the carpets. The thought of all the money that must have been spent to make the house what it was gave him an almost sensual pleasure. He had a deep, disinterested respect for wealth, a tender and admiring love of money for its own sake and without any reference to himself or his immediate needs. Surrounded by these exotic and unfamiliar splendours, he felt no envy, only veneration tinged with a secret satisfaction at the thought that here he was, the greengrocer's son, the ex-office boy, enjoying the splendours from the inside, as a guest, as the indispensable financial adviser, tax expert and accountant of their new owner. Suddenly, the grey sharp-featured face relaxed and, like a schoolboy who has succeeded in scoring off his companions, Mr. Tendring positively grinned.

'Quite a mansion,' he said to Mrs. Ockham, showing a set of teeth which the suburban dentist had made so brilliantly pearly that they would have seemed improbable in the mouth even of a chorus girl. 'Quite,' said Mrs. Ockham vaguely. 'Quite.'

She was thinking how poignantly familiar it all seemed. As though it were only yesterday that she had been a schoolgirl, coming out to Florence every Christmas and Easter to spend the holidays. And now all the rest were dead. Her father first of all. So old and awe-inspiring, so tall and bushy-eyebrowed and aloof, that his going had really made no difference. But then had come her mother's turn; and, for Daisy Ockham, her mother had died twice over — once when she married Eustace, and again, for ever, five years later. And when that anguish had been lived down, there had come her marriage and those years of happiness with Francis and little Frankie. Nearly fourteen years of the richest, the intensest living. And then one brilliant holiday morning, with the sea-gulls screaming, and the air full of blown spray, and the great green glassy waves exploding into foam along the beaches, they had gone down for a bathe. Father and son, the man's hand on the boy's shoulder, laughing together as they walked. Half an hour later, when she followed them down to the beach with the thermos of hot milk and the biscuits, she met the fishermen carrying the two bodies up from the water.... And now it was poor Eustace, whom her mother had loved and whom, for that reason, she herself had passionately hated. But then her mother had died, and Eustace had fallen out of her life, had become a casual acquaintance, encountered occasionally in other people's houses — and once every year or so, when there was business to discuss, they would meet by appointment at the solicitor's and, from Lincoln's Inn, when everything had been settled, he would take her to lunch at the Savoy, and she would listen to his odd, disconcerting talk, so utterly unlike anything she heard at home, and laugh and reflect that, after all, he was really very nice in his funny way. Very nice indeed and very clever, and it was a shame he didn't do anything with his gifts and all that money.

Well, now he was dead, and all that money was hers — all that money and, along with it, all the responsibility for using it as it ought to be used, as God would want it to be used. At the mere thought of the future burden, Mrs. Ockham sighed profoundly. This house, for example — what on earth should she do with it? And all the servants? There must be a dozen of them.

'It was terribly sudden,' she said in Italian to the butler as they started to climb the stairs.

The man shook his head and an expression of genuine sadness appeared on his face. The signore had been so kind. Tanto buono, tanto buono. Tears came into his eyes.

Mrs. Ockham was touched. And yet she simply couldn't keep all these servants. Perhaps if she offered them a year's wages when she gave them notice — or, better, a year's board wages. But Mr. Tendring would never allow that. She shot an apprehensive glance at that grey face with its sharp nose and tight-shut, almost lipless mouth. Never, she repeated to herself, never. And after all, that was what he was there for — to keep her in order, to prevent her from doing anything too silly. She remembered what Canon Cresswell was always dinning into her. 'It takes two people to make a swindle — the swindler and the swindlee. If you let yourself be a swindlee, you're an accessory before the fact — you're leading an innocent person into temptation. So don't do it. Don't!' Golden advice — but how difficult it had been for her to follow it! And now that, instead of her all too comfortable twelve hundred a year, she

was to have six thousand and a whole fortune in buildings, furniture and works of art, it would be even harder, because there would be so many more outstretched hands. She had hired Mr. Tendring, among other reasons, to protect her from her own sentimentality. And yet she couldn't help feeling that those poor servants ought to have a year's board wages. After all, it was no fault of theirs that Eustace had died so suddenly; and some of them had been with him for years and years.... She sighed again. How hard it was to know what was right! And then, when one knew, the knowledge had to be acted upon. That was fairly easy if there were nobody but oneself involved. But mostly one couldn't do what was right without upsetting almost as many people as one satisfied. And then their disappointment and their bitterness made one wonder whether, after all, one had been doing right. And then the whole debate had to begin again....

Half an hour later, refreshed by a hot bath and a change of clothes, Mrs. Ockham entered the drawing-room. She had expected to find herself alone; and when, from the depths of one of the enormous chintz-covered chairs, a small figure suddenly uncurled its legs and jumped respectfully to its feet, she uttered a startled exclamation of surprise. Diffidently, the figure advanced, and as it came within range of her rather short-sighted eyes Mrs. Ockham recognized it as the boy she had talked to in the Hampstead public library. The boy who had reminded her of Frankie; had actually been Frankie, so it excruciatingly seemed; had been her little precious one as he would have become if she had been allowed to keep him another year or two. How often, since that chance meeting of a couple of weeks before, she had reproached herself for having lacked the presence of mind to ask his name and where he lived! And now, impossibly, he was here in Eustace's drawing-room.

'You?' she whispered incredulously. 'But ... but who are you?' The living ghost of Frankie smiled at her shyly.

'I'm Sebastian,' he answered. 'Uncle Eustace was ... well, he was my uncle,' he concluded lamely.

Suddenly and rather heavily — for she was feeling strangely weak about the knees — Mrs. Ockham sat down on the nearest chair. Another moment, and she might have fainted. She shut her eyes and took three or four deep breaths. There was a long silence.

Standing in front of her, Sebastian fidgeted uneasily and wondered whether he oughtn't to say something— 'What a funny coincidence!' or 'That was awfully good chocolate you gave me.' But after all, she had lost her son. He ought to say something about that. 'I didn't have time to say how sorry I was.' But somehow even that sounded pretty bad. Seeing how upset she obviously was, poor old thing!

Mrs. Ockham looked up.

'It's the hand of Providence,' she said in a low voice.

There were tears in her eyes, but she was also smiling — a smile that transfigured the soft and snubby face, making it seem almost beautiful.

'God wants to give him back to me.'

Sebastian writhed. This was really awful!

God wanted to give her Frankie back to her, Mrs. Ockham was thinking; yes, and perhaps to give Himself back. For Frankie had been the living sacrament, the revelation, the immediate experience of divinity.

'God is love,' she said aloud. 'But what's love? I never knew until after my little boy was born. Then I began to learn. And every day I learned a little more. Different forms of love, deeper intensities — every day for nearly fourteen years.'

She was silent again, thinking of that windy summer's morning, and the fishermen toiling slowly up the beach; remembering those first weeks of almost insane, rebellious despair, and then the months of emptiness, of being numb and hopeless and half dead. It was Canon Cresswell who had brought her back to life. After the disaster she had refused to go near him. Perversely — because she knew in her heart that he could help her, and she didn't want to be helped; she wanted to suffer in solitude, for ever. Then, somehow, Mrs. Cresswell had discovered where she was; and one wet November afternoon there they were on the doorstep of the dismal little cottage she had chosen as her hiding-place. And instead of condoling with her on the tragedy, instead of telling her sympathetically how ill she looked, Canon

Cresswell made her sit down and listen, while he called her a cowardly, self-indulgent emotionalist, a mutineer against God's Providence, a self-willed sinner guilty of the most inexcusable despair.

An hour later, Mrs. Cresswell was helping her to clean up the cottage and pack her bags. That evening she was back at the Girls' Club, and the next day, which was Sunday, she went to early Communion. She had come back to life again — but it was a diminished life. In the past God had been with her almost every day. For example, when she came and said good-night to Frankie, and he got out of bed and knelt there in his pink pyjamas and they repeated the Lord's Prayer together — there He was, Our Father in the heaven of her love. But now even Communion failed to bring Him close to her. And though she loved the poor children at the Club, though she was ready to do much more for them now than she had done when her work there was only a thank-offering for so much happiness, it was all a second best; there was nobody to take the place of Frankie. She had learnt to accept God's will; but it was the will of somebody at a distance — withdrawn and unrevealed.

Mrs. Ockham took a handkerchief out of her bag and wiped her eyes.

'I know you think I'm a dreadful old sentimentalist,' she said with a little laugh.

'Not a bit,' Sebastian protested politely.

But for once the Queen Mother had been quite right: *blancmange* was the word for her.

'You're John Barnack's son, I suppose?'

He nodded.

'Then your mother ...?'

Mrs. Ockham left the sentence unfinished. But her tone, and the expression of distress which appeared in her grey eyes, sufficiently indicated what she meant to say.

'Yes, she's dead,' said Sebastian.

'Your mother's dead,' she repeated slowly.

But imagine poor little Frankie, all alone in a harsh, indifferent world, with nobody to love him as she alone was capable of loving him! To the love in her heart there was added an overpowering compassion.

Blancmange, Sebastian was thinking. *Blancmange* with Jesus sauce. Then, to his great relief, the butler entered and announced that dinner was served.

With a sigh Mrs. Ockham put away her handkerchief, then asked the man to go and tell the signore. Turning to Sebastian, she began to explain Mr. Tendring.

'You'll find him a bit ... well, you know, not quite ...' The deprecating gesture sufficiently indicated what he quite wasn't. 'But a good soul underneath,' she hastened to add. 'He's a Unitarian, and he's got two children, and he grows tomatoes in the sweetest little greenhouse in his back garden. And as for business — well, I don't know what I'd have done without him these last five years. That's why I asked him to come along with me now — to deal with all this.'

In a limp gesture of all-embracing ineptitude she waved her hand at Eustace's treasures.

'I wouldn't even know where to begin,' she concluded hopelessly.

The sound of footsteps made her turn.

'Ah, I was just talking about you, Mr. Tendring. Telling Sebastian here — he's Mr. Barnack's nephew, by the way — how utterly lost I'd be without you.'

Mr. Tendring acknowledged the compliment with a slight bow, silently shook hands with Sebastian, then turned and apologized to Mrs. Ockham for having kept her waiting.

'I was compiling a catalogue of the furnishings in my bedroom,' he explained; and in confirmation of his words he pulled a small black notebook out of the side pocket of his jacket and held it up for her inspection.

'A catalogue?' Mrs. Ockham repeated in some astonishment, as she got up from her chair.

Mr. Tendring further compressed his tight-shut mouth, and nodded importantly. In the wide, barristerial opening of his stiff collar, the Adam's apple stirred like a thing endowed with a small spasmodic life of its own. Deliberately, in phrases modelled on those of the business letter and the legal document, he began to speak.

'You have informed me, Mrs. Ockham, that the late owner carried no insurance against fire or theft.' Surprisingly, Mrs. Ockham uttered a little peal of rich, bubbly laughter.

'He used to say he couldn't afford it. Because of the duty on Havana cigars.'

Sebastian smiled; but Mr. Tendring contracted his brows, and his Adam's apple sharply rose and fell, as though it too were shocked by such a blasphemy against Prudence.

'Personally,' he said with severity, 'I don't hold with joking about serious matters.'

Mrs. Ockham hastened to placate him.

'Quite right,' she said, 'quite right. But I don't see what his having no insurance has to do with your making a catalogue.'

Mr. Tendring permitted himself a smile. The Gaiety-Girl teeth flashed triumphantly.

'The fact,' he said, 'constitutes presumptive evidence that the late owner caused no list of his personal property ever to be drawn up.'

He smiled again, evidently delighted with the beauty of his language.

'So that's what you're writing in your little black book,' said Mrs. Ockham. 'Is it really necessary?'

'Necessary?' Mr. Tendring repeated almost indignantly. 'It's a sine qua non.'

It was final and crushing. After a little silence Mrs. Ockham suggested that they should go in to dinner.

'Will you take me in, Sebastian?' she asked.

Sebastian began by offering her the wrong arm, and was horribly embarrassed and ashamed when Mrs. Ockham smiled and told him to go round to the other side. Making a fool of himself in front of this awful little bounder....

'Too stupid,' he muttered. 'I know perfectly well, really.'

But Mrs. Ockham was enchanted by his mistake.

'Just like Frankie!' she cried delightedly. 'Frankie could never remember which arm to give.'

Sebastian said nothing; but he was beginning to have enough of Frankie.

Intimately, as they walked towards the dining-room, Mrs. Ockham squeezed his arm.

'What luck that the others should have been out for our first evening!' she said; but added quickly, 'Not but what I'm very fond of poor dear Granny. And Veronica's so ...'

She hesitated, remembering the Cresswells' concern over the disquieting spirit that had started, before she was even out of pigtails, to peep through their daughter's calm, bright eyes.

'So pretty and clever,' she concluded. 'But all the same, I'm awfully glad they're not here. I hope you are too,' she added, smiling at him almost archly.

'Oh, very,' Sebastian answered without much conviction.

Chapter Twenty-Two

BUT AFTER ALL, he had to admit long before the evening was over, she wasn't a bad old thing by any manner of means. A bit blancmangeish, of course; but really very decent. She was going to give him all the volumes of the Loeb Classics that had been in her husband's library. And the Oxford Press edition of Donne. And Saintsbury's two volumes of Minor Caroline Poets. And on top of being kind, she wasn't even such a fool. True, she had confessed to being unable to sing 'Abide with me' without crying; but she also liked George Herbert. And though she had an exasperating habit of referring to everyone she knew as 'dear So-and-so,' or at the very worst and most uncharitable as 'poor dear,' she had quite a sense of humour, and some of the stories she told were really very funny.

But her most precious gift was that she never made you feel shy. In that respect she was like Uncle Eustace; and in both of them, it seemed to Sebastian, the secret consisted in a certain absence of pretentiousness, a refraining from standing on rights or privileges or dignity. Whereas that fiendish old Queen Mother didn't merely stand on her own dignity; she went out and deliberately trampled on yours.

And more subtly, for all her desirableness, Mrs. Thwale did the same thing. It was as though she were always using you, in some way or other, as a means to further her own private ends — and the ends were disquietingly mysterious and unpredictable. Whereas with Mrs. Ockham it was you who were the end, and all she asked was to be allowed to be the adoring means of your glorification. Which was really rather pleasant. So pleasant, indeed, that Sebastian soon did more than merely cease to be shy with her; he began to show off and lay down the law. Except for Susan — and Susan didn't really count — he had never known anyone who was ready to listen so respectfully to what he had to say. Stimulated by her admiration, and quite unhindered by Mr. Tendring, who never put in a word and allowed his presence to be completely ignored, he became, especially after his second glass of wine, extraordinarily loquacious. And when his own ideas failed him, he did not hesitate to fall back on Uncle Eustace's. His remarks about the affinity between Mid-Victorian English and Italian Primitive were thought to be very startling and brilliant. Still, even with the wine to give him courage and take away discretion, he didn't venture to repeat what Uncle Eustace had said in connection with Piero's Venus and her Adonis. It was Mrs. Ockham who finally broke the silence that had settled down on them as they stood looking at the picture after dinner.

'Art's a funny thing,' she said, pensively shaking her head. 'Very funny indeed, sometimes.'

Sebastian gave her an amused and pitying smile. Her remark had made him feel delightfully superior.

'Works of art aren't moral tracts,' he said sententiously.

'Oh, I know, I know,' Mrs. Ockham agreed. 'But all the same ...'

'All the same what?'

'Well, why bother about that sort of thing so much?'

She hadn't bothered — except, of course, negatively, inasmuch as she'd always felt that the whole business was profoundly unpleasant. And, in spite of her mother's vague but fearful warnings about the male sex, her darling Francis had really bothered very little. So why did other people find it necessary to think and talk so much about it, to write all those books and poems, to paint such pictures as this thing they were now looking at? Pictures which, if they weren't Great Art, one would never dream of tolerating in a decent house, where innocent boys like Frankie, like Sebastian here ...

'Sometimes,' she went on, 'I just cannot understand ...'

'Excuse me,' Mr. Tendring broke in, suddenly pushing his way between them and the mythological nudities.

Horizontally first, then vertically, he applied a tape-measure to the painting. Then, taking the pencil from between his pearly teeth, he made an entry in his notebook: Oil Painting: Antony and Cleopatra. Antique. 41 ins × 20 ins. Framed.

'Thanks,' he said, and passed on to the Seurat. Twenty-six by sixteen; and the frame, instead of being gilded and genuine hand-carved, was the cheapest-looking thing, painted in different colours, like one of those camouflaged ships during the war.

Mrs. Ockham led Sebastian away to the sofa and, while they sipped their coffee, began to ask him about his father.

'He didn't get on too well with poor dear Eustace, did he?'

'He hated Uncle Eustace.'

Mrs. Ockham was shocked.

'You mustn't say that, Sebastian.'

'But it's true,' he insisted.

And when she started trying to smother the whole thing in that soft sentimental blancmange of hers — moaning away about brothers not seeing eye to eye perhaps, but never hating one another, never really forgetting that they were brothers — he became annoyed.

'You don't know my father,' he snapped.

And forgetting all about the heroic portrait he had painted for the benefit of Gabriel Weyl, Sebastian launched out into an embittered account of John Barnack's character and behaviour. Greatly distressed, Mrs. Ockham tried to persuade him that it was all just a case of misunderstanding. When he was older

he would realize that his father had always acted with the best intentions. But the only effect of these well-meaning interventions was to stimulate Sebastian to a greater intemperance of language. Then, by a natural transition, his resentment modulated into complaint. He felt all at once extraordinarily sorry for himself, and began to say so.

Mrs. Ockham was touched. Even if Mr. Barnack wasn't as bad as he had been painted, even if he were nothing worse than a busy man with harsh manners and no time for affection, that would be quite enough to make a sensitive child unhappy. More than ever, as she listened to Sebastian, she felt convinced that it was God who had brought them together — the poor motherless boy, the poor mother who had lost her child — brought them together that they might help one another and, helping one another, might be strengthened to do God's work in the world.

Meanwhile, Sebastian had begun to tell the story of the evening clothes.

Mrs. Ockham remembered how adorable Frankie had looked in the dinner jacket she had bought him for his thirteenth birthday. So grown-up, so touchingly childish. Her eyes filled with tears. But in the meantime it really did seem hard on poor Sebastian that his father should sacrifice him to a mere political prejudice.

'Oh, how sweet of dear old Eustace to give it you!' she cried, when he reached that point in his story. Sebastian was offended by her cheerful all's-well-that-ends-well tone.

'Uncle Eustace only promised,' he said gloomily. 'Then ... well, this thing happened.'

'So you never got it after all?'

He shook his head.

'Poor darling, you do have bad luck!'

To Sebastian, in his mood of self-pity, her commiseration was as balm. To be told, in that tone, that he had had bad luck was so delightful that it would be almost sacrilegious to mention the drawing, the two thousand two hundred lire, the visit to the tailor's. Indeed, it never even occurred to him that they ought to be mentioned. In the present circumstances of mood and feeling these things were irrelevant to the point of being practically non-existent. Then, suddenly, they jumped out into the foreground of immediate reality. Mrs. Ockham leaned forward and laid her hand on his knee; her soft snubby face was transfigured by a smile of intense yearning tenderness.

'Sebastian, I've got a favour to ask of you.'

He smiled charmingly and raised a questioning eyebrow.

'Eustace made you a promise,' she explained. 'A promise he wasn't able to keep. But I can keep it. Will you allow me, Sebastian?'

He looked at her for a moment, uncertain whether he had understood her aright. Then, as it became clear that her words could have only one meaning, the blood rushed up into his cheeks.

'You mean ... about the evening clothes?'

He averted his eyes in confusion.

'I'd so love to do it,' she said.

'It's awfully decent of you,' he muttered. 'But really ...'

'After all, it was one of poor Eustace's last wishes.'

'I know; but ...'

He hesitated, wondering whether to tell her about the drawing. But she might think, as that Weyl fellow had obviously thought, that he oughtn't to have sold it — not so quickly, not immediately after the funeral. And to her he couldn't say it was for a debt of honour. Besides, if he were going to mention the drawing at all, he ought to have done it long ago. To mention it now would be to admit that he had been enjoying her sympathy and inviting her generosity on false pretences. And what a fool he would seem, as well as a humbug!

'After all,' said Mrs. Ockham, who had attributed his hesitation to a quite understandable reluctance to accept a present from a stranger, 'after all, I'm really part of the family. A step-first cousin, to be precise.'

What delicate feelings he had! More tenderly than ever, she smiled at him again.

From the depths of his discomfort Sebastian tried to smile back. It was too late to explain now. There was nothing for it but to go ahead.

‘Well, if you really think it’s all right,’ he said.

‘Oh, good, good!’ cried Mrs. Ockham. ‘Then we’ll go to the tailor’s together. That will be fun, won’t it?’

He nodded and said it would be great fun.

‘It must be the best tailor in town.’

‘I noticed one in the Via Tornabuoni,’ he said, determined at any cost to head her off from the place near the cathedral.

But what a fool he had been to get rid of the drawing in such a hurry! Instead of waiting to see what might turn up. And now he’d be landed with two evening suits. And it wasn’t as though he could save up one of them for use later on. In a couple of years he’d have grown out of both. Well, after all, it didn’t really matter.

‘When we’re back in London,’ said Mrs. Ockham, ‘I hope you’ll come and dine with me sometimes in your evening clothes.’

‘I’d love to,’ he said politely.

‘You’ll be my excuse for going to all the plays and concerts I never have the heart or the energy to go to by myself.’

Plays and concerts.... His eyes brightened at the prospect.

They began talking about music. Mrs. Ockham, it seemed, had been a great concert-goer when her husband was alive, had travelled to Salzburg for Mozart and the moderns, to Bayreuth for Wagner, to Milan for Otello and Falstaff. Against these achievements Sebastian could only set a few poor evenings at the Queen’s Hall. In mere self-defence he found himself compelled to expatiate, with a kind of boastful possessiveness, on the wonderful playing of an old pianist friend of his own, retired now from the concert stage, but as brilliant as ever — Dr. Pfeiffer by name; she had probably heard of him. No? But in his day he had enjoyed a European reputation.

In the background, meanwhile, Mr. Tendring had measured all the paintings and was now working his way through the porcelain, jade and ivory. Thousands of pounds, he said to himself from time to time, lingering voluptuously over the Cockney diphthongs, thousands of pounds.... He felt extraordinarily happy.

At a quarter past ten there was a sudden commotion in the hall, and a moment later, as from a ghostly parade ground, the Queen Mother’s voice came to their ears.

‘There’s poor dear Granny,’ said Mrs. Ockham, interrupting Sebastian in the middle of a sentence.

She rose and hurried towards the door. In the hall, Mrs. Gamble’s maid had just divested the old lady of her wrap and was in process of handing over the Pomeranian.

‘Little Foxy-woxy,’ cried the Queen Mother. ‘Did he miss his old granny-wanny? Did he, then?’

Foxy VIII licked her chin, then turned to bark at the newcomer.

‘Granny dear!’

Scintillating like a whole chandelier of diamonds, Mrs. Gamble wheeled in the direction of the voice.

‘Is that Daisy?’ she rasped enquiringly.

And when Mrs. Ockham had said yes, she presented her with a withered brick-red cheek, lowering Foxy, as she did so, out of range, so that her granddaughter might not be bitten as she paid her respects. Mrs. Ockham kissed her safely.

‘How nice to see you!’ she said through the yapping.

‘Why is your nose so cold?’ the Queen Mother asked sharply. ‘You haven’t got a chill, I hope?’

Mrs. Ockham assured her that she had never felt better, then turned to Mrs. Thwale, who had remained standing a little to one side, a silent, bright-eyed, faintly smiling spectator.

‘And here’s dear little Veronica,’ she said, holding out both her hands.

Mrs. Thwale took the cue and offered both of hers.

‘Looking more beautiful than ever,’ exclaimed Mrs. Ockham in a tone of whole-hearted admiration.

‘Now, Daisy,’ rasped the Queen Mother, ‘for goodness’ sake, stop gushing like a schoolgirl.’

To hear other people complimented in her presence was distasteful to her. But instead of taking the hint, Mrs. Ockham proceeded to deepen her original offence.

‘I’m not gushing,’ she protested, as she took her grandmother’s arm and started with her towards the drawing-room. ‘It’s the simple truth.’

The Queen Mother snorted angrily.

‘I’ve never seen Veronica look so radiant as she does tonight.’

Well, if that was true, Mrs. Thwale was thinking, as she followed them, it meant that she had been living in a fool’s paradise. Flattering herself with the conviction that she had built up an ironclad facial alibi, when in fact she could still be read like an open book.

She frowned to herself. It was bad enough to have a hypothetical God, unto whom all hearts were open, all desires known. But to be known and open to Daisy Ockham, of all people — that was the ultimate humiliation.

True, there were excuses. It wasn’t every evening that one was proposed to by Paul De Vries. But, on the other hand, it was precisely on the exceptional and important occasions that it was most necessary to keep other people in ignorance of what one was really feeling. And she had permitted the symptoms of her elation to appear so clearly that even a fat old goose like Daisy could detect them. Not that much harm had been done this time. But it just showed how careful one had to be, how sleeplessly vigilant.

Mrs. Thwale frowned once more; then, as she relaxed her facial muscles, made a conscious effort to assume an expression of detached indifference. No more of that tell-tale radiance. For the outside world, nothing but the opaque symbol of a rather distant and amused politeness. But behind it, for herself, what gay bright secrets, what an effervescence of unuttered laughter and private triumph!

It had happened after dinner, when old Lord Worplesden, who was an amateur astronomer, insisted on taking Mrs. Thwale and the little Contessina up to the top of the tower on which he had installed his six-inch refracting telescope. A first-rate instrument, he boasted. By Zeiss of Jena. But among the young ladies of the neighbourhood it was celebrated for other reasons. The star-gazer would take you in, under the dome of his baby observatory, and then, under the pretext of getting you and the telescope into the right position for seeing the satellites of Jupiter, would paw you about, booming away all the time about Galileo. Then, if you hadn’t objected too much, he’d show you the rings of Saturn. And finally there were the spiral nebulae. These required at least ten minutes of the most laborious adjustment. Girls who had seen a spiral nebula got a big bottle of scent the next day, with a playful invitation, embossed with a coronet and signed, ‘Yours very affectionately, W.,’ to come again another time and really explore the Moon.

The Contessina’s stock of scent had evidently run low; for it was nearly half an hour before she and the old gentleman emerged again from the observatory. Time enough for Paul, who had followed them uninvited up the tower, to look at the night sky and talk a little about Eddington; to look down at the lights of Florence and reflect aloud that they were beautiful, that earth had its constellations too; to be silent for a little, and then say something about Dante and the Vita Nuova, and again be silent and hold her hand; and at last, rather breathlessly and, for once, inarticulately, to ask her to marry him.

The intrinsic ludicrousness of what had happened, and the sudden glory of her own elation, had almost caused her to laugh aloud.

At last! The magnet had done its work; the philosophic Eye had finally succumbed to life’s essential shamelessness. In the tug-of-war between appearance and reality, reality had won, as it always must, it always must.

Ludicrous spectacle! But for her, at least, the joke would have important and serious consequences. It meant freedom; it meant power over her surroundings; it meant a little cushioned world of privacy outside herself as well as merely within — a house of her own as well as an attitude, a suite at the Ritz as well as a state of mind and a luxuriant fancy.

‘Will you, Veronica?’ he had repeated anxiously, as her averted silence persisted through the seconds. ‘Oh, my darling, say you will!’

Confident at last of being able to speak without betraying herself, she had turned back to him.

Dear Paul ... touched inexpressibly ... taken so utterly by surprise ... would like to wait a day or two before giving her final answer....

The door of the little observatory had opened and Lord Worplesden could be heard loudly recommending the Contessina to read the more popular writings of Sir James Jeans, F.R.S. In his case, she reflected, the Eye was astronomical and proconsular; but it was the same old magnet, the identical shamelessness. And in a few more years there would be the final shamelessness of dying.

Meanwhile, in the drawing-room, the Queen Mother had responded to Mr. Tendring's accent exactly as her granddaughter had feared and expected. To his polite enquiries after her health she responded merely by asking him to spell his name; and when he had done so, she said, 'How very odd!' and repeated the word 'Tendring' two or three times in a tone of extreme distaste, as though she were being forced against her will to speak of skunks or excrement. Then she turned to Daisy and, in a harsh stage-whisper, asked her why on earth she had brought such a dreadfully common little man with her. Fortunately, Mrs. Ockham was able to cover up the old lady's words by the first sentence of her own loud and enthusiastic account of her previous meeting with Sebastian.

'Oh, he's like Frankie, is he?' said the Queen Mother, after listening for a little while in silence. 'Then he must look very young for his age, very babyish.'

'He looks sweet!' cried Mrs. Ockham, with a sentimental unctious which Sebastian found almost as humiliating as her grandmother's offensive.

'I don't like it when boys look sweet,' Mrs. Gamble went on. 'Not with men like Tom Pewsey prowling around.' She lowered her voice. 'What about that little man of yours, Daisy — is he all right?'

'Granny!' Mrs. Ockham exclaimed in horror.

She looked round apprehensively, and was relieved to see that Mr. Tendring had gone over to the other side of the room and was cataloguing the Capo di Monte figures in the cabinet between the windows.

'Thank goodness,' she breathed, 'he didn't hear you.'

'I wouldn't mind if he had,' said the Queen Mother emphatically. 'Penal servitude — that's what those people deserve.'

'But he isn't one of those people,' Mrs. Ockham protested in an agitated and indignant whisper.

'That's what you think,' the Queen Mother retorted. 'But if you imagine you know anything about the subject, you're very much mistaken.'

'I don't want to know anything,' said Mrs. Ockham with a shudder. 'It's a horrible subject!'

'Then why bring it up? Particularly in front of Veronica. Veronica!' she called. 'Have you been listening?'

'In snatches,' Mrs. Thwale demurely admitted.

'You see!' said the Queen Mother in a tone of reproachful triumph to Mrs. Ockham. 'But luckily she's a married woman. Which is more than can be said of that boy. Boy,' she went on, speaking imperiously into the darkness, 'tell me what you think of all this.'

Sebastian blushed. 'You mean, the ... penal servitude?'

'Penal servitude?' repeated the Queen Mother irritably. 'I'm asking you what you think of meeting my granddaughter again.'

'Oh, that! Well, of course, it's most extraordinary. I mean, it's a funny coincidence, isn't it?'

Impulsively, Mrs. Ockham put an arm round Sebastian's shoulders and drew him towards her.

'Not exactly funny,' she said. 'Joyful, if you like — the happiest kind of Godsend. Yes, a real Godsend,' she repeated, and her eyes filled with the tears that came to her so easily, her voice took on a vibrancy of emotion.

'God here, God there,' rasped the Queen Mother. 'You talk too much about God.'

'But how can one talk and think enough?'

'It's blasphemous.'

'But God did send him to me.'

And to lend emphasis to what she had said, Mrs. Ockham tightened her embrace. Inertly, Sebastian suffered himself to be hugged. He felt horribly embarrassed. She was making a fool of him in public — just how much of a fool he divined from the expression on Mrs. Thwale's face. It was the same expression as he had seen on it that afternoon when she tormented him with her talk of giving Mrs. Gamble a demonstration of outrage — the amused, impersonal expression of the spectator who looks on at a delightfully heartless little comedy of manners.

'And not only blasphemous,' the Queen Mother continued. 'It's bad taste to be always talking about God. Like wearing all one's pearls all day long, instead of only in the evening when one's dressed for dinner.'

'Apropos of dressing for dinner,' said Mrs. Ockham, trying to shift the conversation on to safer ground. 'Sebastian and I have agreed that we're going to a lot of plays and concerts together when we get back to London. Haven't we, Sebastian?'

He nodded his head and smiled uncomfortably. Then, to his vast relief, Mrs. Ockham dropped her hand from his shoulder, and he was able to move away.

From between the curtains of her spiritual private box, Mrs. Thwale observed it all and was delighted with the play. The Holy Woman was fairly itching with unsatisfied motherhood. But the boy, not unnaturally, didn't much relish being made the victim of that particular brand of concupiscence. So poor old Holy-Poly had to offer bribes. Theatres and concerts to induce him to become her gigolo-baby, to submit to being the instrument of her maternal lust. But, after all, there were other forms of the essential shamelessness — forms that an adolescent would find more attractive than mother-craving; there were magnets, she flattered herself, considerably more powerful than Daisy's pug-like face, Daisy's chaste but abundant bosom. It might be amusing perhaps, it might be an interesting scientific experiment.... She smiled to herself. Yes, doubly amusing just because of what had happened this evening on Lord Worplesden's tower, scientific to the point of outrage and enormity.

At the mention of concerts, the Queen Mother, who could never bear to feel that she was being left out of anything, had insisted that she should also be of the party whenever they went to one. But, of course, she drew the line at modern music. And Bach always made her go to sleep. And as for string quartets — she couldn't abide that tiresome scraping and squeaking....

Suddenly Mr. Tendring reappeared upon the scene.

'Pardon me,' he said, when the Queen Mother had come to the end of her musical dislikes; and he handed Mrs. Ockham a slip of paper.

'What's this?' she asked.

'A discrepancy,' Mr. Tendring answered, with all the gravity due to a four-syllabled word used by chartered accountants.

Foxy, who had the rich dog's infallible ear and eye and nose for members of the lower orders, started to growl.

'There, there,' said the Queen Mother soothingly. Then, turning to Mrs. Ockham, 'What's the man talking about?' she barked.

'A discrepancy,' Mr. Tendring explained, 'between this receipt, delivered to the late owner on the day of his ... ah ... demise, and the number of articles actually contained in the package. He bought two: but now there's only one.'

'One what?' asked Mrs. Ockham.

Mr. Tendring smiled almost archly.

'Well, I suppose you'd say it was a work of art,' he said.

Sebastian suddenly felt rather sick.

'If you'll step over here,' Mr. Tendring went on.

They all followed him to the table by the window. Mrs. Ockham examined the one remaining Degas and then the slip of paper upon which M. Weyl had acknowledged payment for two.

'Let me have them,' said the Queen Mother, when the situation had been explained to her.

In silence she fingered the drawing's cardboard mount and the flimsy receipt, then handed them back to Mrs. Ockham. The old face lit up.

'The other one must have been stolen,' she said with relish.

Stolen! Sebastian repeated to himself. That was it; they'd think he'd stolen it. And of course, it now occurred to him for the first time, he had no way of proving that Uncle Eustace had given him the drawing. Even that little joke between them at the séance wasn't really evidence. 'Bucks and pendulums' — it had been obvious to him. But would it be obvious if he tried to explain it to anyone else?

Meanwhile Mrs. Ockham had protested against her grandmother's uncharitable suggestion. But the old lady was not to be put off.

'It's one of the servants, of course,' she insisted almost gleefully.

And she went on to tell them about that butler of hers who had drunk at least three dozen bottles of her best brandy, about the housemaid who had been caught with Amy's ruby brooch, about the chauffeur who used to cheat on the petrol and repairs, about the under-gardener who ...

And the fact that he had immediately gone and sold the thing — that would look bad, of course. If only he'd mentioned the matter the very day they found the body! Or else at the séance; that would have been a golden opportunity. Or this morning to Mrs. Thwale. Or even this evening, when Mrs. Ockham had offered to give him the dinner jacket — even then, at the risk of looking as if he'd been asking for sympathy on false pretences. If only, if only ... Because now it was too late. If he told them now, it would look as though he were doing it because he'd been caught. And the story of Uncle Eustace's generosity would sound like something invented on the spur of the moment to cover up his guilt — a particularly stupid and unconvincing lie. And yet, if he didn't tell them, goodness only knew what mightn't happen.

'But we have no right even to think that it's been stolen,' said Mrs. Ockham, as the Queen Mother's recollections of dishonest menials temporarily ran dry. 'Poor Eustace probably took it out of the package and put it somewhere.'

'He couldn't have put it somewhere,' the Queen Mother retorted, 'because he didn't go anywhere. Eustace was in this room with the boy until he went to the W.C. and passed on. All the time — isn't that so, boy?'

Sebastian nodded without speaking.

'Can't you answer?' the ghostly sergeant-major exploded.

'Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot.... I mean, yes, he was here. All the time.'

'Listen to that, Veronica,' said the Queen Mother. 'He mumbles worse than ever.'

Mrs. Ockham turned to Sebastian.

'Did you see him doing anything with the drawing that evening?' she asked.

For a second, Sebastian hesitated; then, in a kind of unreasoning panic, he shook his head.

'No, Mrs. Ockham.'

Feeling that he was violently blushing, he turned away and, to hide his tell-tale face, bent down to look more closely at the drawing on the table.

'I told you it was stolen,' he heard the Queen Mother saying triumphantly.

'Oh, Mr. Tendring, why did you have to find it out?' Mrs. Ockham wailed.

He began to say something dignified about his professional duty, when the Queen Mother interrupted him.

'Now listen, Daisy,' she said. 'I won't have you behaving like a sentimental imbecile, slobbering over a pack of good-for-nothing servants! Why, they're probably robbing you right and left at this very moment.'

'No, they aren't,' cried Mrs. Ockham. 'I simply refuse to believe it. And anyhow, why should we bother about this wretched drawing? If it's as ugly as the other one ...'

'Why should we bother?' Mr. Tendring repeated in the tone of one whose most sacred feelings have been outraged. 'But do you realize what the late owner paid for this object?' He picked up the receipt and handed it again to Mrs. Ockham. 'Seven thousand lire, madam. Seven thousand lire.'

Sebastian started and looked up at him; his eyes widened, his mouth fell open. Seven thousand lire? And that stinker had offered him a thousand and congratulated him on his business ability for having screwed the price up to two thousand two hundred. Anger and humiliation brought the blood rushing up into his face. What a fool he'd been, what an unutterable idiot!

'You see, Daisy, you see?' The Queen Mother's expression was gleeful. 'They could sell the thing for the equivalent of a year's wages.'

There was a little silence; and then, from behind him, Sebastian heard Mrs. Thwale's low musical voice.

'I don't think it was one of the s-servants,' she said, lingering with delicate affectation over the sibilant. 'I think it was somebody els-se.'

Sebastian's heart started to beat very fast and hard, as though he had been playing football. Yes, she must have seen him through the door, while he was putting the drawing into his dispatch-case. And when, an instant later, she spoke his name, he felt absolutely certain of it.

'Sebastian,' Mrs. Thwale repeated softly, when he failed to answer.

Reluctantly he straightened himself up and looked at her. Mrs. Thwale was smiling again as she might smile if she were watching a comedy.

'I expect you know as well as I do,' she said.

He swallowed hard and looked away.

'Don't you?' Mrs. Thwale insisted softly.

'Well,' he began almost inaudibly, 'I suppose you mean ...'

'Of course,' she broke in. 'Of course! That little girl who was out there on the terrace.' And she pointed at the darkness beyond the window.

Startled, Sebastian looked up at her again. The dark eyes were dancing with a kind of exultant light; the smiling lips looked as though they might part at any moment to give passage to a peal of laughter.

'Little girl?' echoed the Queen Mother. 'What little girl?'

Mrs. Thwale started to explain. And suddenly, with an overpowering sense of relief, Sebastian realized that he had been reprieved.

Chapter Twenty-Three

SEBASTIAN'S SENSE OF relief gave place very soon to bewilderment and uneasiness. Alone in his room, as he undressed and brushed his teeth, he kept wondering why the reprieve had come. Did she really think that the child had done it? Obviously, he tried to assure himself, she must have thought so. But there was a part of his mind which obstinately refused to accept that simple explanation. If it were true, then why should she have looked at him like that? What was it she had found so exquisitely amusing? And if she hadn't thought that it was the little girl, what on earth had induced her to say so? The obvious answer was that she had seen him take the drawing, believed he had no right to it, and tried to shield him. But again, in the light of that queer smile of hers, that almost irrepressible amusement, the obvious answer made no sense. Nothing she had done made any sense. And meanwhile there was that wretched little girl to think of. The child would be questioned and bullied; and then the parents would come under suspicion; and finally, of course, Mrs. Gamble would insist on sending for the police....

He turned out all the lights but the reading-lamp on the night table, and climbed into the enormous bed. Lying there, open-eyed, he fabricated for the thousandth time a series of scenes in which he casually mentioned Uncle Eustace's bequest to Mrs. Thwale and the Queen Mother, told Mrs. Ockham that he had already bought an evening suit with the money he had got for the drawing, smilingly scotched Mr. Tendring's suspicions before they were well hatched. How simple it all was, and how creditably he emerged from the proceedings! But the reality was as painfully and humiliatingly different from these

consoling fancies as the blue tart had been from Mary Esdaile. And now it was too late to tell them what had really happened. He imagined the Queen Mother's comments on his behaviour — like sandpaper for uncharitableness. And Mrs. Thwale's faint smile and ironic silence. And the excuses which Mrs. Ockham would make for him with such an effusive sentimentality that her grandmother would become doubly censorious. No, it was impossible to tell them now. There was only one thing to do — buy the drawing back from M. Weyl and then 'find' it somewhere in the house. But the tailor had insisted upon being paid in advance; that meant that ten out of his twenty-two precious banknotes had gone within an hour of his receiving them. And he had spent another hundred lire on books, and sixty for a tortoise-shell cigarette-case. So now he had little more than a thousand in hand. Would Weyl give him credit for the balance? Despondently Sebastian shook his head. He'd have to borrow the money. But from whom? And with what excuse?

Suddenly there was a little tap at the door.

'Come in,' he called.

Mrs. Ockham walked into the room.

'It's me,' she said; and crossing over to the bed, she laid a hand on his shoulder. 'It's rather late, I'm afraid,' she went on apologetically. 'Granny kept me up interminably. But I just couldn't resist coming to say good-night to you.'

Politely, Sebastian propped himself up on one elbow. But she shook her head and, without speaking, gently pushed him back on to the pillow.

There was a long silence while she looked down at him — looked down at little Frankie and her murdered happiness, looked down at the living present, at this other curly-headed incarnation of divine reality. Rosy and golden, a childish head upon a pillow. As she looked, love mounted within her, overwhelming, like a tide rushing up from the depths of that great ocean from which for so long she had been cut off by the siltings of a hopeless aridity.

'Frankie used to wear pink pyjamas too,' she said in a voice which, in spite of her effort to speak lightly, trembled with the intensity of her emotion.

'Did he?'

Sebastian gave her one of those enchanting smiles of his — not consciously this time, or deliberately, but because he felt himself touched into an answering affection for this absurd woman. And suddenly he knew that this was the moment to tell her about the drawing.

'Mrs. Ockham ...' he began.

But at the same instant, and moved by a yearning so intense as to make her unaware that he was trying to say something, Mrs. Ockham also spoke.

'Would you mind very much,' she whispered, 'if I gave you a kiss?'

And before he could answer, she had bent down and touched his forehead with her lips. Drawing back a little, she ran her fingers through his hair — and it was Frankie's hair. Her eyes filled with tears. Once more she bent down and kissed him.

Suddenly, startlingly, there was an interruption.

'Oh, excuse me ...'

Mrs. Ockham straightened herself up and they both turned in the direction from which the voice had come. In the open doorway stood Veronica Thwale. Her dark hair hung down in two plaits over her shoulders, and she was buttoned up in a long white satin dressing-gown that made her look like a nun.

'I'm so sorry to interrupt you,' she said to Mrs. Ockham. 'But your grandmother ...'

She left the sentence unfinished, and smiled.

'Does Granny want me again?'

'She has something more to say about that lost drawing.'

'Oh dear!' Mrs. Ockham sighed profoundly. 'Well, I'd better go, I suppose. Would you like me to turn the light out?' she added, addressing herself again to Sebastian.

He nodded. Mrs. Ockham turned the switch, then laid her hand for a moment against his cheek, whispered 'Good-night,' and hurried out into the corridor. Mrs. Thwale closed the door.

Alone in the darkness, Sebastian wondered uneasily what it was that the Queen Mother wanted so urgently to say about the drawing. Of course, if he'd had time to tell Mrs. Ockham about it, it wouldn't matter what she said. But as it was ... He shook his head. As it was, whatever the old she-devil said or did was sure to complicate matters, was bound to make it more difficult for himself. Meanwhile such an opportunity as he had had just now might not come again; and to go and tell Mrs. Ockham in cold blood would be the most horrible ordeal. So horrible that he began to wonder whether it mightn't be better, after all, to try to get the drawing back from Weyl. He was in the middle of an imaginary interview with the dealer, when he heard behind him the sound of the door being quietly opened. On the wall at which he was looking a bar of light widened, then grew narrower and, as the latch clicked, there was darkness again. Sebastian turned in his bed towards the unseen rustle of silk. She'd come back, and now he could tell her everything. He felt enormously relieved.

'Mrs. Ockham!' he said. 'Oh, I'm so glad ...'

Through the covers a hand touched his knee, travelled up to his shoulder, and with a sharp movement pulled back the bedclothes and threw them aside. The silk rustled again in the darkness, and a wave of perfume came to his nostrils — that sweet hot scent that was a mingling of flowers and sweat, spring freshness and a musky animality.

'Oh, it's you,' Sebastian began in a startled whisper.

But even as he spoke an unseen face bent over him; a mouth touched his chin, then found his lips; and fingers on his throat moved down and began to undo the buttons of his pyjama jacket.

Chapter Twenty-Four

DIVINELY INNOCENT, A sensuality panting up through incandescence into pure ecstasy; in the intervals, the tender and yet wittily cultured lasciviousness of Mary Esdaile — that was what Sebastian had imagined it would be, what he had looked forward to. Certainly not those hands, deliberate in the darkness, that almost surgical research of the essential shamelessness. Nor yet the delicate gluttony of those soft lips that would suddenly give place to teeth and pointed nails. And not those imperiously whispered commands; not those spells of silent, introverted frenzy, those long-drawn agonies, under his timid and almost horrified caresses, of a despairing insatiability.

In his fancy, love had been a kind of gay, ethereal intoxication; but last night's reality was more like madness. Yes, sheer madness; a maniac struggling in the musky darkness with another maniac.

'Twin cannibals in bedlam ...' The phrase came to him as he was examining the red and livid mark of teeth on his arm. Twin cannibals, devouring their own identity and one another's; ravening up reason and decency; obliterating the most rudimentary conventions of civilization. And yet it was precisely there, in that frenzy of the cannibals, that the real attraction had lain. Beyond the physical pleasure lay the yet more rapturous experience of being totally out of bounds, the ecstasy of an absolute alienation.

Mrs. Thwale had put on her dove-grey dress and was wearing round her neck the little gold and ruby cross which her mother had given her on the day she was confirmed.

'Good-morning, Sebastian,' she said, as he came into the dining-room. 'We seem to have the breakfast table to ourselves.'

Sebastian looked with panic at the empty chairs and the unfolded napkins. For some reason he had taken it for granted that Mrs. Ockham would be there to chaperone this dreadfully embarrassing encounter.

'Yes, I thought ... I mean, the journey ... They must have been pretty tired....'

From her private box at the comedy Mrs. Thwale looked at him with bright ironic eyes.

'Mumbling again!' she said. 'I shall really have to buy that birch!'

To cover his confusion, Sebastian went over to the sideboard and started to look at what was under the lids of the silver dishes on the hot-plate. Of course, what he ought to have done, he realized as he

was helping himself to porridge, what he ought to have done, when he saw that she was alone, was to go and kiss her on the nape of the neck and whisper something about last night. And perhaps it wasn't too late even now. Press the muzzle of the revolver against the right temple, count ten, and then rush in and do it. One, two, three, four ... Porridge plate in hand, he advanced towards the table. Four, five, six ...

'I hope you slept well,' said Mrs. Thwale in her low clear voice.

He looked at her in dismay, then dropped his eyes.

'Oh, yes,' he muttered, 'yes ... very well, thanks.'

There was no question any more of that kiss.

'You did?' Mrs. Thwale insisted with an air of astonishment. 'In spite of the owls?'

'The owls?'

'You don't mean to say,' she cried, 'that you didn't hear the owls? Lucky boy! I wish I slept as soundly as you do. I was awake half the night!'

She took a sip of coffee, delicately wiped her mouth, bit off a morsel of her toast and butter and, when she had swallowed it, wiped her mouth again.

'If I were you,' she said, 'I'd make it a point today to go to San Marco and look at the Fra Angelicos.'

The door opened and Mr. Tendring entered and, a moment later, Mrs. Ockham. They too had failed to hear the owls — even though Mrs. Ockham hadn't been able to go to sleep for hours, because of worrying about that wretched drawing.

Yes, that wretched drawing, that stinking drawing. In his impotence, Sebastian indulged in a childish outburst of bad language as he ate his buttered eggs. But calling names brought him no nearer to the resolution of his difficulties, and instead of clearing the mental atmosphere, blasphemy and obscenity merely intensified his mood of oppression by making him feel ashamed of himself.

'Are you going to send for the police?' Mrs. Thwale enquired.

Sebastian's heart seemed to miss a beat. Keeping his eyes fixed upon his plate, he stopped chewing so as to be able to listen with undivided attention.

'That's what Granny wants to do,' said Mrs. Ockham. 'But I won't have it yet. Not till we've made a really thorough search.'

Sebastian renewed his mastication — too soon, as it turned out; for Mrs. Thwale was all for having the little girl brought up to the house for cross-questioning.

'No, I'll go and talk to the parents first,' said Mrs. Ockham.

'Thank God!' Sebastian said to himself.

That meant that he probably had the whole of the day before him. Which was something. But how on earth was he going to set to work?

A touch on the elbow startled him out of his abstraction; the footman was bending over him, and on the proffered salver were two letters. Sebastian took them. The first was from Susan. Impatiently he put it in his pocket, unopened, and looked at the second. The envelope was addressed in an unfamiliar hand, and the stamp was Italian. Who on earth ...? And then a hope was born, grew and, in an instant of time, was transformed into a conviction, a positive certainty that the letter was from that man at the art gallery; explaining that it had all been a mistake; apologizing profusely; enclosing a cheque.... Eagerly he tore open the envelope, unfolded the single sheet of cheap commercial paper and looked for the signature. 'Bruno Rontini,' he read. His disappointment found vent in sudden anger. That fool who believed in Gaseous Vertebrates, that creeping Jesus who tried to convert people to his own idiocies! Sebastian started to put the letter away in his pocket, then decided after all to see what the man had to say.

'Dear Sebastian,' he read, 'Returning yesterday, I heard the news, distressing on more than one account, of poor Eustace's death. I don't know if your plans have been modified by what has happened; but if you are staying on in Florence, remember that I am one of the oldest inhabitants as well as some sort of a cousin, and that I shall be very happy to help you find your way about. You will generally find me at my apartment in the mornings, in the afternoon at the shop.'

‘At the shop,’ Sebastian repeated to himself ironically. ‘And he can damned well stay there.’ And then all at once it occurred to him that, after all, this fool might be of some use to him. A dealer in books, a dealer in pictures — the chances were that they knew one another. Weyl might be ready to do the other fellow a favour; and Uncle Eustace had said that old man Bruno was pretty decent in spite of his silliness. Pensively Sebastian folded up the letter and put it in his pocket.

Chapter Twenty-Five

YES, THE WHOLE universe was laughing with him. Laughing cosmically at the cosmic joke of its own self-frustration, guffawing from pole to pole at the world-wide, age-old slapstick of disaster following on the heels of good intention. A counterpoint of innumerable hilarities — Voltairean voices, yelping in sharp shrill triumph over the bewildered agonies of stupidity and silliness; vast Rabelaisian voices, like bassoons and double basses, rejoicing in guts and excrement and copulation, rumbling delightedly at the spectacle of grossness, of inescapable animality.

Shaking in unison with the universal merriment, he laughed through long durations of increasing pleasure, durations of mounting exhilaration and glory. And meanwhile here was that light again, here was that crystal of luminous silence — still and shining in all the interstices of the jagged laughter. Not at all formidable, this time, but softly, tenderly blue, as it had been when he caught old Bruno at his tricks with it. A blue caressing silence, ubiquitously present, in spite of the yelping and the bassoons, but present without urgency; beautiful, not with that austere, unbearable intensity, but imploringly, as though it were humbly begging to be taken notice of. And there was no participation in its knowledge, no self-compulsion to shame and condemnation. Only this tenderness. But Eustace was not to be caught so easily, Eustace was forearmed against all its little stratagems. To the entreaty of that blue crystal of silence he returned only the explosions of his derision, more and more strident as the light became more tenderly beautiful, as the silence ever more humbly, ever more gently and caressingly solicited his attention. No, no, none of that! He thought again of the Triumphs of Education, the Triumphs of Science, Religion, Politics, and his merriment mounted to a kind of frenzy. Paroxysm after cosmic paroxysm. What pleasure, what power and glory! But suddenly he was aware that the laughter had passed beyond his control, had become a huge, autonomous hysteria, persisting against his will and in spite of the pain it was causing him, persisting with a life of its own that was alien to his life, with a purpose of its own that was entirely incompatible with his well-being.

Out there, in here, the silence shone with a blue, imploring tenderness. But none of that, none of that! The light was always his enemy. Always, whether it was blue or white, pink or pea-green. He was shaken by another long, harrowing convulsion of derision.

Then, abruptly, there was a displacement of awareness. Once again he was remembering something that had not yet happened to somebody else.

Shuddering in the universal epilepsy, an open window presented itself; and there was poor old John, standing beside it, looking down into the street. And what confusion down there, what a yelling in that golden haze of dust! Dark faces, open-mouthed and distorted, dark hands, clenched or clawing. Thousands and thousands of them. And from the bright sunlit square on the right, from the narrow side-street immediately opposite the window, squads of turbaned and black-bearded policemen were shoving their way into the crowd, swinging their long bamboo staves. On heads and shoulders, on the bone of thin wrists upraised to protect the frightened, screaming faces — blow after blow, methodically. There was another convulsion. The figures wavered and broke, like images in a ruffled pool, then came together again as the laughing frenzy died down. Overhead, the blue tenderness was not mere sky, but the bright crystal of living silence. Methodically, the policemen hammered on. The thought of those sharp or cushioned impacts was nauseatingly distinct.

‘Horrible!’ John was saying between his teeth. ‘Horrible!’

'It would be a damned sight worse if the Japs were to get to Calcutta,' another voice remarked. Slowly, reluctantly, John nodded his head.

The professional Liberal condoning a lathi charge! There was another convulsive seizure, and another. Derision kept on tearing at him, like the gusts of a hurricane among tattered sails; kept on carding the very substance of his being, as though with combs and iron claws. But through the torment Eustace was unsteadily aware that, immediately below the window, a boy had dropped unconscious, felled by a blow on the temple. Two other young men were bending over him. Suddenly, through the yelping and the bassoons, there was as it were a memory of wild shrill cries and the frightened repetition of one incomprehensible phrase. A line of steel helmets was moving forward across the square. There was a panic movement of the crowd, away from the approaching danger. Jostled and staggering, the two young men succeeded none the less in raising their companion from the ground. As though in some mysterious rite, the boy's limp body was lifted shoulder-high towards the blue, imploring tenderness of the silence. For a few seconds only. Then the rush of the frightened mob toppled them down. Rescuers and rescued, they were gone, engulfed in the trampling and the suffocation. Blindly, in terror, the crowd moved on. A gale of mirthless lacerating laughter blew them into oblivion. Only the luminous silence remained, tender, beseeching. But Eustace was up to all its tricks.

And suddenly there was another bleeding face. Not the face of the nameless Indian boy; but, of all people, Jim Poulshot's face. Yes, Jim Poulshot! That vacant pigeon-hole which was so obviously destined to contain the moderately successful stockbroker of 1949. But Jim was in uniform and lying at the foot of a clump of bamboos, and three or four little yellow men with guns in their hands were standing over him.

'Wounded,' Jim kept saying in a thin cracked voice. 'Bring doctor quick! Wounded, wounded ...'

The three little yellow men broke out simultaneously into loud, almost good-humoured guffaws. And as though moved by a kind of secret sympathy, the whole universe shook and howled in chorus.

Then suddenly one of the men raised his foot and stamped on Jim's face. There was a scream. The heel of the heavy rubber-soled boot came down again and, with yet more force, a third time. Blood was streaming from the mangled mouth and nose. The face was hardly recognizable.

Horror, pity, indignation — but in the same instant a blast of frantic laughter clawed at his being. 'The empty pigeon-hole,' his memories kept howling, and then, with irrepressible glee: 'The stockbroker of 1949, the moderately successful stockbroker.'

Under the bamboos the stockbroker of 1949 lay still, moaning.

Under the bamboo,

Under the bamboo,

Probably constipaysh ...

The barrel-organ outside the Kensington Registry Office, and Timmy's explanation of what had happened on the cricket field.

Probably constip,

Probably constip ...

Among the little yellow men there had been a short, gloating silence. Then one of them said something and, as though to illustrate his meaning, drove his long bayonet into Jim Poulshot's chest. Grinning, the others followed suit — in the face, in the belly, in the throat and the genitals — again and again, until at last the screaming stopped.

The screaming stopped. But the laughter persisted — the howling, the epilepsy, the uncontrollable lacerating derision.

And meanwhile the scene had repeated itself. The bleeding face, the horror of the bayonets, but all somehow mixed up with Mimi in her claret-coloured dressing-gown. Adesso comincia la tortura — and then the dandling, the fumbling, the fondling. And at the same time the stamping, the stabbing. With St. Sebastian among the Victorian flowers, and poor dear Amy, tremulous before the Kensington Registrar, and Laurina at Monte Carlo. Ave verum corpus, the true body, the prim Victorian mouth, the brown, blind breast-eyes. And while the bayonets stabbed and stabbed, there was the shameful

irrelevance of a pleasure that died at last into a cold reiterated friction, automatic and compulsory. And all the time the yelping and the bassoons, the iron teeth, combing and carding the very substance of his being. For ever and ever, excruciatingly. But he knew what the light was up to. He knew what that blue tenderness of silence was beseeching him to do. No, no, none of that! Deliberately he turned yet again towards the parting of the dressing-gown, towards the mangled and unrecognizable face, towards the intolerable pain of derision and lust, compulsorily, self-imposed, for ever and ever.

Chapter Twenty-Six

THERE WERE ALMOST as many stairs as at Glanvil Terrace, but the fifth-floor landing was reached at last. Sebastian paused before ringing the bell, to recover his breath and to remind himself that, on this occasion, the nausea on the threshold was entirely unjustified. Who was Bruno Rontini anyhow? Just an amiable old ass, too decent, by all accounts, to be sarcastic or censorious, and too completely a stranger, for all his vague cousinship, to have the right to say unpleasant things, even if he wanted to. Besides, it wasn't as if he, Sebastian, were going to confess his sins, or anything like that. No, no, he wouldn't ask for help on that basis. It would be a matter of just casually introducing the subject, as though it weren't really so very important after all. 'By the way, do you happen to know a fellow called Weyl?' And so on, lightly, airily; and as Bruno wasn't his father, there wouldn't be any unpleasant interruptions, everything would go through according to plan. So that there was really no possible excuse for feeling sick like this. Sebastian drew three deep breaths, then pushed the button.

The door was opened almost immediately, and there stood old man Bruno, strangely cadaverous and beaky, in a grey sweater, with crimson carpet slippers on his feet.

His face lit up with a smile of welcome.

'Good,' he said, 'good!'

Sebastian took the extended hand, mumbled something about its being so awfully kind of him to write, and then averted his face in an excess of that paralysing embarrassment which always assailed him when he spoke to strangers. But meanwhile, inside his skull, the observer and the phrase-maker were busily at work. By daylight, he had noticed, the eyes were blue and very bright. Blue fires in bone-cups, vivid not simply with awareness and certainly not with the detached, inhuman curiosity which had shone in Mrs. Thwale's dark eyes when, last night, she had suddenly turned on the light and he had found her, on hands and knees, spanning him like an arch of white flesh. For a long half-minute she had looked at him, wordlessly smiling. Microscopic, in the black bright pupils, he could see his own pale reflection. "'Nature's lay idiot, I taught thee to love,'" she said at last. Then the pure mask crumpled into a grimace, she uttered her tiny stertorous grunt of laughter, reached out a slender arm towards the lamp and once more plunged the room into darkness. With an effort, Sebastian exorcized his memories. He looked up again into those bright, serene and extraordinarily friendly eyes.

'You know,' said Bruno, 'I was almost expecting you.'

'Expecting me?'

Bruno nodded, then turned and led the way across an obscure cupboard of a hall into a small bed-sitting-room, in which the only articles of luxury were the view of far-away mountains across the house-tops and a square of sunlight, glowing like a huge ruby, on the tiled floor.

'Sit down.' Bruno indicated the more comfortable of the two chairs, and when they were settled, 'Poor Eustace!' he went on reflectively, after a pause. He had a way, Sebastian noticed, of leaving spaces between his sentences, so that everything he said was framed, as it were, in a setting of silence. 'Tell me how it happened.'

Breathless and somewhat incoherent with shyness, Sebastian began to tell the story.

An expression of distress appeared on Bruno's face.

'So suddenly!' he said, when Sebastian had finished. 'So utterly without preparation!'

The words caused Sebastian to feel delightfully superior. Inwardly he smiled an ironic smile. It was almost incredible, but the old idiot seemed actually to believe in hell-fire and Holy Dying. With a studiously straight face, but still chuckling to himself, he looked up, to find the blue eyes fixed upon his face.

‘You think it sounds pretty funny?’ Bruno said, after the usual second of deliberate silence.

Startled, Sebastian blushed and stammered.

‘But I never ... I mean, really ...’

‘You mean what everybody means nowadays,’ the other interposed in his quiet voice. ‘Ignore death up to the last moment; then, when it can’t be ignored any longer, have yourself squirted full of morphia and shuffle off in a coma. Thoroughly sensible, humane and scientific, eh?’

Sebastian hesitated. He didn’t want to be rude, because, after all, he wanted the old ass to help him. Besides, he shrank from embarking on a controversy in which he was foredoomed by his shyness to make a fool of himself. At the same time, nonsense was nonsense.

‘I don’t see what’s wrong with it,’ he said cautiously, but with a faint undertone almost of truculence.

He sat there, sullenly averted, waiting for the other’s argumentative retort. But it never came. Prepared for attack, his resistance found itself confronted by a friendly silence and became somehow absurd and irrelevant.

Bruno spoke at last.

‘I suppose Mrs. Gamble will be holding one of her séances pretty soon.’

‘She has already,’ said Sebastian.

‘Poor old thing! What a greed for reassurance!’

‘But I must say ... well, it’s pretty convincing, don’t you think?’

‘Oh, something happens all right, if that’s what you mean.’

Remembering Mrs. Thwale’s comment, Sebastian giggled knowingly.

‘Something pretty shameless,’ he said.

‘Shameless?’ Bruno repeated, looking up at him in surprise. ‘That’s an odd word. What makes you use it?’

Sebastian smiled uncomfortably and dropped his eyes.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ he said. ‘It just seemed the right word, that’s all.’

There was another silence. Through the sleeve of his jacket Sebastian felt for the place where she had left the mark of her teeth. It was still painful to the touch. Twin cannibals in bedlam.... And then he remembered that damned drawing, and that time was passing, passing. How the devil was he to broach the subject?

‘Shameless,’ Bruno said again pensively. ‘Shameless.... And yet you can’t see why there should be any preparation for dying?’

‘Well, he seemed perfectly happy,’ Sebastian answered defensively. ‘You know — jolly and amusing, like when he was alive. That is, if it really was Uncle Eustace.’

‘If,’ Bruno repeated. ‘If.’

‘You don’t believe ...?’ Sebastian questioned in some surprise.

Bruno leaned forward and laid his hand on the boy’s knee.

‘Let’s try to get this business quite clear in our minds,’ he said. ‘Eustace’s body plus some unknown, non-bodily x equals Eustace. And for the sake of argument let’s admit that poor Eustace was as happy and jolly as you seem to think he was. All right. A moment comes when Eustace’s body is abolished; but in view of what happens at old Mrs. Gamble’s séance we’re forced to believe that x persists. But before we go any further, let’s ask ourselves what it really was that we learned at the séance. We learned that x plus the medium’s body equals a temporary pseudo-Eustace. That’s an empirical fact. But meanwhile what exactly is x? And what’s happening to x when it isn’t connected with the medium’s body? What happens to it?’ he insisted.

‘Goodness knows.’

‘Precisely. So don’t let’s pretend that we know. And don’t let’s commit the fallacy of thinking that, because x plus the medium’s body is happy and jolly, x by itself must also be happy and jolly.’ He withdrew his hand from Sebastian’s knee and leaned back in his chair. ‘Most of the consolations of spiritualism,’ he went on after a little pause, ‘seem to depend on bad logic — on drawing faulty inferences from the facts observed at séances. When old Mrs. Gamble hears about Summerland and reads Sir Oliver Lodge, she feels reassured; she’s convinced that the next world will be just like this one. But actually Summerland and Lodge are perfectly compatible with Catherine of Genoa and ...’ he hesitated, ‘yes, even the Inferno.’

‘The Inferno?’ Sebastian repeated. ‘But surely you don’t imagine ...?’ And making a last desperate effort to assure himself that Bruno was just an old ass, he laughed aloud.

His sniggering dropped into a gulf of benevolent silence.

‘No,’ said Bruno at last, ‘I don’t believe in eternal damnation. But not for any reasons that I can discover from going to séances. And still less for any reasons that I can discover from living in the world. For other reasons. Reasons connected with what I know about the nature ...’

He paused, and with an anticipatory smile Sebastian waited for him to trot out the word ‘God.’

‘... of the Gaseous Vertebrate,’ Bruno concluded. He smiled sadly. ‘Poor Eustace! It made him feel so much safer to call it that. As though the fact were modified by the name. And yet he was always laughing at other people for using intemperate language.’

‘Now he’s going to start on his conversion campaign,’ Sebastian said to himself.

But, instead, Bruno got up, crossed over to the window and, without a word, deftly caught the big blue-bottle fly that was buzzing against the glass and tossed it out into freedom. Still standing by the window, he turned and spoke.

‘You’ve got something on your mind, Sebastian,’ he said. ‘What is it?’

Startled into a kind of panic suspicion, Sebastian shook his head.

‘Nothing,’ he insisted; but an instant later he was cursing himself for having missed his opportunity.

‘And yet that’s what you came here to talk about.’

The smile with which the words were accompanied was without a trace of irony or patronage. Sebastian was reassured.

‘Well, as a matter of fact ...’ He hesitated for a second or two, then forced a rather theatrical little laugh. ‘You see,’ he said with an attempt at gaiety, ‘I’ve been swindled. Swindled,’ he repeated emphatically; for all at once he had seen how the story could be told without any reference to Mr. Tendring’s discovery or his own humiliating failures to tell the truth — simply as the story of trustful inexperience and (yes, he’d admit it) childish silliness shamefully victimized and now appealing for help. Gathering confidence as he proceeded, he told his revised version of what had happened.

‘Offering me a thousand, when he’d sold it to Uncle Eustace for seven!’ he concluded indignantly. ‘It’s just plain swindling.’

‘Well,’ said Bruno slowly, ‘they have peculiar standards, these dealers.’ None more so, he might have added, on the strength of an earlier encounter with the man, than Gabriel Weyl. But nothing would be gained, and perhaps some positive harm might be done, if he were to tell Sebastian what he knew. ‘But meanwhile,’ he went on, ‘what do your people up at the villa think about it all? Surely they must be wondering.’

Sebastian felt himself blushing.

‘Wondering?’ he questioned, hoping and pretending that he didn’t understand what was being implied.

‘Wondering how the drawing disappeared like that. And you must be pretty worried about it, aren’t you?’

There was a pause. Then, without speaking, the boy nodded his head.

‘It’s difficult to come to any decision,’ said Bruno mildly, ‘unless one knows all the relevant facts.’

Sebastian felt profoundly ashamed of himself.

‘I’m sorry,’ he whispered. ‘I ought to have explained....’

Sheepishly, he began to supply the details he had previously omitted.

Bruno listened without comment until the end.

‘And you were really intending to tell Mrs. Ockham all about it?’ he questioned.

‘I was just beginning,’ Sebastian insisted. ‘And then she was sent for.’

‘You didn’t think of telling Mrs. Thwale instead?’

‘Mrs. Thwale? Oh, goodness, no!’

‘Why goodness, no?’

‘Well ...’ Embarrassed, Sebastian groped for an avowable answer. ‘I don’t know. I mean, the drawing didn’t belong to her. She had nothing to do with it.’

‘And yet you say it was she who suspected the little girl.’

‘I know, but ...’ Twin cannibals in bedlam — and when the light went on, the eyes were bright with the look of one who enjoys a comedy from between the curtains of the most private of boxes.

‘Well, somehow it never occurred to me.’

‘I see,’ said Bruno, and was silent for a few seconds. ‘If I can get the drawing back for you,’ he went on at last, ‘will you promise to take it straight to Mrs. Ockham and tell her the whole story?’

‘Oh, I promise,’ Sebastian cried eagerly.

The other held up a bony hand.

‘Not so quick, not so quick! Promises are serious. Are you sure you’ll be able to keep this one, if you make it?’

‘Certain!’

‘So was Simon Peter. But cocks have a habit of crowing at the most inconvenient moments...’

Bruno smiled, humorously, but at the same time with a kind of compassionate tenderness.

‘As though I were ill,’ Sebastian thought, as he looked into the other’s face, and was simultaneously touched and annoyed — touched by so much solicitude on his behalf, but annoyed by what it implied: namely, that he was sick (mortally sick, to judge by the look in those bright blue eyes), of the inability to keep a promise. But really that was a bit thick....

‘Well,’ Bruno went on, ‘the quicker we get to work the better, eh?’

He peeled off his sweater and, opening the wardrobe, took out an old brown jacket. Then he sat down to change his shoes. Bending over the laces, he began to talk again.

‘When I do something wrong,’ he said, ‘or merely stupid, I find it very useful to draw up — not exactly a balance sheet; no, it’s more like a genealogy, if you see what I mean, a family tree of the offence. Who or what were its parents, ancestors, collaterals? What are likely to be its descendants — in my own life and other people’s? It’s surprising how far a little honest research will take one. Down into the rat-holes of one’s own character. Back into past history. Out into the world around one. Forward into possible consequences. It makes one realize that nothing one does is unimportant and nothing wholly private.’ The last knot was tied; Bruno got up. ‘Well, I think that’s everything,’ he said, as he put on his jacket.

‘There’s the money,’ Sebastian mumbled uncomfortably. He pulled out his wallet. ‘I’ve only got about a thousand lire left. If you could lend me the rest ... I’ll return it as soon as I possibly ...’

Bruno took the wad of notes and handed one of them back to the boy.

‘You’re not a Franciscan,’ he said. ‘At any rate, not yet — though one day, perhaps, in mere self-defence against yourself ...’ He smiled almost mischievously and, cramming the rest of the money in a trouser pocket, picked up his hat.

‘I don’t suppose I shall be very long,’ he said, looking back from the door. ‘You’ll find plenty of books to amuse you — that is, if you want an opiate, which I hope you don’t. Yes, I hope you don’t,’ he repeated with a sudden, insistent earnestness; then he turned and went out.

Left to himself, Sebastian sat down again.

It had gone off quite differently, of course, from what he had imagined, but very well. Better, in fact, than he had ever dared to hope — except that he did wish he hadn’t started by telling that revised version of what had happened. Hoping to cut a better figure, and then having to admit, abjectly,

humiliatingly, that it wasn't true. Anyone else would have seized the opportunity to deliver the most frightful pi-jaw. Not Bruno, however. He felt profoundly grateful for the man's forbearance. To have had the decency to help without first taking it out of him in a sermon — that was really extraordinary. And he wasn't a fool either. What he had said about the genealogy of an offence, for example ...

'The genealogy of an offence,' he whispered in the silence, 'the family tree....'

He began to think of the lies he had told and of all their ramifying antecedents and accompaniments and consequences. He oughtn't to have told them, of course; but, on the other hand, if it hadn't been for his father's idiotic principles he wouldn't have had to tell them. And if it hadn't been for the slums and rich men with cigars, like poor Uncle Eustace, his father wouldn't have had those idiotic principles. And yet Uncle Eustace had been thoroughly kind and decent. Whereas that anti-fascist professor — one wouldn't trust him an inch. And how boring most of his father's left-wing, lower-class friends were! How unutterably dreary! But dreary and boring, he remembered, to him; and that was probably his fault. Just as it was his fault that those evening clothes should have seemed so indispensable — because other boys had them, because there would be those girls at Tom Boveney's party. But one oughtn't to consider what other people did or thought; and the girls would turn out to be just another excuse for sensual day-dreamings that were destined henceforward to be haunted by memories of last night's reality of unimaginable shamelessness and alienation. Cannibals in bedlam — and the door of the madhouse had been locked against the last chance of telling the truth. Meanwhile, in some crowded peasant's cottage at the remote, unvisited end of the garden, a child in tears was perhaps even now protesting her innocence under an angry cross-examination. And when blows and threats had failed to elicit the information she didn't possess, that old she-devil of a Mrs. Gamble would insist on sending for the police; and then everybody would be questioned, everybody — himself included. But would he be able to stick to his story? And if they took it into their heads to go and talk to Weyl, what reason would he have for withholding the truth? And then ... Sebastian shuddered. But now, thank God, old man Bruno had come to the rescue. The drawing would be bought back; he'd make a clean breast of the whole business to Mrs. Ockham — irresistibly, so that she'd start crying and say he was just like Frankie — and everything would be all right. The children of his lie would either remain unborn or else be smothered in their cradles, and the lie itself would be as though it had never been uttered. Indeed, for all practical purposes, one could now say that it never had been uttered.

'Never,' Sebastian said to himself emphatically, 'never.'

His spirits rose, he began to whistle, and suddenly, in a flash of intensely pleasurable illumination, he perceived how well this notion of the genealogy of offences would fit into the scheme of his new poem. Patterns of atoms; but chaos of the molecules assembled in the stone. Patterns of living cells and organs and physiological functioning, but chaos of men's behaviour in time. And yet even in that chaos there was law and logic; there was a geometry even of disintegration. The square on lust is equal, so to speak, to the sum of the squares on vanity and idleness. The shortest distance between two cravings is violence. And what about the lies he had been telling? What about broken promises and betrayals? Phrases began to form themselves in his mind.

Belial his blubber lips and Avarice

Pouting a trap-tight sphincter, voluptuously

Administer the lingering Judas kiss ...

He pulled out his pencil and scribbling-pad, and started to write. '... the lingering Judas kiss.' And, after Judas, the crucifixion. But death had many ancestors besides greed and falsehood, many other forms than voluntary martyrdom. He recalled an article he had read somewhere about the character of the next war. 'And the dead children,' he wrote,

And the dead children lying about the streets

Like garbage, when the bombardiers have done —

These the mild sluggard murders while he snores,

And Calvin, father of a thousand whores,

Murders in pulpits, logically, for a syllogism....

An hour later a key turned in the lock. Startled, and at the same time annoyed, by the unwelcome interruption, Sebastian came to the surface from the depths of his absorbed abstraction and looked towards the door.

Bruno met his eye and smiled.

‘Eccolo!’ he said, holding up a thin rectangular package wrapped in brown paper.

Sebastian looked at it, and for a second couldn’t think what it was. Then recognition came; but so completely had he convinced himself that Bruno would succeed, and that all his troubles were already over, that the actual sight of the drawing left him almost indifferent.

‘Oh, the thing,’ he said, ‘the Degas.’ Then, realizing that mere politeness demanded a display of gratitude and delight, he raised his voice and cried, ‘Oh, thank you, thank you! I can never ... I mean, you’ve been so extraordinarily decent....’

Bruno looked at him without speaking. ‘A small cherub in grey flannel trousers,’ he said to himself, remembering the phrase that Eustace had used at the station. And it was true: that smile was angelical, in spite of its calculatedness. There was a kind of lovely and supernatural innocence about the boy, even when, as now, he was so obviously acting a part. And, incidentally, why should he be acting a part? And considering the panic he had been in an hour ago, why was it that he didn’t now feel genuinely glad and grateful? Scrutinizing the delicately beautiful face before him, Bruno sought in vain for an answer to his questions. All he could find in it was the brute fact of that seraphic naïveté shining enchantingly through childish hypocrisy, that guilelessness even in deliberate cunning. And because of that guilelessness people would always love him — always, whatever he might be betrayed into doing or leaving undone. But that wasn’t by any means the most dangerous consequence of being a seraph — but a seraph out of heaven, deprived of the beatific vision, unaware, indeed, of the very existence of God. No, the most dangerous consequence was that, whatever he might do or leave undone, he himself would tend, because of the beauty of his own intrinsic innocence, to spare himself the salutary agonies of contrition. Being angelical, he would be loved, not only by other people, but also by himself — through thick and thin, with a love inexpugnable by any force less violent than a major disaster. Once again, Bruno felt himself moved by a profound compassion. Sebastian, the predestined target, the delicate and radiant butt of God alone knew what ulterior flights of arrows — piercing enjoyments, successes poisoned with praise and barbed to stick; and then, if Providence was merciful enough to send an antidote, pains and humiliations and defeats....

‘Been writing?’ he asked at last, noticing the pad and pencil, and making them the excuse for breaking the long silence.

Sebastian blushed and stowed them away in his pocket.

‘I’d been thinking of what you were saying just before you went out,’ he answered. ‘You know, about things having genealogies....’

‘And you’ve been working out the genealogy of your own mistakes?’ Bruno asked with a glad hopefulness.

‘Well, not exactly. I was ... Well, you see, I’m working on a new poem, and this seemed to fit in so well....’

Bruno thought of the interview from which he had just come, and smiled with a touch of rather rueful amusement. Gabriel Weyl had ended by yielding; but the surrender had been anything but graceful. Against his will — for he had done his best to put them out of mind — Bruno found himself remembering the ugly words that had been spoken, the passionate gestures of those hirsute and beautifully manicured hands, that face distorted and pale with fury. He sighed, laid his hat and the drawing on the book-case, and sat down.

‘The Gospel of Poetry,’ he said slowly. ‘In the beginning were the words, and the words were with God, and the words were God. Here endeth the first, last and only lesson.’

There was a silence. Sebastian sat quite still, with averted face, staring at the floor. He was feeling ashamed of himself and at the same time resentful of the fact that he had been made to feel ashamed. After all, there was nothing wrong about poetry; so why on earth shouldn’t he write, if he felt like it?

‘Can I see what you’ve done?’ Bruno asked at last.

Sebastian blushed again and mumbled something about its being no good; but finally handed over the scribbling-pad.

“‘Belial his blubber lips,’” Bruno began aloud, then continued his reading in silence. ‘Good!’ he said, when he had finished. ‘I wish I could say the thing as powerfully as that. If I’d been able to,’ he added with a little smile, ‘perhaps you’d have spent your time making out your own genealogy, instead of writing something that may move other people to make out theirs. But then, of course, you have the luck to have been born a poet. Or is it the misfortune?’

‘The misfortune?’ Sebastian repeated.

‘Every Fairy Godmother is also potentially the Wicked Fairy.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it’s easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man ...’ He left the sentence unfinished.

‘But I’m not rich,’ Sebastian protested, thinking resentfully of what his father’s stinginess had forced him to do.

‘Not rich? Read your own verses!’ Bruno handed back the scribbling-pad. ‘And when you’ve done that, look at your image in a mirror.’

‘Oh, I see....’

‘And women’s eyes — those are mirrors when they come close enough,’ Bruno added.

When they come close enough — looking down at the comedy, with the microscopic image of nature’s lay idiot reflected in their ironic brightness. Feeling extremely uneasy, Sebastian wondered what the man would say next. But to his great relief the talk took a less personal turn.

‘And yet,’ Bruno went on reflectively, ‘a certain number of the intrinsically rich do succeed in getting through the needle’s eye. Bernard, for example. And perhaps Augustine, though I always wonder if he wasn’t the victim of his own incomparable style. And Thomas Aquinas. And obviously François de Sales. But they’re few, they’re few. The great majority of the rich get stuck, or never even attempt the passage. Did you ever read a life of Kant?’ he asked parenthetically. ‘Or of Nietzsche?’

Sebastian shook his head.

‘Well, perhaps you’d better not,’ said Bruno. ‘It’s difficult, if one does, to avoid uncharitableness. And then Dante....’ He shook his head, and there was a silence.

‘Uncle Eustace talked about Dante,’ Sebastian volunteered. ‘That last evening it was — just before ...’

‘What did he say?’

Sebastian did his best to reproduce the substance of the conversation.

‘And he was perfectly right,’ said Bruno, when he had finished. ‘Except, of course, that Chaucer isn’t any solution to the problem. Being worldly in one way and writing consummately well about this world is no better than being worldly in another way and writing consummately well about the next world. No better for oneself, that’s to say. When it comes to the effect on other people ...’ He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. “‘Let Austin have his swink to him reserved.” Or

e la sua volontate è nostra pace;

ell’è quel mare al qual tutto si move,

ciò eh’ella crea e che natura face.

I know which of them I’d choose. Can you understand Dante, by the way?’

Sebastian shook his head, but immediately made up for this admission of ignorance by showing off a little.

‘If it were Greek,’ he said, ‘or Latin, or French ...’

‘But unfortunately it’s Italian,’ Bruno interposed matter-of-factly. ‘But Italian’s worth learning, if only for the sake of what those lines can do for you. And yet,’ he added, ‘how little they did for the man who actually wrote them! Poor Dante — the way he pats himself on the back for belonging to such a distinguished family! Not to mention the fact that he’s the only man who was ever allowed to

visit heaven before he died. And even in Paradise he can't stop raging and railing about contemporary politics. And when he gets to the sphere of the Contemplatives, what does he make Benedict and Peter Damian talk about? Not love or liberation, nor the practice of the presence of God. No, no; they spend all their time, as Dante liked to spend his — denouncing other people's bad behaviour and threatening them with hell-fire.' Sadly, Bruno shook his head. 'Such a waste of such enormous gifts — it makes one feel inclined to weep.'

'Why do you suppose he wasted himself like that?'

'Because he wanted to. And if you ask why he went on wanting to after he'd written about God's will being our peace, the answer is that that's how genius works. It has insights into the nature of ultimate reality and it gives expression to the knowledge so obtained. Gives expression to it either explicitly in things like "e la sua volontate è nostra pace" or implicitly, in the white spaces between the lines, so to speak — by writing beautifully. And of course you can write beautifully about anything, from the Wife of Bath to Baudelaire's *affreuse juive* and Gray's pensive Selima. And incidentally the explicit statements about reality don't convey very much unless they too are written poetically. Beauty is truth; truth, beauty. The truth about the beauty is given in the lines, and the beauty of the truth in the white spaces between them. If the white spaces are merely blank, the lines are just ... just Hymns Ancient and Modern.'

'Or late Wordsworth,' put in Sebastian.

'Yes, and don't forget the very early Shelley,' said Bruno. 'The adolescent can be quite as inept as the old.' He smiled at Sebastian. 'Well, as I was saying,' he continued in another tone, 'explicitly or implicitly, men of genius express their knowledge of reality. But they themselves very rarely act on their knowledge. Why not? Because all their energy and attention are absorbed by the work of composition. They're concerned with writing, not with acting or being. But because they're only concerned with writing about their knowledge, they prevent themselves from knowing more.'

'What do you mean?' Sebastian asked.

'Knowledge is proportionate to being,' Bruno answered. 'You know in virtue of what you are; and what you are depends on three factors: what you've inherited, what your surroundings have done to you, and what you've chosen to do with your surroundings and your inheritance. A man of genius inherits an unusual capacity to see into ultimate reality and to express what he sees. If his surroundings are reasonably good, he'll be able to exercise his powers. But if he spends all his energies on writing and doesn't attempt to modify his inherited and acquired being in the light of what he knows, then he can never get to increase his knowledge. On the contrary, he'll know progressively less instead of more.'

'Less instead of more?' Sebastian repeated questioningly.

'Less instead of more,' the other insisted. 'He that is not getting better is getting worse, and he that is getting worse is in a position to know less and less about the nature of ultimate reality. Conversely, of course, if one gets better and knows more, one will be tempted to stop writing, because the all-absorbing labour of composition is an obstacle in the way of further knowledge. And that, maybe, is one of the reasons why most men of genius take such infinite pains not to become saints — out of mere self-preservation. So you get Dante writing angelic lines about the will of God and in the next breath giving vent to his rancours and vanities. You get Wordsworth worshipping God in nature and preaching admiration, hope and love, while all the time he cultivates an egotism that absolutely flabbergasts the people who know him. You get Milton devoting a whole epic to man's first disobedience and consistently exhibiting a pride worthy of his own Lucifer. And finally,' he added, with a little laugh, 'you get young Sebastian perceiving the truth of an important general principle — the inter-relationship of evil — and using all his energy, not to act on it, which would be a bore, but to turn it into verse, which he thoroughly enjoys. "Calvin, father of a thousand whores" is pretty good, I grant you; but something personal and practical might have been still better. Mightn't it? However, as I said before, In the beginning were the words, and the words were with God, and the words were God.' He got up and crossed over to the door of the kitchen. 'And now let's see what we can scrape together for lunch,' he said.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

AFTER LUNCHEON THEY did some sight-seeing, and it was with an imagination haunted by the frescoes of San Marco and the Medicean tombs that Sebastian finally made his way home. The sun was already low as he walked up the steep and dusty road to the villa; there were treasures of blue shadow, expanses not of stone or stucco, but of amber, trees and grass glowing with supernatural significance. Blissfully, in a mood of effortless alertness and passivity, like a wide-eyed somnambulist, who sees, but with senses somehow not his own, who feels and thinks, but with emotions that no longer have a personal reference, a mind entirely free and unconditioned, he moved through the actual radiance around him, through the memories of what he had so lately seen and heard — the huge, smooth marbles, the saints diaphanous in the whitewashed monastery cells, the words that Bruno had spoken as they came out of the Medici chapel.

‘Michelangelo and Fra Angelico — apotheosis and deification.’

Apotheosis — the personality exalted and intensified to the point where the person ceases to be mere man or woman and becomes god-like, one of the Olympians, like that passionately pensive warrior, like those great titanesses brooding, naked, above the sarcophagi. And over against apotheosis, deification — personality annihilated in charity, in union, so that at last the man or woman can say, ‘Not I, but God in me.’

But meanwhile here was the goat again, the one that had been eating wistaria buds under the headlights that first evening with Uncle Eustace. But this time it had a half-ruminated rose sticking out of the corner of its mouth — like Carmen in the opera, so that it was to the imagined strains of ‘Toreador, toreador’ that the creature advanced to the gate of its garden and, slowly chewing on the rose, looked out at him through the bars. In the yellow eyes the pupils were two narrow slots of the purest, blackest mindlessness. Sebastian reached out and caressed the long curve of a nobly semitic nose, fondled six warm and muscular inches of drooping ear, then took hold of one of the diabolic horns. Carmen began to back away impatiently. He tightened his grip and tried to pull her forward. With a sudden, forceful jerk of the head, the creature broke away from him and went bounding up the steps. A large black udder wobbled wildly as she ran. Pausing at the top of the steps, she let fall half a dozen pills of excrement, then reached up and plucked another rose for her appearance in the Second Act. Sebastian turned and walked on, through the late afternoon sunshine and his memories. Somnambulistically happy. But uneasily, at the back of his mind, he was aware of the other, disregarded realities — the lies he had told, the interview with Mrs. Ockham that still lay ahead of him. And perhaps that wretched child had already been questioned, whipped, deprived of food. But no, he refused to give up his happiness before it was absolutely necessary. Carmen with her rose and her white beard; marble and fresco; apotheosis and deification. But why not apotragosis and caprification? He laughed aloud. And yet what Bruno had said, as they stood there in the Piazza del Duomo, waiting for the tram, had impressed him profoundly. Apotheosis and deification — the only roads of escape from the unutterable wearisomeness, the silly and degrading horror, of being merely yourself, of being only human. Two roads; but in reality only the second led out into open country. So much more promising, apparently, so vastly more attractive, the first invariably turned out to be only a glorious blind alley. Under triumphal arches, along an avenue of statuary and fountains, you marched in pomp towards an ultimate frustration — solemnly and heroically, full tilt into the insurmountable dead end of your own selfhood. And the dead end was solid marble, of course, and adorned with the colossal monuments of your power, magnanimity and wisdom, but no less a wall than the most grotesquely hideous of the vices down there in your old, all too human prison. Whereas the other road ... But then the tram had come.

‘You’ve been incredibly kind,’ he had stammered as they shook hands, and then, suddenly carried away by his feelings: ‘You’ve made me see such a lot of things.... I’ll really try. Really....’

The brown beaked skull had smiled, and in their deep sockets the eyes had brightened with tenderness and, once again, compassion.

Yes, Sebastian had repeated to himself, as the tram crawled along the narrow streets towards the river, he'd really try. Try to be more honest, to think less of himself. To live with people and real events and not so exclusively with words. How awful he was! Self-hatred and remorse blended harmoniously with the feelings evoked by the afternoon sunlight and the fascinating foreignness of what it illuminated, by San Marco and the Medici chapel, by Bruno's kindness and what the man had said. And gradually his mood had modulated out of its original ethical urgency into another key — out of the exaltation of repentance and good resolutions into the bliss of detached poetical contemplation, into this heavenly condition of somnambulism, in which he still found himself as he rounded the last hairpin of the road and saw the wrought-iron gates between their tall pillars of stone, the solemn succession of the cypress trees winding away towards the villa, out of sight, round the contour of the hill.

He slipped through the pedestrians' wicket. The fine gravel of the drive made a delicious crunching noise under his feet, like Grape Nuts.

Walking on Grape Nuts and imagination,
Among recollected crucifixions and these jewels
Of horizontal sunlight ...

Suddenly, from between two cypresses, twenty or thirty yards ahead of him, a small black figure came running out into the drive. With a start and a horrible sinking of the stomach, Sebastian recognized the little girl with the weeding basket, recognized the incarnation of his own disregarded guilty conscience, the harbinger of that reality which, in his somnambulist detachment, he had forgotten. Catching sight of him, the child halted and stood there staring with round black eyes. Her face, Sebastian noticed, was paler than usual, and she had evidently been crying. Oh, God.... He smiled at her, called 'Hullo' and waved a friendly hand. But before he had taken five more steps the child turned and, like a frightened animal, rushed away along the path by which she had come.

'Stop!' he shouted.

But of course she didn't stop; and when he came to the opening between the trees, the child was nowhere to be seen. And even if he were to follow and find her, he reflected, it wouldn't be any good. She understood no English, he spoke no Italian. Gloomily Sebastian turned and walked on towards the house.

No servants were about when he entered, and he could hear no sound from the drawing-room. Thank God, the coast was clear. He tiptoed across the hall and started to climb the stairs. On the last step he halted. A sound had caught his ear. Somewhere, behind one of those closed doors, people were talking. Should he run the invisible blockade and go on, or beat a retreat? Sebastian was still hesitating, when the door of what had been poor Uncle Eustace's room was thrown open and out walked old Mrs. Gamble, hugging that dog of hers in one arm while Mrs. Ockham held the other. They were followed by a pale, cow-like creature, whom Sebastian recognized as the medium. Then came Mrs. Thwale and, close behind Mrs. Thwale — of all horrors! — Gabriel Weyl and Mme Weyl.

'So different from the occidental art,' Weyl was saying. 'For example, you would not desire to feel a Gothic madonna — would you, madame?'

He dodged past Mrs. Thwale and the medium, and caught Mrs. Ockham by the sleeve.

'Would you?' he insisted, as she halted and turned towards him.

'Well, really ...' said Mrs. Ockham uncertainly.

'What's that he's saying?' the Queen Mother questioned sharply. 'I can't understand a word of it.'

'Those folds of trecento drapery,' M. Weyl went on. 'So harsh, so emphatic!' He made a grimace of agony and with his left hand tenderly clasped the fingers of his right, as though they had just been caught in a mouse-trap. 'Qué barbaridad!'

Still keeping his eyes fixed on the menace at the other end of the corridor, Sebastian stepped noiselessly down from the highest stair to the one below the highest.

'Whereas a Chinese object,' M. Weyl went on; and, from agonized, his large expressive face became suddenly rapturous. 'Un petit bodhisattva, par exemple...'

Another step down.

‘... With his draperies in liquefaction. Like butter in the month of August. No violence, no Gothic folds — simply quelques volutes savantes et peu profondes.

Voluptuously the thick, white, hairy hands caressed the air.

‘What deliciousness for the ends of the fingers! What sublime sensuality! What ...’

Another step. But this time the movement was too abrupt. Foxy VIII turned a sharp nose towards the staircase and, wriggling frantically in Mrs. Gamble’s clasp, began to bark.

‘Why, it’s Sebastian!’ cried Mrs. Ockham delightedly. ‘Come along and be introduced to Monsieur and Madame Weyl.’

Feeling like a criminal on his way to execution, Sebastian slowly mounted the last three stairs of the scaffold and walked towards the drop. The barking grew more hysterical.

‘Be quiet, Foxy,’ rasped the Queen Mother. Then, tempering command by argument, ‘After all,’ she added, ‘he’s a perfectly harmless boy. Perfectly harmless.’

‘Sebastian Barnack, my stepfather’s nephew,’ Mrs. Ockham explained.

Sebastian looked up, expecting to meet a smile of ironic recognition, a voluble declaration that the Weyls had met him before. But, instead, the wife merely inclined her head politely, while the man held out a hand and said:

‘Enchanted to make your acquaintance, sir.’

‘Enchanted,’ Sebastian mumbled back, trying to look and behave as though this were the usual kind of ordinary unimportant introduction.

‘Without doubt,’ said M. Weyl, ‘you share your uncle’s love of the arts?’

‘Oh, rather ... I mean, I ...’

‘The Chinese collection alone!’ M. Weyl clasped his hands and looked up to heaven. ‘And the fact that he kept most of it in his bedroom,’ he went on, turning back to Mrs. Ockham, ‘for no other eyes than his own! What delicacy, what sensibility!’

‘I’d sell the whole lot if I were you, Daisy,’ put in the Queen Mother. ‘Sell ’em for cash and buy yourself a Rolls. It’s an economy in the end.’

‘How true!’ breathed M. Weyl in the tone of one who comments reverently on an utterance by Rabindranath Tagore.

‘Well, I don’t know about the Rolls,’ said Mrs. Ockham, who had been thinking of how she could use the money to help her poor girls. Then, to avoid further discussion with her grandmother, she hastily changed the subject. ‘I wanted to talk to Monsieur Weyl about the drawing,’ she continued, turning to Sebastian. ‘So Veronica rang him up after luncheon, and he very kindly offered to come up here immediately.’

‘No kindness at all,’ protested M. Weyl. ‘A pleasure and at the same time a sacred duty to the memory of our dear defunct.’ He laid his hand on his heart.

‘Monsieur Weyl is very optimistic,’ Mrs. Ockham went on. ‘He doesn’t think it was stolen. In fact, he’s absolutely certain we shall find it again.’

‘Daisy, you’re talking nonsense,’ barked the Queen Mother. ‘Nobody can be certain about that drawing except Eustace. That’s why I sent for Mrs. Byfleet again — and the quicker we get to our séance, the better.’

There was a silence, and Sebastian knew that the moment had come for him to keep his promise. If he failed to act now, if he didn’t immediately hand over the drawing and explain what had happened, it might be too late. But to confess in public, before that awful man and the Queen Mother and Mrs. Thwale — the prospect was appalling. And yet he had promised, he had promised. Sebastian swallowed hard and passed the tip of his tongue over his dry lips. But it was Mrs. Gamble who broke the silence.

‘Nothing will convince me that it wasn’t stolen,’ she went on emphatically. ‘Nothing except an assurance from Eustace’s own lips.’

‘Not even the fact that it has been already found?’ said M. Weyl.

His eyes twinkled, his tone and expression were those of a man on the verge of delighted laughter.

‘Already found?’ Mrs. Ockham repeated questioningly.

Like a conjurer materializing rabbits, M. Weyl reached out and twitched the thin, flat parcel from under Sebastian's left arm.

'In its original wrapping,' he said, as he broke the string. 'I recognize my paper of emballage.' And with a flourish, as though it were not rabbits this time, but infant unicorns, he pulled out the drawing and handed it to Mrs. Ockham. 'And as for our jeune farceur,' he went on, 'who holds himself there saying nothing with a funebral face as if he was at an interment ...' He exploded in a great guffaw and clapped Sebastian on the shoulder.

'What's that, what's that?' cried the Queen Mother, darting blind glances from one face to another. 'The boy's found it, has he?'

"Elle est retrouvée" M. Weyl declaimed,

'Elle est retrouvée.

Quoi? L'éternité.

C'est la mer allée

Avec le soleil.

But seriously, my friend, seriously ... Where? Not by chance in the place where I always said it must be? Not in ...?' He paused, then leaned forward and whispered in Sebastian's ear, '... In the place where even the king goes on foot — enfin, the toilet cabinet?'

Sebastian hesitated for a moment, then nodded his head.

'There's a little space between the medicine cupboard and the wall,' he whispered.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

PAIN AND THE howling of laughter. Nightmares of cruelty and cold lust, and this irrepressible derision tearing relentlessly at the very substance of his being. Without end; and the durations grew longer and progressively longer with each repetition of the ever-increasing agony.

After an eternity deliverance came with a kind of jerk, as though by miracle. Came with the sudden lapse out of mere incoherent succession into the familiar orderliness of time. Came with the multitudinous twittering of sensation, the fluttering consciousness of having a body. And out there lay space; and in the space there were bodies — the sensed evidence of other kindred minds.

'We have two old friends of yours with us this evening,' he heard the Queen Mother saying in her ghostly petty officer's voice. 'Monsieur and Madame — what's the name, by the way?'

'Weyl,' and 'Gabriel Weyl,' a masculine and a feminine voice answered simultaneously.

And sure enough, it was the Flemish Venus and her preposterous Vulcan.

"'Where every prospect pleases,'" he chanted, "'and only man is WEYL FRÈRES, Bruxelles, Paris, Florence....'"

But, as usual, the imbecile interpreter got it all wrong. Meanwhile the dealer had begun to talk to him about the Chinese bronzes. What taste in the collector of such treasures, what connoisseurship, what sensibility! Then, with a solemn earnestness that was in ludicrous contrast with her naughty-naughty French accent, Mme Weyl brought out something about their calligraphic polyphony.

Delicious absurdity!

'He thinks you're funny,' the interpreter squeaked, and broke into a shrill giggle.

But these Weyls, Eustace suddenly perceived, were much more than funny. In some way or other they were enormously significant and important. In some way and for some mysterious reason they were epoch-making — yes, there was no other word for it. They were absolutely epoch-making.

He seemed on the verge of discovering just how and why they were epoch-making, when the Queen Mother suddenly broke in.

'I suppose you're beginning to feel quite at home now, on the other side,' she rasped.

'At home!' he repeated with sarcastic emphasis.

But it was as a rather gushing statement of fact that the imbecile brought out the words.

‘Sure, he feels quite at home,’ she squeaked.

Then the Queen Mother suggested that it might be nice for those who had never attended a séance before if he gave them something evidential; and she began to fire off a string of the most idiotic questions. How much had he paid for those drawings he had bought from M. Weyl? What was the name of the hotel he had stayed at in Paris? What books had he been reading the day he passed on? And then Mrs. Thwale piped up, and both the Weyls; and the conversation became so incoherent, so senselessly trivial, that he grew confused, found it difficult to think straight or even remember the most familiar facts. In self-protection he turned his attention away from the significance of what was being said to him, concentrating instead on the mere sound of the words, on the pitch and timbre and volume of the different voices. And contrapuntal to these noises from without there were the muffled rhythms of blood and breathing, the uninterrupted stream of messages from this temporary body of his. Warmths and pressures, moistures and titillations, a score of little aches and stiffnesses, of obscure visceral discontents and satisfactions. Treasures of physiological reality, directly experienced and so intrinsically fascinating that there was no need to bother about other people, no point in thinking or trying to communicate. It was enough just to have this feeling of space and time and the processes of life. Nothing else was required. This alone was paradise.

And then, through the dark twittering aviary of his sensations, Eustace was aware, once again, of that blue shining stillness. Delicate, unutterably beautiful, like the essence of all skies and flowers, like the silent principle and potentiality of all music. And tender, yearning, supplicatory.

But meanwhile the air slowly came and went in the nostrils, cool on the intake, warm to the point of being all but imperceptible as it was breathed out; and as the chest expanded and contracted, effort was succeeded by a delicious effortlessness, tension by relaxation, again and again. And what pleasure to listen to the waves of blood as they beat against the ear-drums, to feel them throbbing under the skin of the temples! How fascinating to analyse the mingled savours of garlic and chocolate, red wine and — yes — kidneys, haunting the tongue and palate! And then, all at once, by a kind of exquisitely harmonious and co-ordinated earthquake of all the muscles of the mouth and gullet, the accumulations of saliva were swallowed; and a moment later a faint bubbling trill from below the diaphragm announced that the processes of digestion were sleeplessly going forward. That seemed to bring the ultimate reassurance, to perfect and consummate his sense of paradisaical cosiness. And suddenly he found himself remembering St. Sebastian and the stuffed humming-birds, remembering the taste of cigar smoke on a palate warmed by old brandy, remembering Mimi and the Young Man of Peoria and his collection of facts about the ludicrous or disastrous consequences of idealism — remembering them not with shame or self-condemnation but with downright relish or, at the very worst, an amused indulgence. The light persisted, ubiquitously present; but this feeling of being in a body was an effective barrier against its encroachments. Behind his sensations he was safe from any compulsion to know himself as he was known. And these Weyls, he now perceived, this Venus with her swarthy Vulcan, could become the instruments of his permanent deliverance from that atrocious knowledge. There was a living uterine darkness awaiting him there, a vegetative heaven. Providence was ready for him, a providence of living flesh, hungry to engulf him into itself, yearning to hold and cradle him, to nourish with the very substance of its deliciously carnal and sanguine being.

Imploringly, the light intensified its shining silence. But he knew what it was up to, he was forearmed against its tricks. And besides, it was possible to make the best of Mozart and the Casino, of Mimi and the evening star between cypresses. Perfectly possible, provided always one owned a physiology to protect one against the stratagems of the light. And that protection could be had for the asking; or rather was being offered, greedily, with a kind of mindless frenzy....

Suddenly the squeaking of the imbecile ceased to be nothing but a sensation, and modulated into significance.

‘Good-bye, folks, good-bye.’

And from out there in the darkness came an answering chorus of farewells that grew momentarily dimmer, vaguer, more confused. And all the delicious messages from this body of his — they too were fading. The aviary fell silent and motionless. And suddenly there was a kind of wrench, and once again he was out of the comfortable world where time is a regular succession and place is fixed and solid — out in the chaos and delirium of unfettered mind. In the vague flux of masterless images, of thoughts and words and memories all but autonomous and independent, two things preserved their stability, the tender ubiquity of the light and the knowledge that there was a fostering darkness of flesh and blood in which, if he chose, he could find deliverance from the light.

But here once more was the lattice of relationships, and he was in the midst of it, moving from node to node, from one patterned figure to its strangely distorted projection in another pattern. Moving, moving, until all of a sudden there he was, carefully putting down his cigar on the onyx ashtray and turning to open the medicine cupboard.

There was a kind of side-slip, a falling, as it were, through the intricacies of the lattice — and he knew himself remembering events that had not yet taken place. Remembering a day towards the end of summer, hot and cloudless, with aeroplanes roaring across the sky — across the luminous silence. For the silence was still there, shining, ubiquitously tender; still there in spite of what was happening on this long straight road between its poplar trees. Thousands of people, all moving one way, all haunted by the same fear. People on foot, carrying bundles on their backs, carrying children; or perched high on overloaded carts; or wheeling bicycles with suitcases strapped to the handle-bars.

And here was Weyl, paunchy and bald-headed, pushing a green perambulator packed full of unframed canvases and Dutch silver and Chinese jade, with a painted madonna standing drunkenly at an angle where the baby should have been. Heavy now with the approach of middle age, the Flemish Venus limped after him under the burden of a blue morocco dressing-case and her sealskin coat. 'Je n'en peux plus,' she kept whispering, 'je n'en peux plus.' And sometimes, despairingly, 'Suicidons-nous, Gabriel.' Bent over the perambulator, Weyl did not answer or even look round, but the little spindly boy who walked beside her, preposterous in baggy plus-fours, would squeeze his mother's hand, and when she turned her tear-stained face towards him would smile up at her encouragingly.

To the left, across a tawny expanse of stubble and some market gardens, a whole town was burning, and the smoke of it, billowing up from behind the towers of that sunlit church in the suburbs, spread out as it mounted through the luminous silence into a huge inverted cone of brown darkness. A noise of distant gunfire bumped against the summer air. Near by, from an abandoned farm, came the frantic lowing of un milked cows and, overhead, suddenly there were the planes again. The planes — and almost in the same instant another roaring made itself heard on the road behind them. Dimly at first. But the convoy was travelling at full speed and, second by second, the noise swelled up, terrifyingly. There were shouts and screaming and a panic rush towards the ditch — the frenzy and blind violence of fear. And suddenly here was Weyl howling like a madman beside his overturned perambulator. A horse took fright, whinnied, reared up in the shafts; the cart moved back with a sudden jerk, striking Mme Weyl a glancing blow on the shoulder. She staggered forward a step or two, trying to recover her balance, then caught one of her high heels against a stone and fell face downwards into the roadway. 'Maman!' screamed the little boy. But before he could pull her back the first of the huge lorries had rolled across the struggling body. For a second there was a gap in the nightmare, a glimpse between the trees of that distant church, bright against the billowing smoke, like a carved jewel in the sunshine. Then, identical with the first, the second lorry passed. The body was quite still.

But Eustace was alone again with the light and the silence. Alone with the principle of all skies and music and tenderness, with the potentialities of all that skies and music and even tenderness were incapable of manifesting. For an instant, for an eternity, there was a total and absolute participation. Then, excruciatingly, the knowledge of being separate returned, the shamed perception of his own hideous and obscene opacity.

But in the same instant there was the memory of those epoch-making Weyls, the knowledge that if he chose to accept it, they could bring him deliverance from the excess of light.

The lorries rolled on, identically grey-green, full of men and clanking metal. In the gap of time between the fourth and fifth, they managed to pull the body out from under the wheels. A coat was thrown over it.

Still crying, Weyl went back, after a little, to see if he could find any more fragments of the madonna's broken crown and fingers. A big red-cheeked woman laid her arm round the child's shoulders and, leading him away, made him sit down at the foot of one of the poplar trees. The little boy crouched there, his face in his hands, his body trembling and shaken by sobs. And suddenly it was no longer from outside that he was thought about. The agony of that grief and terror were known directly, by an identifying experience of them — not as his, but mine. Eustace Barnack's awareness of the child had become one with the child's awareness of himself; it was that awareness.

Then there was another displacement, and again the image of the little boy was only a memory of someone else. Horrible, horrible! And yet, in spite of the horror, what blessedness it was to feel the waves of blood beating and beating within the ears! He remembered the warm delicious sense of being full of food and drink, and the feel of flesh, the aromatic smell of cigar smoke ... But here was the light again, the shining of the silence. None of that, none of that. Firmly and with decision, he averted his attention.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

AS SOON AS breakfast was over, Sebastian slipped out of the house and almost ran down the hill to where the tram-cars stopped. He had to see Bruno, to see him as soon as possible and tell him what had happened.

His mind, as he stood there waiting for the tram, wavered back and forth between an overpowering sense of guilt and the aggrieved and plaintive feeling that he had been exposed to moral pressures which it was beyond the power of any ordinary human being to withstand. He'd broken his promise — the promise that (to crown wrongdoing with humiliation) he'd been so boastfully confident of being able to keep. But then who could have imagined that Weyl would be there? Who could possibly have anticipated that the fellow would behave in that extraordinary way? Inventing a story for him to tell, and fairly forcing it upon him! Yes, forcing him to lie, he kept repeating in self-justification. Forcing him against his better judgment, against his will; for hadn't he really been on the point of coming out with the truth, there in the corridor, in front of everybody? By the time the tram arrived, Sebastian had half persuaded himself that that was how it had been. He had just been opening his mouth to tell Mrs. Ockham everything, when, for some unknown and sinister reason, that beast of a man barged in and forced him to break his promise. But the trouble with that story, he reflected as they rattled along the Lungarno, was that Bruno would listen to it and then, after a little silence, very quietly ask some question that would make it collapse like a pricked balloon. And there he'd be, clutching the shameful vestiges of yet another lie and still under the necessity of confessing the previous falsehood. No, it would be better to start by telling Bruno the miserable truth — that he'd started by trying to run away and then, when he'd been cornered, had felt only too grateful to Weyl for showing him the way to break his promise and save his precious skin.

But here was Bruno's corner. The tram stopped; he got off and started to walk along the narrow street. Yes, at bottom he'd actually been grateful to the man for having made the lie so easy.

'God, I'm awful,' he whispered to himself, 'I'm awful!'

The tarry smell of Bologna sausages came to his nostrils. He looked up. Yes, this was it — the little pizzicheria next to Bruno's house. He turned in under a tall doorway and began to climb the stairs. On the second landing he became aware that there were people coming down from one of the higher floors; and suddenly some sort of soldier or policeman came into sight. With a fatuous assumption of majesty, he strutted along the landing. Sebastian squeezed against the wall to let him pass. A second

later three more men turned the corner of the stairs. A man in uniform led the way, a man in uniform brought up the rear, and between them, carrying his ancient Gladstone bag, walked Bruno. Catching sight of Sebastian, Bruno immediately frowned, pursed his lips to indicate the need of silence and almost imperceptibly shook his head. Taking the hint, the boy closed his parted lips and tried to look blank and unconcerned. In silence the three men passed him, then one after another turned and disappeared down the stairs.

Sebastian stood there, listening to the sound of the receding footsteps. Where his stomach should have been, there was an awful void of apprehension. What did it mean? What on earth could it mean?

They were at the bottom of the stairs now, they were crossing the hall. Then abruptly there was no more sound; they had walked out into the street. Sebastian hurried down after them and, looking out, was in time to see the last of the policemen stepping into a waiting car. The door was slammed, the old black Fiat started to move, turned left just beyond the sausage shop and was gone. For a long time Sebastian stared unseeingly at the place where it had been, then started to walk slowly back by the way he had come.

A touch on the elbow made him start and turn his head. A tall bony young man was walking beside him.

‘You came to see Bruno?’ he said in bad English.

Remembering his father’s stories of police spies and agents provocateurs, Sebastian did not immediately answer. His apprehension was evidently reflected on his face; for the young man frowned and shook his head.

‘Not have fear,’ he said almost angrily. ‘I am Bruno’s friend. Malpighi — Carlo Malpighi.’ He raised his hand and pointed. ‘Let us go in here.’

Four broad steps led up to the entrance of a church. They mounted and pushed aside the heavy leather curtain that hung across the open door. At the end of the high vaulted tunnel a few candles burned yellow in a twilight thick with the smell of stale incense. Except for a woman in black, praying at the altar rails, the building was empty.

‘What happened?’ Sebastian whispered when they were inside.

Struggling with his broken English and incoherent with emotional distress, the young man tried to answer. A friend of Bruno’s — a man employed at police headquarters — had come last night to warn him of what they were going to do. In a fast car he could easily have got to the frontier. There were lots of people who would have taken almost any risk to help him. But Bruno had refused: he wouldn’t do it, he simply wouldn’t do it.

The young man’s voice broke, and in the half-darkness the other could see that big tears were running down his cheeks.

‘But what did they have against him?’ Sebastian asked.

‘He’d been denounced for being in touch with some of Cacciaguida’s agents.’

‘Cacciaguida?’ Sebastian repeated; and with a renewal of that horrible sense of inner emptiness he remembered the elation he had felt as he stuffed the twenty-two bank-notes into his wallet, his stupid boasting about all that his father had done to help the anti-fascists. ‘Was it — was it that man Weyl?’ he whispered.

For what seemed an enormously long time the young man looked at him without speaking. Wet with tears and strangely distorted, the narrow elongated face twitched uncontrollably. He stood quite still, his arms hanging loosely by his sides; but the big hands kept clenching and unclenching, as though animated by a tortured life of their own. And at last the silence was broken.

‘It was all because of you,’ he said, speaking very slowly and in a tone of such concentrated hatred that Sebastian shrank away from him in fear. ‘All because of you.’

And advancing a step, he gave the boy a back-handed blow in the face. Sebastian uttered a cry of pain and staggered back against a pillar. His teeth bared, his fists raised, the other stood over him menacingly; then, as Sebastian pulled out a handkerchief to stanch the blood that was streaming from his nostrils, he suddenly dropped his hands.

'Excuse,' he muttered brokenly, 'excuse!'

And quickly turning, he hurried out of the church.

By a quarter to one Sebastian was back again at the villa, with nothing worse than a slightly swollen lip to bear witness to his morning's adventures. In the church he had lain down across two chairs until his nose stopped bleeding, then had given his face a preliminary washing in holy water and gone out to buy himself a clean handkerchief and finish off his ablutions in the lavatory of the British Institute.

The goat was there again as he climbed the hill; but Sebastian felt obscurely that he had no right to stop and look at it, felt at the same time too horribly guilty even to wish to indulge in poetical fancies. Up the road, through the gate and between the stately cypresses he walked on, miserably, wishing he were dead.

On the low wall of the terrace in front of the villa, at the foot of the pedestal on which a moss-grown Pomona held up her cornucopia of fruits, the Queen Mother was sitting all alone, stroking the little dog on her knees. Catching sight of her, Sebastian halted. Would it be possible, he wondered, to tiptoe past her into the house without being heard? The old woman suddenly raised her head and looked sightlessly up into the sky. To his astonishment and dismay, Sebastian saw that she was crying. What could be the matter? And then he noticed the way Foxy was lying across her lap — limply, like one of those brown furs that women wrap round their necks, the paws dangling, the head lower than the body. It was obvious: the dog was dead. Feeling now that it would be wrong to sneak past unobserved, Sebastian started to walk across the crunching gravel with steps as heavy as he could make them.

The Queen Mother turned her head.

'Is that you, Daisy?' And when Sebastian gave his name, 'Oh, it's you, boy,' she said in a tone of almost resentful disappointment. 'Come and sit here.' She patted the sun-warmed stucco of the wall, then pulled out an embroidered handkerchief and wiped her eyes and her wet rouged cheeks.

Sebastian sat down beside her.

'Poor little Foxy.... What happened?'

The old woman put away her handkerchief and turned blindly towards him.

'Didn't you know?'

Sebastian explained that he had spent the whole morning in town.

'That fool, Daisy, thinks it was an accident,' said the Queen Mother. 'But it wasn't. I know it wasn't. They killed him.' Her thin, rasping voice trembled with a ferocious hatred.

'Killed him?'

She nodded emphatically.

'To revenge themselves. Because we thought it was that child who had stolen the drawing.'

'Do you think so?' Sebastian whispered in a tone of dismay. Bruno arrested, and now the little dog killed — and all because of what he had done or left undone. 'Do you really think so?'

'I tell you, I know it,' rasped the Queen Mother impatiently. 'They gave him rat poison — that's what it was. Rat poison. Veronica found him after breakfast, lying dead on the terrace.'

Suddenly she gave vent to a loud and horribly inhuman cry. Picking up the small limp body on her knees she held it close, pressing her face against the soft fur.

'Little Foxy,' she said brokenly. 'Little Foxy-woxy....' And then the puckered grimace of despair gave place once again to an expression of intense hatred. 'The beasts!' she cried. 'The devils!'

Sebastian looked at her in horror. This was his fault, this was all his fault.

The hum of an approaching car made him turn his head.

'It's the Isotta,' he said, thankful to have an excuse to change the subject.

The car swung round past the front steps and came to a halt immediately in front of them. The door swung open and Mrs. Ockham jumped out.

'Granny,' she called excitedly, 'we've found one.' And from under her coat she brought out a little round handful of orange fur with two bright black eyes and a black pointed muzzle. 'His father's won three First Prizes. Here! Hold out your hands.'

Mrs. Gamble stretched out a pair of jewelled claws into the darkness, and the tiny puppy was placed between them.

‘How small!’ she exclaimed.

‘Four months old,’ said Mrs. Ockham. ‘Wasn’t that what the woman told us?’ she added, turning to Mrs. Thwale, who had followed her out of the car.

‘Four months last Tuesday,’ said Mrs. Thwale.

‘He’s not black, is he?’ questioned the old woman.

‘Oh, no! The real fox-colour.’

‘So he’s Foxy too,’ said the Queen Mother. ‘Foxy the Ninth.’ She lifted the little creature to her face. ‘Such soft fur!’ Foxy IX turned his head and gave her a lick on the chin. The Queen Mother uttered a gleeful cackle. ‘Does he love me then? Does he love his old granny?’ Then she looked up in the direction of Mrs. Ockham. ‘Five Georges,’ she said, ‘seven Edwards, eight Henries. But there’s never been anybody the ninth.’

‘What about Louis XIV?’ suggested Mrs. Ockham.

‘I was talking about England,’ said the Queen Mother severely. ‘In England they’ve never got further than an eighth. Little Foxy here is the first one to be a ninth.’ She lowered her hands. Foxy IX leaned out from between the imprisoning fingers and sniffed inquisitively at the corpse of Foxy VIII.

‘I bought my first Pomeranian in ‘seventy-six,’ said the Queen Mother. ‘Or was it ‘seventy-four? Anyhow, it was the year that Gladstone said he was going to abolish the income tax — but he didn’t, the old rascal! We used to have pugs before that. But Ned didn’t like the way they snored. He snored himself — that was why. But little Foxy-woxy,’ she added in another tone, ‘he doesn’t snore, does he?’ And she raised the tiny dog again to her face.

Noiselessly, like a ghost, the butler appeared and announced that luncheon was served.

‘Did he say lunch?’ said the Queen Mother; and without waiting for anyone to help her, she almost sprang to her feet. With a little thud the body of Foxy VIII fell to the ground. ‘Oh dear, I’d quite forgotten he was on my lap. Pick him up, boy, will you? Hortense is making a little coffin for him. She’s got a bit of an old pink satin dress of mine to line it with. Give me your arm, Veronica.’

Mrs. Thwale stepped forward and they started to walk towards the house.

Sebastian bent down and, with a qualm of repulsion, picked up the dead dog.

‘Poor little beast!’ said Mrs. Ockham; and as they followed the others, she laid a hand affectionately on Sebastian’s shoulder. ‘Did you have a nice morning in town?’ she asked.

‘Quite nice, thanks,’ he answered vaguely.

‘Sight-seeing, I suppose,’ she began, and then broke off. ‘But I’d quite forgotten. There was a wire from your father after you’d gone.’ She opened her bag, unfolded the telegraph form and read aloud: “ACCEPTED CANDIDACY FORTHCOMING BY-ELECTION RETURNING IMMEDIATELY ARRANGE SEBASTIAN MEET ME FOUR PM WEDNESDAY NEXT THOMAS COOK AND SON GENOA.” It’s a shame,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘I thought we’d keep you here till the end of the holidays. And, oh dear! there won’t be any time to get your evening clothes.’

‘No, I’m afraid not,’ said Sebastian.

No time, he was thinking, to get either suit; for the dinner jacket he had ordered at Uncle Eustace’s tailor — ordered, yes, and paid for — was to have been tried on for a first fitting the very day he had to be in Genoa. It had all been for nothing — all these miseries he had gone through, all this guilt, and Bruno’s arrest, and this wretched little dog. And meanwhile there was the problem of Tom Boveney’s party, still unsolved and growing more agonizingly urgent with every passing day.

‘It’s a shame!’ Mrs. Ockham repeated.

‘What is?’ asked the Queen Mother over her shoulder.

‘Sebastian’s having to leave so soon.’

‘No more mum-mbling lessons,’ said Mrs. Thwale, lingering a little over the word. ‘But perhaps he’ll be relieved.’

‘You’ll have to make the best of such time as is left you,’ said the Queen Mother.

‘Oh, we will, we will,’ Mrs. Thwale assured her, and uttered her delicate little grunt of laughter. ‘Here we are at the steps,’ she went on gravely. ‘Five of them, if you remember. Low risers and very broad treads.’

Chapter Thirty

EPILOGUE

THE GUNS ON Primrose Hill were banging away with a kind of frenzy; and though the desert was far away, though the nightmare under those swooping planes was long past, Sebastian felt some of the old quivering tension — as if he were a violin with knotted strings in the process of being tuned up, excruciatingly sharp and sharper, towards the final snapping point. Movement might bring relief, he thought. He jumped up — too abruptly. The papers lying on the arm of his chair scattered to the floor. He bent down and grabbed for them as they were falling — grabbed with the nearer of his hands; but the nearer of his hands wasn’t there. Fool! he said to himself. It was a long time since he had done a thing like that. Forcing himself to be methodical, he picked them up with the hand that still remained to him. While he was doing this, the noise outside subsided; and suddenly there was the blessing of silence. He sat down again.

Hateful experience! But it had at least one good point; it made it impossible for one to cherish the illusion that one was identical with a body that behaved in direct opposition to all one’s wishes and resolutions. *Neti, neti* — not this, not this. There could be no possible doubt about it. And, of course, he reflected, there hadn’t been any doubt in the old days, when he wanted to say no to his sensuality and couldn’t. The only difference was that, in those circumstances, it had been fun to surrender to one’s alien body, whereas, in these, it was atrocious.

The telephone bell rang; he picked up the receiver and said, ‘Hullo.’

‘Sebastian darling!’

For a second he thought it was Cynthia Poyns and immediately started to think of excuses for refusing the impending invitation.

‘Sebastian?’ the voice questioned, when he didn’t reply; and to his enormous relief he realized that he had made a mistake.

‘Oh, it’s you, Susan!’ he said. ‘Thank goodness!’

‘Who did you think it was?’

‘Oh, somebody else....’

‘One of the ex-girl friends, I suppose. Ringing up to make a scene of jealousy.’ Susan’s tone was playfully, but still reproachfully sarcastic. ‘She wasn’t pretty enough for you — was that it?’

‘That was it,’ Sebastian agreed. But Cynthia Poyns wasn’t only passively good-looking; she was also actively a sentimentalist and literary snob, with a notorious weakness, in spite of her being such an exemplary young mother, for men. ‘Oughtn’t we to be wishing one another a Happy New Year?’ he asked, in another tone.

‘That’s what I rang up for,’ said Susan.

And she went on to hope that he’d started the year auspiciously, to wish and pray that 1944 might finally bring peace. But meanwhile, all three children had colds and Robin was even running a temperature. Nothing to worry about, of course — but all the same one couldn’t help worrying. But her mother, happily, was much better, and she had just heard from Kenneth that there was a chance of his being transferred to a job in England — and what a marvellous New Year’s present that would be!

Then Aunt Alice took over the instrument and opened with her favourite gambit: ‘How’s literature?’

‘Still conscious,’ Sebastian answered. ‘But sinking fast.’

Jocularity, whenever one talked to Aunt Alice about art or philosophy or religion, was always de rigueur.

'I hope you've got another play on the way,' came the bright, perky voice.

'Lucky, he said, 'I've still got something left of what I earned with the last one, five years ago.'

'Well, take my advice; don't invest it in the Far East.'

Gallantly making a joke of financial ruin, Aunt Alice uttered a little peal of laughter; then asked him if he had heard the story about the American corporal and the Archbishop of Canterbury.

He had, several times; but not wishing to deprive her of a pleasure, Sebastian begged to hear it. And when she duly told it, he made all the appropriate noises.

'But here's that Susan again,' she concluded.

And Susan had forgotten to ask him if he remembered Pamela, the girl with a snub nose who was at that progressive school. Lost sight of her for years till just a few weeks ago. A really wonderful girl! So intelligent and well-informed! Working on statistics for the Government, and really very attractive in that piquant, original kind of way — you know.

Sebastian smiled to himself. Another of those prospective wives that Susan was always indefatigably digging up for him. Well, one day she might dig up the right one — and of course he'd be very grateful. But meanwhile ...

Meanwhile, Susan was saying, Pamela would be in London again next week. They'd all have to get together.

She was finished at last, and he hung up, feeling that curious mixture of humorous tenderness and complete despair which conversations like these always seemed to evoke in him. It was the problem, not of evil, but of goodness — the excruciating problem of sound, honest, better-than-average goodness.

He thought of dear Aunt Alice, indefatigably full of good works in spite of the never-ending discomfort of her rheumatism. Carrying on undramatically, without ever trying to play the part (and what a juicy part!) of one who carries on. Bearing her misfortunes with the same unaffected simplicity. Poor Jim killed in Malaya; her house burnt by an incendiary with all her possessions in it; nine-tenths of their savings wiped out by the fall of Singapore and Java; Uncle Fred breaking down under the shock and strain, and escaping at last into insanity. She didn't talk too much about these things, and she didn't talk too little, too repressedly. And meanwhile the old, rather metallic brightness of manner was still maintained, the little jokes and the pert answers were still uttered. As though she had resolved to go down with her sense of humour still flying and nailed to the mast.

And then there was Susan, there were the three admirably brought up babies, there were the all too priceless letters from Kenneth, somewhere in the Middle East, and Susan's own comments on war and peace, life and death, good and evil, bubbling up from the depths of a still almost untroubled upper-middle-class Weltanschauung.

Mother, daughter, son-in-law — looking at them with a playwright's eyes, he could see them as three deliciously comic characters. But in the other sense of that word and from the moralist's viewpoint, they were three characters of the most solid worth. Courageous and reliable and self-sacrificing as he himself had never been and could only humbly hope he might become. An absolutely sterling goodness, but limited by an impenetrable ignorance of the end and purpose of existence.

Without Susan and Kenneth and Aunt Alice and all their kind, society would fall to pieces. With them, it was perpetually attempting suicide. They were the pillars, but they were also the dynamite; simultaneously the beams and the dry-rot. It was thanks to their goodness that the system worked as smoothly as it did; and thanks to their limitations that the system was fundamentally insane — so insane that Susan's three charming babies would almost certainly grow up to become cannon fodder, plane fodder, tank fodder, fodder for any one of the thousand bigger and better military gadgets with which bright young engineers like Kenneth would by that time have enriched the world.

Sebastian sighed and shook his head. There was only one remedy, of course; but that they didn't want to try.

He picked up the loose-leaf book lying on the floor beside his chair. Fifty or sixty pages of random notes, jotted down at intervals during the last few months. This first day of the year was a good time to take stock. He started to read:

There is a higher utilitarianism as well as the ordinary, common or garden utilitarianism.

‘Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and all the rest shall be added.’ That is the classic expression of the higher utilitarianism — together with: ‘I show you sorrow’ (the world of ordinary, nice, unregenerate people) ‘and the ending of sorrow’ (the world of people who have achieved unitive knowledge of the divine Ground).

Set against these the slogans implicit in the lower, popular utilitarianism. ‘I show you sorrow’ (the world as it is now) ‘and the ending of sorrow’ (the world as it will be when Progress and a few more indispensable wars, revolutions and liquidations have done their work). And then, ‘Seek ye first all the rest — creditable virtues, social reform, instructive chats on the radio and the latest in scientific gadgets — and some time in the twenty-first or twenty-second century the kingdom of God will be added.’

All men are born with an equal and inalienable right to disillusionment. So, until they choose to waive that right, it’s three cheers for Technological Progress and a College Education for Everybody.

Read Aeschylus on the subject of Nemesis. His Xerxes comes to a bad end for two reasons. First, because he is an aggressive imperialist. Second, because he tries to get too much control over nature — specifically by bridging the Hellespont. We understand the devilishness of the political manifestations of the lust for power; but have so completely ignored the evils and dangers inherent in the technological manifestations that, in the teeth of the most obvious facts, we continue to teach our children that there is no debit side to applied science, only a continuing and ever-expanding credit. The idea of Progress is based on the belief that one can be overweening with impunity.

The difference between metaphysics now and metaphysics in the past is the difference between word-spinning which makes no difference to anybody and a system of thought associated with a transforming discipline. ‘Short of the Absolute, God cannot rest, and having reached that goal He is lost and religion with Him.’ That is Bradley’s view, the modern view. Sankara was as strenuously an Absolutionist as Bradley — but with what an enormous difference! For him, there is not only discursive knowledge about the Absolute, but the possibility (and the final necessity) of a direct intellectual intuition, leading the liberated spirit to identification with the object of its knowledge. ‘Among all means of liberation, Bhakti or devotion is supreme. To seek earnestly to know one’s real nature — this is said to be devotion. In other words, devotion can be defined as the search for the reality of one’s own Atman.’● And the Atman, of course, is the spiritual principle in us, which is identical with the Absolute. The older metaphysicians did not lose religion; they found it in the highest and purest of all possible forms.

The fallacy of most philosophies is the philosopher. Enjoying as we do the privilege of Professor X’s acquaintance, we know that whatever he personally may think up about the nature and value of existence cannot possibly be true. And what (God help us!) about our great thoughts? But fortunately there have been saints who could write. We and the Professor are free to crib from our betters.

It is wonderfully easy to escape the vices towards which one doesn’t happen to be drawn. I hate sitting long over meals, am indifferent to ‘good food’ and have a stomach that is turned by more than an ounce or two of alcohol; no wonder, then, that I am temperate. And what about the love of money? Too squeamish and retiring to want to show off, too exclusively concerned with words and notions to care about real estate or first editions or ‘nice things,’ too improvident and too sceptical to be bothered about investments, I have always (except during a year or two of undergraduate idiocy) had more than enough for my needs. And for someone with my musculature, my kind of gift and my disastrous capacity for getting away with murder, the lust for power is even less of a problem than the lust for money. But when it comes to the subtler forms of vanity and pride, when it comes to indifference, negative cruelty and the lack of charity, when it comes to being afraid and telling lies, when it comes to sensuality ...

I remember, I remember the house where j’ai plus de souvenirs que si j’avais mille ans, where emotion is recollected in tranquillity and there is nessun maggior dolore che death in life, the days that are no more. And all the rest, all the rest. For the nine Muses are the daughters of Mnemosyne; memory is of the very stuff and substance of poetry. And poetry, of course, is the best that human life can offer. But there is also the life of the spirit, and the life of the spirit is the analogue, on a higher turn of the spiral, of the animal’s life. The progression is from animal eternity into time, into the strictly human world of

memory and anticipation; and from time, if one chooses to go on, into the world of spiritual eternity, into the divine Ground. The life of the spirit is life exclusively in the present, never in the past or future; life here, now, not life looked forward to or recollected. There is absolutely no room in it for pathos, or remorse, or a voluptuous rumination of the delicious cuds of thirty years ago. Its Intelligible Light has nothing whatever to do either with the sunset radiance of those heart-rendingly good old days before the last war but three, or with the neon glow from those technological New Jerusalems beyond the horizons of the next revolution. No, the life of the spirit is life out of time, life in its essence and eternal principle. Which is why they all insist — all the people best qualified to know — that memory must be lived down and finally died to. When one has succeeded in mortifying the memory, says John of the Cross, one is in a state that is only a degree less perfect and profitable than the state of union with God. It is an assertion that, at a first reading, I found incomprehensible. But that was because at that time, my first concern was with the life of poetry, not of the spirit. Now I know, by humiliating experience, all that memory can do to darken and obstruct the knowledge of the eternal Ground. Mortification is always the condition of proficiency.

‘Mortification’ — the word had sent his mind flying off on a tangent. Instead of thinking about the dangers of memory, he was remembering. Remembering Paul De Vries in 1939 — poor old Paul, as he had sat, so monotonously eager, so intelligently absurd, leaning across the table in the little café at Villefranche and talking, talking. The subject, of course, was one of those famous ‘bridge-ideas,’ with which he loved to link the island universes of discourse. A particularly ‘exciting’ idea, he insisted, harping on the word that had always irritated Sebastian so much — a generalization that spanned, a little precariously perhaps, the gulfs separating art, science, religion and ethics. The bridge, surprisingly enough, was mortification. Mortification of prejudice, cocksureness and even common sense, for the sake of objectivity in science; mortification of the desire to own or exploit, for the sake of contemplating an existing beauty or creating a new one; mortification of the passions, for the sake of an ideal of rationality and virtue; mortification of the self in all its aspects, for the sake of liberation, of union with God. He had listened, Sebastian remembered, with a good deal of interest — but patronizingly, as one listens to a very clever man who is also a fool, and with whose wife, moreover, one happens, the previous evening, to have committed adultery. It was the evening, incidentally, that Veronica had copied out for him that sonnet of Verlaine’s:

Ah! les oaristys! les premières maîtresses!
Vor des cheveux, l’azur des yeux, la fleur des chairs,
Et puis, parmi l’odeur des corps jeunes et chers
La spontanéité craintive des caresses....

Only in Veronica’s case there was nothing timid about that surgical spontaneity and, in spite of Elizabeth Arden, the body was now thirty-five years old; while as for ‘dear’ — that it had never been, never. It had been only irresistible, the dreaded and fascinating vehicle of an alienation more total than that which he had known with anyone else of all the women he had loved or allowed himself to be loved by. And in the same instant he remembered his wife, unutterably weary under the burden of a pregnancy that seemed so strangely irrelevant to a being so small, bird-quick and fragile as Rachel had been. Remembered the promises he had made her, when he left Le Lavandou to go and stay with the De Vrieses, the vows of fidelity which he knew, even as he made them, that he wasn’t going to keep — even though she was certain to find out. And of course she had found out, much sooner than he had expected. Sebastian remembered her as she lay in the hospital a month later, after the miscarriage, when the blood-poisoning had set in. ‘It’s all your fault,’ she whispered reproachfully; and when he knelt beside her, in tears, she had turned her face away from him. When he came the next morning, Dr. Buloz waylaid him on the stairs. ‘Some courage, my friend! We’ve some bad newses about your wife.’

Bad newses, and it was all his fault, his fault parmi l’odeur des corps, amid the smell of iodoform and the memory of tuberose on the coffin. Rachel’s coffin, Uncle Eustace’s coffin. And beside both the graves had stood Veronica, monastically elegant in mourning, with only the extremities of that warm white instrument of alienation projecting from under her disguise. And within two weeks of Rachel’s

funeral, once again the cannibals in bedlam.... 'It's all your fault.' The phrase had gone on repeating itself even in the extremities of an experience of otherness almost as absolute, on its own level, as the otherness of God. But he had gone on, just because it was such a vileness and for the express purpose of enjoying yet another repulsive taste of that mixture of sensuality, abhorrence and self-hatred which had become for him the all too fascinating theme of what turned out to be a whole volume of verses.

It was with one of those poems that he had been deliciously struggling when somebody sat down beside him on his favourite bench on the Promenade des Anglais. He turned irritably to see who had trespassed on his sacred privacy. It was Bruno Rontini — but Bruno ten years after, Bruno the ex-prisoner, now in exile and far gone in his last illness. An old man, bent and horribly emaciated. But in the beaked skull the blue bright eyes were full of joy, alive with an intense and yet somehow disinterested tenderness.

Speechless with a kind of terror, he took the dry skeleton hand that was held out to him. This was his doing! And what made it worse was the fact that, all these years, he had done everything he could to obliterate the consciousness of his offence. It had begun with excuses and alibis. He had been a child; and after all, who was there who didn't tell an occasional fib? And his fib, remember, had been told out of mere weakness, not from interest or malice. Nobody would have dreamed of making a fuss about it, if it hadn't been for that unfortunate accident. And, obviously, Bruno had it coming to him; Bruno had been on their bad books for years. That wretched little business of the drawing happened to have been made the pretext of an action which would have been taken anyhow, sooner or later. By no stretch of the imagination could he, Sebastian, be held responsible. And a couple of days after the arrest he was on his way home; and his father had taken him electioneering — which had been the greatest fun. And the next term he had worked tremendously hard for a scholarship which, to his own and everyone else's surprise, he had won. And when he went up to Oxford that autumn, Daisy Ockham secretly gave him a cheque for three hundred pounds, to supplement his allowance; and what with the intoxicating excitement of spending it, what with the new freedom, the new succession of amorous adventures, it ceased to be necessary to find excuses or establish alibis: he just forgot. The incident slipped away into insignificance. And now suddenly, out of the grave of his oblivion, this old dying man with the blue eyes had risen like some irrepressible Lazarus — for what purpose? To reproach, to judge, to condemn?

'Those arrows!' Bruno said at last. 'All those arrows!'

But what had happened to his voice? Why did he speak in that almost inaudible whisper? Terror deepened into sheer panic.

Bruno's smile had expressed a kind of humorous compassion.

'They seem to have started flying all right,' he whispered. 'The predestined target....'

Sebastian shut his eyes, the better to recall that little house at Vence which he had taken for the dying man. Furnished and decorated with an unfailing bad taste. But Bruno's bedroom had windows on three sides, and there was a wide veranda, windless and warm with spring sunshine, from which one could look out over the terraced fields of young wheat, the groves of orange trees and the olive orchards, down to the Mediterranean.

'Il tremolar della marina,' Bruno would whisper when the reflected sunlight lay in a huge splendour across the sea. And sometimes it was Leopardi that he liked to quote:

e sovrumani

Silenzi, e profondissima quiete.

And then, again and again, voicelessly, so that it was only by the movements of the lips that Sebastian had been able to divine the words:

E'l naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare.

Little old Mme Louise had done the cooking and the housework; but except for the last few days, when Dr. Borély insisted on a professional nurse, the care of the sick man had been exclusively Sebastian's business. Those fifteen weeks between the meeting on the Promenade des Anglais and that almost comically unimpressive funeral (which Bruno had made him promise was not to cost more than twenty pounds) had been the most memorable period of his life. The most memorable and, in a certain sense,

the happiest. There had been sadness, of course, and the pain of having to watch the endurance of a suffering which he was powerless to alleviate. And along with that pain and sadness had gone the gnawing sense of guilt, the dread and the anticipation of an irreparable loss. But there had also been the spectacle of Bruno's joyful serenity, and even, at one remove, a kind of participation in the knowledge of which that joy was the natural and inevitable expression — the knowledge of a timeless and infinite presence; the intuition, direct and infallible, that apart from the desire to be separate there was no separation, but an essential identity.

With the progress of the cancer in his throat, speech, for the sick man, became more and more difficult. But those long silences on the veranda, or in the bedroom, were eloquent precisely about the things which words were unfitted to convey — affirmed realities which a vocabulary invented to describe appearances in time could only indirectly indicate by means of negations. 'Not this, not this' was all that speech could have made clear. But Bruno's silence had become what it knew and could cry, 'This!' triumphantly and joyfully, 'this, this this!'

There were circumstances, of course, in which words were indispensable; and then he had resorted to writing. Sebastian got up, and from one of the drawers of his desk took the envelope in which he kept all the little squares of paper on which Bruno had pencilled his rare requests, his answers to questions, his comments and advice. He sat down again and, selecting at random, began to read.

'Would it be very extravagant to get a bunch of freesias?'

Sebastian smiled, remembering the pleasure the flowers had brought. 'Like angels,' Bruno had whispered. 'They smell like angels.'

'Don't worry,' the next scribbled message began. 'Having intense emotions is just a matter of temperament. God can be loved without any feelings — by the will alone. So can your neighbour.'

And to this Sebastian had clipped another jotting on the same theme. 'There isn't any secret formula or method. You learn to love by loving — by paying attention and doing what one thereby discovers has to be done.'

He picked up another of the squares of paper. 'Remorse is pride's ersatz for repentance, the ego's excuse for not accepting God's forgiveness. The condition of being forgiven is self-abandonment. The proud man prefers self-reproach, however painful — because the reproached self isn't abandoned; it remains intact.'

Sebastian thought of the context in which the words had been written — his passion for self-loathing, his almost hysterical desire to make some kind of dramatic expiation for what he had done, to pay off his debt of guilt towards Bruno, who was dying, towards the despairing and embittered Rachel, who had died. If he could submit to some great pain or humiliation, if he could undertake some heroic course of action! He had expected an unqualified approval. But Bruno had looked at him for a few seconds in appraising silence; then, with a gleam of sudden mischief in his eyes, had whispered, 'You're not Joan of Arc, you know. Not even Florence Nightingale.' And then, reaching for the pencil and the scribbling-pad, he had started to write. At the time, Sebastian remembered, the note had shocked him by its calm and, he had felt, positively cynical realism. 'You'd be inefficient, you'd be wasting your talents, and your heroic altruism would do a great deal of harm, because you'd be so bored and resentful that you'd come to loathe the very thought of God. Besides, you'd seem so noble and pathetic, on top of your good looks, that all the women within range would be after you. Not fifty per cent. of them, as now, but all. As mothers, as mistresses, as disciples — every one. And of course you wouldn't resist — would you?' Sebastian had protested, had said something about the necessity of sacrifice. 'There's only one effectively redemptive sacrifice,' came the answer, 'the sacrifice of self-will to make room for the knowledge of God.' And a little later, on another scrap of paper: 'Don't try to act somebody else's part. Find out how to become your inner not-self in God while remaining your outer self in the world.'

Bewildered and a little disappointed, Sebastian looked up and found Bruno smiling at him.

'You think it's too easy?' came the whisper. Then the pencil went to work again.

Sebastian rustled through the scattered leaves of paper. Here was what the pencil had written:

‘Performing miracles in a crisis — so much easier than loving God selflessly every moment of every day! Which is why most crises arise — because people find it so hard to behave properly at ordinary times.’

Reading the scribbled lines, Sebastian had felt himself all of a sudden appalled by the magnitude of the task that had been set for him. And soon, very soon, there would be no Bruno to help him.

‘I shall never be able to do it alone,’ he cried.

But the sick man was inexorable.

‘It can’t be done by anyone else,’ the pencil wrote. ‘Other people can’t make you see with their eyes. At the best they can only encourage you to use your own.’

Then, as an afterthought, he had added on another sheet of the scribbling-pad: ‘And, of course, once you’ve started using your own eyes, you’ll see that there’s no question of being alone. Nobody’s alone unless he wishes to be.’

And as though to illustrate his point, he put down his pencil and looked away towards the sunlit landscape and the sea. His lips moved. “‘The corn was orient and immortal wheat’ ... *Ell’è quel mare al qual tutto si move ... E’I naufragar m’è dolce ...* the shipwreck in that sea....’ He shut his eyes. After a minute or two he opened them again, looked at Sebastian with a smile of extraordinary tenderness and held out his thin bony hand. Sebastian took and pressed it. The sick man looked at him for a little longer with the same smile, then shut his eyes again. There was a long silence. Suddenly, from the kitchen, came the thin, piping voice of Mme Louise, singing her favourite waltz of forty years ago. ‘*Lorsque tout est fini...*’ Bruno’s emaciated face puckered itself into an expression of amusement.

‘Finished,’ he whispered, ‘finished?’ And his eyes as he opened them were bright with inner laughter. ‘But it’s only just begun!’

For a long time Sebastian sat quite still. But, alas, the memory of the knowledge that had come to him that day was very different from the knowledge. And, in the end, perhaps even this memory would have to be mortified. He sighed profoundly, then turned back to his note-book.

War guilt — the guilt of London and Hamburg, of Coventry, Rotterdam, Berlin. True, one wasn’t in politics or finance, one was lucky enough not to have been born in Germany. But in a less obvious, more fundamental way, one was guilty by just being imperviously oneself, by being content to remain a spiritual embryo, undeveloped, undelivered, unilluminated. In part, at least, I am responsible for my own maiming, and on the hand that is left me there is blood and the black oily smear of charred flesh.

Look at any picture paper or magazine. News (and only evil is news, never good) alternates with fiction, photographs of weapons, corpses, ruins, with photographs of half-naked women. Pharisaically, I used to think there was no causal connection between these things, that, as a strict sensualist and aesthete, I was without responsibility for what was happening in the world. But the habit of sensuality and pure aestheticism is a process of God-proofing. To indulge in it is to become a spiritual mackintosh, shielding the little corner of time, of which one is the centre, from the least drop of eternal reality. But the only hope for the world of time lies in being constantly drenched by that which lies beyond time. Guaranteed God-proof, we exclude from our surroundings the only influence that is able to neutralize the destructive energies of ambition, covetousness and the love of power. Our responsibility may be less spectacularly obvious than theirs; but it is no less real.

The rain is over. On the spider-webs the beads of water hang unshaken. Above the tree-tops the sky is like a closed lid, and these fields are the flat bare symbols of a total resignation.

Invisible in the hedge, a wren periodically releases the ratchet of its tiny whirring clockwork. From the wet branches overhead the drops fall and fall in the unpredictable rhythm of an absolutely alien music. But the autumnal silence remains unflawed and even the rumble of a passing lorry, even the long crescendo and the fading roar of a flight of aeroplanes, even my memories of those explosions and all the long nights of pain, are somehow irrelevant and can be ignored. On the sphere’s surface what a clatter of ironmongery! But here, at its glassy centre, the three old hornbeams and the grass, the brambles and the holly tree stand waiting. And between the repetitions of his mindless little declaration of personal independence, even the wren occasionally stops, down there at the bottom of the hedge, to listen for a

moment to the silence within the silence; cocks his head and, for a second or two, is aware of himself, waiting, in the twiggy labyrinthine darkness, waiting for a deliverance of which he can have no inkling. But we, who can come, if we choose, to the full knowledge of that deliverance, have quite forgotten that there is anything to wait for.

Something of the happiness he had felt in the course of that long-drawn solitude under the dripping trees came back to him. Not, of course, that it was anything like enough to sense the significances of landscapes and living things. Wordsworth had to be supplemented by Dante, and Dante by ... well, by somebody like Bruno. But if you didn't idolatrously take the manifestation for the principle, if you avoided spiritual gluttony and realized that these country ecstasies were only an invitation to move on to something else, then of course it was perfectly all right to wander lonely as a cloud and even to confide the fact to paper. He started to read again.

To the surprise of Humanists and Liberal Churchmen, the abolition of God left a perceptible void. But Nature abhors vacuums. Nation, Class and Party, Culture and Art have rushed in to fill the empty niche. For politicians and for those of us who happen to have been born with a talent, the new pseudo-religions have been, still are and (until they destroy the entire social structure) will continue to be extremely profitable superstitions. But regard them dispassionately, *sub specie aeternitatis*. How unutterably odd, silly and satanic!

Gossip, day-dreaming, preoccupation with one's own moods and feelings — fatal, all of them, to the spiritual life. But among other things even the best play or narrative is merely glorified gossip and artistically disciplined daydreaming. And lyric poetry? Just 'Ow!' or 'Oo-oo!' or 'Nyum-nyum!' or 'Damn!' or 'Darling!' or 'I'm a pig!' — suitably transliterated, of course, and developed.

Which is why some God-centred saints have condemned art, root and branch. And not only art — science, scholarship, speculation. Or remember Aquinas: the consummate philosophical virtuoso — but after achieving the unitive knowledge of that Primordial Fact, about which he had so long been spinning theories, he refused to write another word of theology. But what if he had come to union twenty years earlier? Would there have been no *Summa*? And, if so, would that have been a matter for regret? No, we should have answered a few years ago. But now some physicists are beginning to wonder if scholastic Aristotelianism may not be the best philosophy in terms of which to organize the findings of contemporary science. (But meanwhile, of course, contemporary science in the hands of contemporary men and women is engaged in destroying, not only things and lives, but entire patterns of civilization. So we find ourselves faced with yet another set of question marks.)

For the artist or intellectual, who happens also to be interested in reality and desirous of liberation, the way out would seem to lie, as usual, along a knife-edge.

He has to remember, first, that what he does as an artist or intellectual won't bring him to knowledge of the divine Ground, even though his work may be directly concerned with this knowledge. On the contrary, in itself the work is a distraction. Second, that talents are analogous to the gifts of healing or miracle-working. But 'one ounce of sanctifying grace is worth a hundredweight of those graces which theologians call "gratuitous," among which is the gift of miracles. It is possible to receive such gifts and be in a state of mortal sin; nor are they necessary to salvation. As a rule, gratuitous graces are given to men less for their own benefit than for the edification of their neighbours.' But François de Sales might have added that miracles don't necessarily edify. Nor does even the best art. In both cases, edification is merely a possibility.

The third thing that has to be remembered is that beauty is intrinsically edifying; gossip, day-dreaming and mere self-expression, intrinsically unedifying. In most works of art, these positive and negative elements cancel out. But occasionally the anecdotes and the day-dreams are thought of in relation to first principles and set forth in such a way that the intervals between their component elements create some new unprecedented kind of beauty. When this happens, the possibilities of edification are fully realized, and the gratuitous grace of a talent finds its justification. True, the composition of such consummate works of art may be no less of a distraction than the composition of swing music or

advertising copy. It is possible to write about God and, in the effort to write well, close one's mind completely to God's presence. There is only one antidote to such forgetting — constant recollection.

Well, he couldn't say that he hadn't given himself due warning, Sebastian reflected with a smile, as he turned the page. 'Minimum Working Hypothesis' was the heading to the next note.

Research by means of controlled sense-intuitions into material reality — research motivated and guided by a working hypothesis, leading up through logical inference to the formulation of a rational theory, and resulting in appropriate technological action. That is natural science.

No working hypothesis means no motive for starting the research, no reason for making one experiment rather than another, no rational theory for bringing sense or order to the observed facts.

Contrariwise, too much working hypothesis means finding only what you know, dogmatically, to be there and ignoring all the rest.

Among other things, religion is also research. Research by means of pure intellectual intuition into non-sensuous, non-psychic, purely spiritual reality, descending to rational theories about its results and to appropriate moral action in the light of such theories.

To motivate and (in its preliminary stages) guide this research, what sort and how much of a working hypothesis do we need?

None, say the sentimental humanists; just a little bit of Wordsworth, say the blue-dome-of-nature boys. Result: they have no motive impelling them to make the more strenuous investigations; they are unable to explain such non-sensuous facts as come their way; they make very little progress in Charity.

At the other end of the scale are the Papists, the Jews, the Moslems, all with historical, one-hundred-per-cent, revealed religions. These people have a working hypothesis about non-sensuous reality — which means that they have a motive for doing something to get to know about it. But because their working hypotheses are too elaborately dogmatic, most of them discover only what they were taught to believe. But what they believe is a hotch-potch of good, less good and even bad. Records of the infallible intuitions of great saints into the highest spiritual reality are mixed up with records of the less reliable and infinitely less valuable intuitions of psychics into lower levels of non-sensuous existence; and to these are added mere fancies, discursive reasonings and sentimentalisms, projected into a kind of secondary objectivity and worshipped as though they were divine facts. But at all times and in spite of the handicap imposed by these excessive working hypotheses, a passionately persistent few continue the research to the point where they become aware of the Intelligible Light and are united with the divine Ground.

For those of us who are not congenitally the members of any organized church, who have found that humanism and blue-domeism are not enough, who are not content to remain in the darkness of spiritual ignorance, the squalor of vice or that other squalor of mere respectability, the minimum working hypothesis would seem to be about as follows:

That there is a Godhead or Ground, which is the unmanifested principle of all manifestation.

That the Ground is transcendent and immanent.

That it is possible for human beings to love, know and, from virtually, to become actually identified with the Ground.

That to achieve this unitive knowledge, to realize this supreme identity, is the final end and purpose of human existence.

That there is a Law or Dharma, which must be obeyed, a Tao or Way, which must be followed, if men are to achieve their final end.

That the more there is of I, me, mine, the less there is of the Ground; and that consequently the Tao is a Way of humility and compassion, the Dharma a Law of mortification and self-transcending awareness. Which accounts, of course, for the facts of human history. People love their egos and don't wish to mortify them, don't wish to see why they shouldn't 'express their personalities' and 'have a good time.' They get their good times; but also and inevitably they get wars and syphilis and revolution and alcoholism, tyranny and, in default of an adequate religious hypothesis, the choice between some lunatic idolatry, like nationalism, and a sense of complete futility and despair. Unutterable miseries! But throughout recorded history most men and women have preferred the risks, the positive certainty, of

such disasters to the laborious whole-time job of trying to get to Know the divine Ground of all being. In the long run we get exactly what we ask for.

Which was all right so far as it went, Sebastian reflected. But it would be one of the tasks of the coming year to add the necessary developments and qualifications. To discuss the relationships, for example, between the Ground and its higher manifestations — between the Godhead and the personal God and the human Avatar and the liberated saint. And then there were the two methods of religious approach to be considered: the direct approach, aiming at an identifying knowledge of the Ground, and the indirect, ascending through the hierarchy of material and spiritual manifestations — at the risk, always, of getting stuck somewhere on the way. But meanwhile, where was the note he had made by way of commentary on those lines in Hotspur's final speech? He flicked through the pages. Here it was.

If you say absolutely everything, it all tends to cancel out into nothing. Which is why no explicit philosophy can be dug out of Shakespeare. But as a metaphysic by implication, as a system of beauty-truths, constituted by the poetical relationships of scenes and lines, and inhering in the blank spaces between even such words as 'told by an idiot, signifying nothing,' the plays are the equivalent of a great theological Summa. And, of course, if you choose to ignore the negatives that cancel them out, what extraordinary isolated utterances of a perfectly explicit wisdom! I keep thinking, for example, of those two and a half lines in which the dying Hotspur casually summarizes an epistemology, an ethic and a metaphysic.

But thought's the slave of life, and life's time's fool,
And time, that takes survey of all the world,
Must have a stop.

Three clauses, of which the twentieth century has paid attention only to the first. Thought's enslavement to life is one of our favourite themes. Bergson and the Pragmatists, Adler and Freud, the Dialectical Materialism boys and the Behaviourists — all tootle their variations on it. Mind is nothing but a tool for making tools; controlled by unconscious forces, either sexual or aggressive; the product of social and economic pressures; a bundle of conditioned reflexes.

All quite true, so far as it goes; but false if it goes no further. For, obviously, if mind is only some kind of nothing-but, none of its affirmations can make any claim to general validity. But all nothing-but philosophies make such claims. Therefore they can't be true; for if they were true, that would be the proof that they were false. Thought's the slave of life — undoubtedly. But if it weren't also something else, we couldn't make even this partially valid generalization.

The significance of the second clause is mainly practical. Life's time's fool. By merely elapsing time makes nonsense of all life's conscious planning and scheming. No considerable action has ever had all or nothing but the results expected of it. Except under controlled conditions, or in circumstances where it is possible to ignore individuals and consider only large numbers and the law of averages, any kind of accurate foresight is impossible. In all actual human situations more variables are involved than the human mind can take account of; and with the passage of time the variables tend to increase in number and change their character. These facts are perfectly familiar and obvious. And yet the only faith of a majority of twentieth-century Europeans and Americans is faith in the Future — the bigger and better Future, which they know that Progress is going to produce for them, like rabbits out of a hat. For the sake of what their faith tells them about a Future time, which their reason assures them to be completely unknowable, they are prepared to sacrifice their only tangible possession, the Present.

Since I was born, thirty-two years ago, about fifty millions of Europeans and God knows how many Asiatics have been liquidated in wars and revolutions. Why? In order that the great-great-grandchildren of those who are now being butchered or starved to death may have an absolutely wonderful time in A.D. 2043. And (choosing, according to taste or political opinion, from among the Wellsian, Marxian, Capitalistic or Fascist blueprints) we solemnly proceed to visualize the sort of wonderful time these lucky beggars are going to have. Just as our early Victorian great-great-grandfathers visualized the sort of wonderful time we were going to have in the middle years of the twentieth century.

True religion concerns itself with the givenness of the timeless. An idolatrous religion is one in which time is substituted for eternity — either past time, in the form of a rigid tradition, or future time, in the form of Progress towards Utopia. And both are Molochs, both demand human sacrifice on an enormous scale. Spanish Catholicism was a typical idolatry of past time. Nationalism, Communism, Fascism, all the social pseudo-religions of the twentieth century, are idolatries of future time.

What have been the consequences of our recent shift of attention from Past to Future? An intellectual progress from the Garden of Eden to Utopia; a moral and political advance from compulsory orthodoxy and the divine right of kings to conscription for everybody, the infallibility of the local boss and the apotheosis of the State. Before or behind, time can never be worshipped with impunity.

But Hotspur's summary has a final clause: time must have a stop. And not only must, as an ethical imperative and an eschatological hope, but also does have a stop, in the indicative tense, as a matter of brute experience. It is only by taking the fact of eternity into account that we can deliver thought from its slavery to life. And it is only by deliberately paying our attention and our primary allegiance to eternity that we can prevent time from turning our lives into a pointless or diabolic foolery. The divine Ground is a timeless reality. Seek it first, and all the rest — everything from an adequate interpretation of life to a release from compulsory self-destruction — will be added. Or, transposing the theme out of the evangelical into a Shakespearean key, you can say: 'Cease being ignorant of what you are most assured, your glassy essence, and you will cease to be an angry ape, playing such fantastic tricks before high heaven as make the angels weep.'

A postscript to what I wrote yesterday. In politics we have so firm a faith in the manifestly unknowable future that we are prepared to sacrifice millions of lives to an opium smoker's dream of Utopia or world dominion or perpetual security. But where natural resources are concerned, we sacrifice a pretty accurately predictable future to present greed. We know, for example, that if we abuse the soil it will lose its fertility; that if we massacre the forests our children will lack timber and see their uplands eroded, their valleys swept by floods. Nevertheless, we continue to abuse the soil and massacre the forests. In a word, we immolate the present to the future in those complex human affairs where foresight is impossible; but in the relatively simple affairs of nature, where we know quite well what is likely to happen, we immolate the future to the present. 'Those whom the gods would destroy they first make mad.'

For four and a half centuries white Europeans have been busily engaged in attacking, oppressing and exploiting the coloured peoples inhabiting the rest of the world. The Catholic Spaniards and Portuguese began it; then came Protestant Dutch and Englishmen, Catholic French, Greek Orthodox Russians, Lutheran Germans, Catholic Belgians. Trade and the Flag, exploitation and oppression, have always and everywhere followed or accompanied the proselytizing Cross.

Victims have long memories — a fact which oppressors can never understand. In their magnanimity they forget the ankle they twisted while stamping on the other fellow's face, and are genuinely astonished when he refuses to shake the hand that flogged him and manifests no eagerness to go and get baptized.

But the fact remains that a shared theology is one of the indispensable conditions of peace. For obvious and odious historical reasons, the Asiatic majority will not accept Christianity. Nor can it be expected that Europeans and Americans will swallow the whole of Brahmanism, say, or Buddhism. But the Minimum Working Hypothesis is also the Highest Common Factor.

Three prostrate telegraph poles lying in the patch of long grass below my window at the inn — lying at a slight angle one to another, but all foreshortened, all insisting, passionately, on the fact (now all of a sudden unspeakably mysterious) of the third dimension. To the left the sun is in the act of rising. Each pole has its attendant shadow, four or five feet wide, and the old wheel tracks in the grass, almost invisible at midday, are like canyons full of blue darkness. As a 'view,' nothing could be more perfectly pointless; and yet, for some reason, it contains all beauty, all significance, the subject-matter of all poetry.

Industrial man — a sentient reciprocating engine having a fluctuating output, coupled to an iron wheel revolving with uniform velocity. And then we wonder why this should be the golden age of revolution and mental derangement.

Democracy is being able to say no to the boss, and you can't say no to the boss unless you have enough property to enable you to eat when you have lost the boss's patronage. There can be no democracy where ...

Sebastian turned over a page or two. Then his eye was caught by the opening words of a note that was dated, 'Christmas Eve.'

Today there was an almost effortless achievement of silence — silence of intellect, silence of will, silence even of secret and subconscious cravings. Then a passage through these silences into the intensely active tranquillity of the living and eternal Silence.

Or else I could use another set of inadequate verbal signs and say that it was a kind of fusion with the harmonizing interval that creates and constitutes beauty. But whereas any particular manifestation of beauty — in art, in thought, in action, in nature — is always a relationship between existences not in themselves intrinsically beautiful, this was a perception of, an actual participation in, the paradox of Relationship as such, apart from anything related; the direct experience of pure interval and the principle of harmony, apart from the things which, in this or that concrete instance, are separated and harmonized. And somewhere, somehow, the participation and the experience persist even now as I write. Persist in spite of the infernal racket of the guns, in spite of my memories and fears and preoccupations. If they could persist always ...

But the grace had been withdrawn again, and in recent days ... Sebastian sadly shook his head. Dust and cinders, the monkey devils, the imbecile unholinesses of distraction. And because knowledge, the genuine knowledge beyond mere theory and book learning, was always a transforming participation in that which was known, it could never be communicated — not even to one's own self when in a state of ignorance. The best one could hope to do by means of words was to remind oneself of what one once had unitively understood and, in others, to evoke the wish and create some of the conditions for a similar understanding. He reopened the book.

Spent the evening listening to people talking about the future organization of the world — God help us all! Do they forget what Acton said about power? 'Power always corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. All great men are bad.' And he might have added that all great nations, all great classes, all great religious or professional groups are bad — bad in exact proportion as they exploit their power.

In the past there was an age of Shakespeare, of Voltaire, of Dickens. Ours is the age, not of any poet or thinker or novelist, but of the Document. Our Representative Man is the travelling newspaper correspondent, who dashes off a best seller between two assignments. 'Facts speak for themselves.' Illusion! Facts are ventriloquists' dummies. Sitting on a wise man's knee they may be made to utter words of wisdom; elsewhere, they say nothing, or talk nonsense, or indulge in sheer diabolism.

Must look up what Spinoza says about pity. As I remember, he considers it intrinsically undesirable, in so far as it is a passion, but relatively desirable, in so far as it does more good than harm. I kept thinking of this yesterday, all the time I was with Daisy Ockham. Dear Daisy! Her passionate pity moves her to do all sorts of good and beautiful things; but because it is just a passion, it also warps her judgment, causes her to make all kinds of ludicrous and harmful mistakes, and translates itself into the most absurdly sentimental and radically false view of life. She loves to talk, for example, about people being transformed and ameliorated by suffering. But it's perfectly obvious, if one isn't blinded by the passion of pity, that this isn't true. Suffering may and often does produce a kind of emotional uplift and a temporary increase in courage, tolerance, patience and altruism. But if the pressure of suffering is too much prolonged, there comes a breakdown into apathy, despair or violent selfishness. And if the pressure is removed, there's an immediate return to normal conditions of unregeneracy. For a short time, a blitz engenders sentiments of universal brotherliness; but as for permanent transformation and improvement — that occurs only exceptionally. Most of the people I know have come back from battle unchanged; a fair number are worse than they were; and a few — men with an adequate philosophy and a desire to act upon it — are better. Daisy is so sorry for them that she insists that they are all better. I talked to her a little about poor Dennis C., and what suffering has done for him — drink, recklessness, indifference to simple honesty, a total cynicism.

Buddhist writers distinguish between compassion and Great Compassion — pity in the raw, as a mere visceral and emotional disturbance, and pity informed by principle, enlightened by insight into the nature of the world, aware of the causes of suffering and the only remedy. Action depends on thought, and thought, to a large extent, depends on vocabulary. Based on the jargons of economics, psychology, and sentimental religiosity, the vocabulary in terms of which we think nowadays about man's nature and destiny is about the worst....

Suddenly the door-bell rang. Sebastian looked up with a start. At this hour, who could it be? Dennis Camlin probably. And probably rather drunk again. What if he didn't open the door? But, no, that would be uncharitable. The poor boy seemed to find some sort of comfort in his presence. 'It's all true,' he used to say. 'I've always known it was true. But if one wants to destroy oneself — well, why not?' And the tone would become truculent, the words violently obscene and blasphemous. But a few days later he'd be back again.

Sebastian got up, walked into the hall and opened the door. A man was standing there in the darkness — his father. He cried out in astonishment.

'But why aren't you on the other side of the Atlantic?'

'That's the charm of war-time travel,' said John Barnack, in the studiedly unexcited tone which he reserved for partings and reunions. 'No nonsense about sailing lists or premonitory cables. Can you put me up, by the way?'

'Of course,' Sebastian answered.

'Not if it's the least trouble,' his father continued as he put down his suitcase and began to unbutton his overcoat. 'I just thought it would be easier for me to open up my own place by daylight.'

He walked briskly into the sitting-room, sat down and, without even asking Sebastian how he was or volunteering the slightest personal information, began to talk about his tour through Canada and the States. The remarkable swing to the left in the Dominion — so strikingly different from what was going on across the border. But whether the Republicans would actually win the presidential election was another matter. And anyhow it wasn't by any party or president that the country's future policy would be dictated — it was by brute circumstance. Whoever got in, there'd be more government control, more centralization to cope with the post-war mess, continuing high taxes....

Sebastian made the gestures and noises of intelligent attention; but his real concern was with the speaker, not with what was being said. How tired his father looked, how old! Four years of war-time overwork, at home, in India, back again in England, had left him worn and diminished; and now these two months of winter travel, of daily lectures and conferences, had consummated the process. Almost suddenly, John Barnack had passed from powerful maturity to the beginnings of old age. But, of course, Sebastian reflected, his father would be much too proud to acknowledge the fact, much too strong-willed and stubborn to make any concessions to his tired and shrunken body. Ascetical for asceticism's sake, he would continue to drive himself on, pointlessly, until the final collapse.

'... The most consummate imbecile,' John Barnack was saying in a voice that contempt had made more ringingly articulated. 'And of course, if he hadn't been Jim Tooley's brother-in-law, nobody would ever have dreamed of giving him the job. But naturally, when one's wife is the sister of the world's champion lick-spittle, one can aspire to the highest official positions.'

He uttered a loud metallic bray of laughter; then launched out into an animated digression on nepotism in high places.

Sebastian listened — not to the words, but to what they concealed and yet so plainly expressed: his father's bitter sense of grievance against a party and a government that had left him all these years in the ranks, without office or any position of authority. Pride did not permit him to complain; he had to be content with these ferociously sardonic references to the stupidity or the turpitude of the men for whom he had been passed over. But, after all, if one couldn't refrain from talking to one's colleagues as though they were subnormal and probably delinquent children, one really ought not to be surprised if they handed out the sugar plums to somebody else.

Old, tired, bitter. But that wasn't all, Sebastian said to himself, as he watched the deeply furrowed, leathery face and listened to the now incongruously loud and commanding voice. That wasn't all. In some subtle and hardly explicable way his father gave an impression of deformity — as though he had suddenly turned into a kind of dwarf or hunchback. 'He that is not getting better is getting worse.' But that was too sweeping and summary. 'He that isn't growing up is growing down.' That was more like it. Such a man might end his life, not as a ripened human being, but as an aged foetus. Adult in worldly wisdom and professional skill; embryonic in spirit and even (in spite of all the stoical and civic virtues he might have acquired) in character. At sixty-five his father was still trying to be what he had been at fifty-five, forty-five, thirty-five. But this attempt to be the same made him essentially different. For then he had been what a busy young or middle-aged politician ought to be. Now he was what an old man ought not to be; and so, by straining to remain unmodified, had transformed himself into a gruesome anomaly. And, of course, in an age that had invented Peter Pan and raised the monstrosity of arrested development to the rank of an ideal, he wasn't in any way exceptional. The world was full of septuagenarians playing at being in their thirties or even in their teens, when they ought to have been preparing for death, ought to have been trying to unearth the spiritual reality which they had spent a lifetime burying under a mountain of garbage. In his father's case, of course, the garbage had been of the very highest quality — personal austerity, public service, general knowledge, political idealism. But the spiritual reality was no less effectually buried than it would have been under a passion for gambling, for example, or an obsession with sexual pleasure. Perhaps, indeed, it was buried even more effectually. For the card-player and the whoremonger didn't imagine that their activities were creditable, and therefore stood a chance of being shamed into giving them up; whereas the well-informed good citizen was so certain of being morally and intellectually right that he seldom so much as envisaged the possibility of changing his way of life. It had been the publicans who came to salvation, not the Pharisees.

Meanwhile, the talk had veered away from nepotism, to settle, inevitably, on what might be expected to happen after the war.... Up till quite recently, Sebastian was thinking as he listened, this staunch idolater of future time had been rewarded by his god with the grace of an inexhaustible energy in the service of his favourite social reforms. Now, instead of the beneficiary, he was the victim of what he worshipped. The future and its problems had come to haunt him like a guilty conscience or a consuming passion.

There was first the immediate future. On the continent a chaos so frightful that, to millions of people, the war years would seem in retrospect a time positively of prosperity. And even in England, along with the enormous relief, there would be a certain nostalgia for the simplicities of war economy and war organization. And meanwhile, in Asia, what political confusion, what hunger and disease, what abysses of inter-racial hatred, what preparations, conscious and unconscious, for the coming war of colour! John Barnack raised his hands and let them fall again in a gesture of utter hopelessness. But of course, that wasn't all. As though spurred on by avenging Furies, he proceeded to explore the further distances of time. And here there loomed for him, like the menace of an inescapable fate, the quasi-certainties of future population trends. An England, a Western Europe, an America, hardly more populous thirty years hence than at the present time, and with a fifth of their inhabitants drawing old-age pensions. And contemporary with this decrepitude, a Russia of more than two hundred millions, preponderantly youthful, and as bumptious, confident and imperialistically minded as England had been at a corresponding point in her own long-past phase of economic and demographic expansion. And east of Russia would be a China of perhaps five hundred millions, in the first flush of nationalism and industrialization. And, south of the Himalayas, four or five hundred millions of starving Indians, desperately trying to exchange the products of their sweated factory labour for the wherewithal to survive just long enough to add an additional fifty millions to the population and subtract yet another year or two from the average expectation of life.

The main result of the war, he went on gloomily, would be the acceleration of processes which otherwise would have taken place more gradually and therefore less catastrophically. The process of Russia's advance towards the domination of Europe and the Near East; of China's advance towards

the domination of the rest of Asia; and of all Asia's advance towards industrialism. Torrents of cheap manufactures flooding the white men's markets. And the white men's reaction to those torrents would be the casus belli of the impending war of colour.

'And what that war will be like ...'

John Barnack left the sentence unfinished and began to talk instead about the present miseries of India — the Bengal famine, the pandemic of malaria, the prisons crowded with the men and women at whose side, a few years before, he himself had fought for swaraj. A note of despairing bitterness came into his voice. It was not only that he had had to sacrifice his political sympathies. No, the roots of his despair struck deeper — down into the conviction that political principles, however excellent, were almost irrelevant to the real problem, which was merely arithmetical, a matter of the relationship between acreage and population. Too many people, too little arable land. Thanks to technology and the Pax Britannica, Malthus's nightmare had become, for a sixth of the human race, their everyday reality.

Sebastian went out to the kitchen to brew some tea. Through the open door he heard a momentary blast of trumpets and saxophones, then the distressing noise of actresses being emotional, then the quieter intonations of a masculine voice that talked and talked. His father was evidently listening to the news.

When he came back into the living-room, it was over. His eyes shut, John Barnack was lying back in his chair, half asleep. Taken off guard, the face and the limp body betrayed an unutterable fatigue. A cup clinked as Sebastian set down the tray. His father started and sat up. The worn face took on its familiar look of rather formidable determination, the body was taut again and alert.

'Did you hear that about the Russians and the Czechs?' he asked.

Sebastian shook his head. His father enlightened him. More details about the twenty-year pact were coming out.

'You see,' he concluded almost triumphantly, 'it's beginning already — the Russian hegemony of Europe.'

Cautiously, Sebastian handed him an overflowing cup of tea. Not so long ago, he was thinking, it wouldn't have been 'Russian hegemony,' but 'Soviet influence.' But that was before his father had begun to take an interest in population problems. And now, of course, Stalin had reversed the old revolutionary policy towards religion. The Greek Orthodox Church was being used again as an instrument of nationalism. There were seminaries now, and a patriarch like Father Christmas, and millions of people crossing themselves in front of ikons.

'A year ago,' John Barnack went on, 'we would never have allowed the Czechs to do this. Never! Now we have no choice.'

'In that case,' Sebastian suggested after a brief silence, 'it might be as well to think occasionally about matters where we do have a choice.'

'What do you mean?' his father asked, looking up at him suspiciously.

'Russians or no Russians, one's always at liberty to pay attention to the Nature of Things.'

John Barnack assumed an expression of pitying contempt, then burst into a peal of laughter that sounded like a carload of scrap iron being tipped on to a dump.

'Four hundred divisions,' he said, when the paroxysm was over, 'against some high-class thoughts about the Gaseous Vertebrates!'

It was a remark in the good old style — but with this difference, that the good old style was now the new style of a self-stunted dwarf who had succeeded in consummating his own spiritual abortion.

'And yet,' said Sebastian, 'if one thought about it to the point of...' he hesitated, 'well, to the point of actually becoming one of its thoughts, one would obviously be very different from what one is now.'

'Not a doubt of it!' said John Barnack sarcastically.

'And that sort of difference is infectious,' Sebastian went on. 'And in time the infection might spread so far that the people with the big battalions would actually not wish to use them.'

Another load of scrap iron was tipped down the chute. This time Sebastian joined in the laughter.

‘Yes,’ he admitted, ‘it is pretty funny. But, after all, a chance of one in a million is better than no chance at all, which is what you look forward to.’

‘No, I didn’t say that,’ his father protested. ‘There’ll be a truce, of course — quite a long one.’

‘But not peace?’

The other shook his head.

‘No, I’m afraid not. No real peace.’

‘Because peace doesn’t come to those who merely work for peace — only as the by-product of something else.’

‘Of an interest in Gaseous Vertebrates, eh?’

‘Exactly,’ said Sebastian. ‘Peace can’t exist except where there’s a metaphysic which all accept and a few actually succeed in realizing.’ And when his father looked at him questioningly, ‘By direct intuition,’ he went on; ‘the way you realize the beauty of a poem — or a woman, for that matter.’

There was a long silence.

‘I suppose you don’t remember your mother very well, do you?’ John Barnack suddenly asked.

Sebastian shook his head.

‘You were very like her when you were a boy,’ the other went on. ‘It was strange ... almost frightening.’ He shook his head, then added, after a little pause: ‘I never imagined you’d do this.’

‘Do what?’

‘You know — what we’ve been talking about. Of course, I think it’s all nonsense,’ he added quickly. ‘But I must say ...’ A look of unwonted embarrassment appeared on his face. Then, shying away from the too emphatic expression of affection, ‘It certainly hasn’t done you any harm,’ he concluded judiciously.

‘Thank you,’ said Sebastian.

‘I remember him as a young man,’ his father went on over the top of his teacup.

‘Remember whom?’

‘Old Rontini’s son. Bruno — wasn’t that his name?’

‘That was it,’ said Sebastian.

‘He didn’t make much impression on me then.’

Sebastian wondered whether anybody had ever made much impression on him. His father had always been too busy, too completely identified with his work and his ideas, to be very much aware of other people. He knew them as the embodiments of legal problems, as particular examples of political or economic types, not as individual men and women.

‘And yet I suppose he must have been remarkable in some way,’ John Barnack went on. ‘After all, you thought so.’

Sebastian was touched. It was the first time that his father had paid him the compliment of admitting that perhaps he wasn’t an absolute fool.

‘I knew him so much better than you did,’ he said.

With what was obviously a rather painful effort, John Barnack hoisted himself out of the depths of the armchair. ‘Time to go to bed,’ he said, as though he were enunciating a general truth, not expressing his own fatigue. He turned back to Sebastian. ‘What was it you found in him?’ he asked.

‘What was it?’ Sebastian repeated slowly. He hesitated, uncertain what to answer. There were so many things one could mention. That candour, for example, that extraordinary truthfulness. Or his simplicity, the absence in him of all pretensions. Or that tenderness of his, so intense and yet so completely unsentimental and even impersonal — but impersonal, in some sort, above the level of personality, not below it, as his own sensuality had been impersonal. Or else there was the fact that, at the end, Bruno had been no more than a kind of thin transparent shell, enclosing something incommensurably other than himself — an unearthly beauty of peace and power and knowledge. But that, Sebastian said to himself, was something his father wouldn’t even wish to understand. He looked up at last. ‘One of the things that struck me most,’ he said, ‘was that Bruno could somehow convince you that it all made sense. Not by talking, of course; by just being.’

Instead of laughing again, as Sebastian had expected him to do, John Barnack stood there, silently rubbing his chin.

‘If one’s wise,’ he said at last, ‘one doesn’t ask whether it makes any sense. One does one’s work and leaves the problem of evil to one’s metabolism. That makes sense all right.’

‘Because it’s not oneself,’ said Sebastian. ‘Not human, but a part of the cosmic order. That’s why animals have no metaphysical worries. Being identical with their physiology, they know there’s a cosmic order. Whereas human beings identify themselves with money-making, say, or drink, or politics, or literature. None of which has anything to do with the cosmic order. So naturally they find that nothing makes sense.’

‘And what’s to be done about it?’

Sebastian smiled and, standing up, ran a finger-nail across the grille of the loud-speaker.

‘One can either go on listening to the news — and of course the news is always bad, even when it sounds good. Or alternatively one can make up one’s mind to listen to something else.’

Affectionately, he took his father’s arm. ‘What about going to see if everything’s all right in the spare room?’

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