Laugh or Cry

Mary Crawford

Laugh or Cry

a novel by

MARY CRAWFORD

JONATHAN CAPE

THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE

LONDON

Part One

Chapter 1

MY daughter has received a proposal of marriage. It has thrown us all into great embarrassment. Lindsay herself is indignant at the mere idea of marrying someone who is old enough to be her father; the unfortunate suitor has taken his dismissal with painful meekness; and Gilbert (caught in one of those moods when he contrives to be both sour and lofty) is aggrieved. He likes to think that Lindsay is still a child, and he resents the possible awkwardness with our nearest neighbour. Naturally he blames me for it. I should have made Conrad keep his feelings to himself.

I have not been able to express my own feelings. From surprise, bewilderment, concern and (let me say it), sardonic amusement, I have dredged up nothing but a faint melancholy. If Lindsay is marriageable, then I am old. I find myself gazing at the mirror, examining my own face, if that is possible, dispassionately. My skin is still soft, and these few days of premature summer have burned it to a warm, tender brown; but at the corners of my eyes the crowsfeet are white and sharp. The line of my jaw, which I remember as a smooth, fine curve, has fallen a little out of focus; and the pale yellow of my hair (although it probably deceives all but the closest scrutiny) is actually beginning to turn grey.

I have to admit I am no longer a beauty. Yet I suddenly notice I am smiling at myself. I catch a fleeting memory of my great-aunt, with her witch's face, her cracked voice, her skeleton hand clutching an ebony stick. She is showing some young man her vegetable garden. He gazes at her with devotion. While I, half-child still, follow them at a distance along the cinder path, occasionally lashing at a cabbage white butterfly with my tennis racket. Evidently her beauty, long since dead and gone, left her a more durable gift. I mean, the habit of being admired.

So this face in the glass smiles at me, reminding me how little I have to regret, since people still regard me with the same revealing interest that I first noticed a quarter of a century ago. The bus conductor is flattered if I make some dull remark about the weather; and Gilbert's friends, having come to talk about politics, remain long after he has got what he wanted out of them and visibly wishes them away. It is even possible that Conrad who in a moment of illusion saw my daughter as his wife was paying me a perverse compliment.

Is my vanity inordinate? Yet there is no harm, surely, in admitting it to myself? I have never aspired to break hearts, or to achieve dramatic effects of influence or power. I have only basked a little, well within the limits of convention, prudence and good taste.

I can imagine that nobody, except myself, sees below the surface; or even wonders what lies there. When I married, I found myself invested with a mythological character, the character of *Gilbert's wife*. No doubt that is a commonplace experience, but I was unprepared for it. In the first daze of pleasure, when I learned what it was like to be loved as a woman, I supposed that I was the woman he loved; and I realized only slowly that his

passion and tenderness were lavished on some dream of his lonely youth, in my person. Gradually, I became acquainted with the features of my archetype, and finally, not without a struggle, I accepted the part that had already been composed for me. What else could I do? If I went outside it, I found myself swept into one of his black moods, or condemned to a no less annihilating atmosphere of bland indifference.

So my life with Gilbert became a work of art, in which I must confess I have taken extraordinary pleasure. It is active, varied and interesting, and like other minor works — a fine piece of embroidery, or a well-set jewel — it excites apparently no curiosity about the hidden nature of the artist. A few years after we married, my great-aunt conveyed to me the exact nature of my success: I had been quoted to her as the ideal wife for a rising young barrister. I suppose I looked a little too gratified. She tapped me on the knee with her stick, and gave a wicked grin.

'You are looking very plump and pretty my dear child,' she said (we were at last wearing our natural curves again). 'I can see Gilbert has his own way of looking after you. But it's a pity you have no eccentricities; they become such a very great consolation in old age.'

If she was trying to plant a seed of rebellion, it never took root. I knew that she had never quite liked Gilbert, but I did not relish any criticism of my performance. The show must go on.

I saw less and less of my own family. Gilbert's commitments, part social, part professional, kept us busy. We entertained, modestly and intelligently; I was photographed (with my four-year-old daughter and a spaniel puppy) for an American fashion paper; the spaniel pined in London and was replaced by the perfect urban lady,

a witty and affectionate miniature poodle; and Gilbert's reputation reached a new summit in one of the more notable financial trials of the early 'thirties.

When my father died and left me this house in the country (because, although I was the youngest child, I was the only one who could conceivably make use of it) I dreamed of a different life. It was I who pressed for keeping on the home farm, and saw myself lavishing time and thought upon it. But Gilbert, when he reluctantly agreed that we could perhaps afford a second home, had already seen a constituency. He had always, he said later, been interested in agriculture.

Now inevitably I open flower shows with a few words so well-chosen that no one need listen to them. Periodically, our lawn is clawed up by that amorphous monster, the Conservative Fête; and our square white house with its elegant green veranda shelters an office as well as, from time to time, a family.

It is a small family; Lindsay is our only child. Today, when Gilbert and I were having tea by ourselves in a sunny sheltered corner by the yew hedge, I thought how odd we would look to my parents sitting there in solitude, with a plate of minute sandwiches and a cake we felt no inclination to cut. In the old days, there were always so many people; a great silver tray with a dozen cups laid out on it, and mugs for the smallest children; and scones, bread and butter, bread and jam, little buns, seed cake, plum cake. . . .

It was a cheerful and eventful existence, but never peaceful. We have now, however poorly we live up to it, an ideal of family harmony which our parents would certainly have thought absurd. They valued above all a united family and that (since it spread over four generations and included the most diverse characters) forced

them to accept continual difficulties and tensions as the natural condition of life.

At this season of the year, for instance — the primrose and spring-cleaning season — we had an annual visit from a distant cousin whom we all detested. 'She is very lonely,' said my mother, 'and so good about helping me to wash the china.' In this way, she re-affirmed her intention to do what she thought was right, and also gave herself a little encouragement at the prospect of a bleak fortnight, when my father was certain to be tiresome, and the maids upset.

The idea of evading such responsibilities was not entertained, nor yet the possibility of stemming our visitor's flow of unwanted advice. It was assumed, as a matter of courtesy, that one did not tamper with human nature, any more than with family obligations. My mother occasionally retired, with a graceful apology, to write letters, and my father went out shooting rather more than usual. We children were expected to entertain her for short periods, and otherwise pursued our own lives in the nursery and the schoolroom, at the tops of trees, and in secret tunnels under the rhododendrons.

That child's world seems to have disappeared. Although we were subject to certain strict rules of behaviour (which might now seem oppressive) we were never afflicted by that anxious parental concern which in fact exerts a more radical pressure, not necessarily beneficent. Anxiety is infectious, and parents who worry over their children's development promote the belief that there is a great deal to worry about.

My own parents went to the other extreme of optimism and tolerance. My sister Chloe's formidable sulks were treated, like Kathy's growing pains, as 'a phase'; and both afflictions disappeared in the course of time. My brothers

were not so lucky. Because they quarrelled, they were forbidden to sit next each other at meals; but apart from that, there was no recognition of the desperate rivalry which set the whole course of their lives.

Idly dreaming of the past, I noticed also with delight that in the windbreak of ancient beeches across the lawn a single young tree was already in leaf.

'Would you like the local paper?' said Gilbert, looking up from the *Economist*.

'No, thank you. I was just wondering if we could get Kathy and the children to stay.'

'Good heavens. All four of them?'

'Well, we have just got room.'

'It seems a bit much,' said Gilbert. He retreated among his statistics. I had chosen a bad moment. He held his cup out, without comment, and I filled it, keeping my disappointment to myself. Kathy is always good company, and I enjoy giving her any sort of treat. She is sunk almost without trace in a midland parish, with two large stepsons, and twin daughters of her own, and a husband whose gentle and generous nature (accessible to all God's children, however dubious their allegiance here on earth) exacts from her daily miracles of devotion.

The day had begun to go wrong. Gilbert read with an obstinate expression that I felt was directed at me. I might have relieved his mind by telling him I would try to arrange a visit some time when he was in London, but almost immediately we were interrupted by Conrad. I was pleased to see him, but I was surprised too. He is the most punctilious of neighbours, and rarely drops in unexpectedly. I had a momentary, absurd, fear that Lindsay, who was out riding, had met with an accident. I asked if he had seen her.

'Yes, she wanted me to go with her, but I hadn't the time.'

‘Then it’s specially nice of you to come and see your friends. Have you had tea?’

‘Yes,’ said Conrad. He sat down beside me on the bench, and did not reveal any other object for his visit. Gilbert put down his paper ostentatiously. He is fond of Conrad, as we all are, but the afternoon had been alloted to relaxation, and this was a disturbance. Conversation languished. Conrad looked unhappy and nervous, and I feared his chronic suspicion — that Gilbert finds him a bore — was beginning to nag.

Gilbert is shamelessly intolerant of boredom, and quite shameless in escaping it by the simple means of talking himself. As I related some trifling piece of village gossip, I could see him collecting his forces. Then he turned to Conrad with an expression of real interest.

‘Have you followed these American experiments in grain-crops?’ he said. ‘They have produced some astonishing results. . . .’

He repeated some information he and I had been discussing earlier in the day. This time, the sentences had a little more professional polish and I guessed that he was, perhaps unconsciously, rehearsing a speech. I hardly listened, watching them both. Gilbert is still so handsome, and his voice is beautiful. Hearing the music, not the words, I could imagine myself inspired to storm a barricade, to assassinate a president, or to defend to my dying gasp an impossible position. Conrad, a frown of concentration on his square, red-veined face, listened to the words.

‘Of course,’ he said, when Gilbert paused and glanced at him inquiringly, ‘we couldn’t grow wheat here in any large quantity.’

‘You feel sure of that?’ said Gilbert.

Conrad’s farm, adjoining ours, is what Lindsay used to

call a *reel farm*. That means, according to Gilbert, under-capitalized and run in defiance of all principles of scientific management. Ours is experimental, but in times of crisis we often appeal to Conrad. Besides that, as absentees in London for most of the year, we depend on him to keep an eye on the place. He listened with growing horror while Gilbert described his private vision of a great wheat-field obliterating pasture, coppice, woodland, a stretch of heath and an ancient British barrow. Mercifully, it's quite impossible. Conrad took the trouble to explain why.

'I am unconvinced,' said Gilbert. 'To my mind, our enslavement to nature is psychological, not technical. We have the means but lack the courage.'

Gilbert of course has never worked this land; I have, for five years of war. Conrad caught my eye. We both remembered the struggle it had been to bring our marginal fields under cultivation; and the wretched crops we had got from them.

Conrad fidgeted, looked at me with the beseeching eyes of a spaniel, and finally got up. Gilbert reached for his paper. I was sorry for Conrad. He had been given no chance to tell us what he had on his mind, and I could guess that he was taking Gilbert's wild ideas much too seriously.

'Shall I walk back with you?' I said.

That was what he wanted. As soon as we were out of earshot, I tried to re-assure him.

'You needn't worry, you know. Gilbert is only amusing himself making out a case. He doesn't intend to do anything.'

'I suppose not,' said Conrad despondently. He seemed to have sunk into one of his periodic glooms, but I was conceited enough to think that my company would soon assuage it. I was wrong. I could not make him smile, or

induce him to take any pleasure in this landscape we both love.

The footpath runs across two fields, this year under grass, and slants downhill across a plantation of firs to the river. Then for a few hundred yards it winds along the hillside at the edge of the wood, with a steep slope, covered with a scrub of hazel and bramble, falling off on the other side to the river bank. This is our boundary. Across the stream, beyond a narrow stone bridge, I could see a corner of Conrad's land — a stretch of meadow, and then plough, already dusted with the golden green of the first blades of spring corn.

'How lovely it is,' I murmured. Conrad remained pre-occupied. We came out into the sunshine again, on a broader track, and I put my hand on his arm. 'Just look at it,' I said.

The rapids above the bridge frothed and sparkled. Below, in an angle of the near bank, the fierce current was checked and dispersed in a deep, clear pool, where, under the shadow of the trees I could see a curve of rock and a hank of water-weed, mineral green.

'This is where I learned to swim. Do you remember my father throwing pennies off the bridge? There must be some there still. But mother put a stop to it when John stayed under too long and went blue in the face. . . .'

Conrad broke in. 'It seems impossible that you should have a grown-up daughter.'

'I married rather young.'

Conrad frowned. 'I have been trying to get you alone for days,' he said, acutely distressed, 'and now I don't know what to say.'

'Need you say it? After all, my dear, we have managed more than twenty years of impeccable silence. . . .'

He looked at me as if he did not understand what I

meant. Possibly, occupied with his own thoughts, he did not hear it. Yet his next words seemed to touch, however remotely, the same memory.

'I felt I should speak to you first . . . before I said anything to Lindsay.'

'Lindsay?' I must have sounded surprised.

'I suppose you mean she wouldn't even consider it?'

'But *what*?'

'Marriage.'

He stared over the river, looking tense and wretched. No words came to me. Poor Conrad, I thought; and then, poor silly me. When I broke our short-lived engagement, and he swore he would never stop loving me, I mocked him. Yet I had become so accustomed to his guarded sentiment, following me through life like a mild and stable perfume, that it was my turn now to feel helpless and ridiculous.

A wave of hysterical laughter hit me. 'Is it as funny as all that?' said Conrad, automatically offering me his handkerchief. I shook my head, speechless, clumsily dabbing my eyes.

'You aren't feeling ill or anything, are you?'

'No . . . of course not . . . and I'm not laughing at the *idea*. It's just that this is the wrong century for making proposals in form to a girl's parents. If you want Lindsay to marry you, then you must ask her. I don't know what anyone else thinks or feels.'

'I should like your blessing.'

'You can have that. But I don't undertake to pave the way for you.'

He was evidently disappointed. I wished him courage, and left him abruptly. I wanted to have my own thoughts in order before I saw Lindsay. She too had become a stranger — the object of a love that was not my own.

I had ample time. It was just before dinner when Lindsay swept into my bedroom, slammed the door, and threw her riding crop on the bed with a vicious cut.

'Oh, mother, I fell into the trap. I just fell right into it. I wanted to show off my jumping to Conrad, so I stopped there on the way home. And he gave me some advice, and told me I ought to get Betsy shod, and then, when we were drinking sherry on the terrace, he suddenly asked me to marry him. He must be mad. He's much older than you are, and not nearly so well preserved.'

'Darling, what did you say to him?'

'I just said no. I suppose I ought to feel honoured and flattered; but I only feel cross.'

She sat down on the bed with her legs stuck out in front of her, looking like a sulky stable-boy.

'My boots are too tight. I haven't even finished growing. Oh, mother, why did it have to be Conrad.'

'I hope you weren't too unkind to him.'

'Of course I was unkind to him. I don't want to marry him. I don't want him even to *think* about marrying me. I don't know how he could ever be so stupid. Before I could stop him, he started trying to tell me why he loved me. That's stupid too. It must be much nicer to be loved regardless. Would you still be fond of me, mother, if I had kleptomania or a hunched back?'

'I expect so,' I said confidently; but it was this actual child who wakened in me so sharp a sensation of tenderness that I caught my breath. She got up impatiently and crossed the room; then, standing opposite the long glass, she took off her cap and shook her hair loose about her shoulders. The lad's face vanished. Composed of the same fine-drawn features, a new face, entirely feminine, obliterated it.

‘Does everybody always look silly? I mean, when they talk about love.’

‘How should I know?’

‘You must have had hundreds of admirers. Nanny always says you were simply besieged. What did they all say to you?’

‘I’ve forgotten. It’s far too long ago.’

‘Brute. Liar. Well, anyway, how did father do it?’

‘Very elegantly.’

‘You mean he didn’t make you feel awkward?’

‘Not awkward, no. It was rather like a scene in a play. I felt as if someone had told me what I was to say. Although I didn’t have much opportunity to say anything.’

‘Just yes.’

‘Do you know, I’ve never been quite sure. I do remember him saying “well, then, it’s settled”; and perhaps I said yes then.’

‘Were you besotted with love?’

‘I must have been.’

‘How glorious. But probably my fate is to be an old man’s darling.’

‘But you have crowds of other friends, my dear. Here, and in London, and at least half a dozen young men at the art school. . . .’

‘That’s just what it is, a crowd. I imagine something different. You look across a whole roomful of people, and you only see one face. There may not even be anything special about it, but all the other faces are just blanks. Oh, well. It’s only that I shouldn’t like to die without knowing what it’s like.’

‘You’ve got lots of time.’

‘I’m nearly a year older than you were when you got engaged.’

Gilbert and I had danced, pouncing and dodging in a brassy foxtrot. A final crash immobilized the crowd of jerking figures, and then a long sobbing note from the 'cello, announcing a tango, drew them off the floor. We were left with only half a dozen other couples, in empty space. How sweetly and lightly then the music took hold of us, as if we were birds swooping on a buoyant current of air. The faint pressure of Gilbert's hand on my spine was part of the music, and my whole body listened, infinitely receptive, supple and pliant.

The floor was empty. I leaned a little on Gilbert's arm and looked up at his face. 'Just another clever young man,' I had told my sister Chloe, meaning that he posed a bit, and counted too much on making an impression. Glorying in the dance, I meant to tell him that everyone was watching us, but I was checked by his expression of absorbed and serious delight. It was so unfamiliar, that I was shocked, as if I had seen him asleep.

The music died. There was a burst of clapping. My mother, over by the hydrangeas, gave me a disapproving glance, for her code did not allow us to draw attention to ourselves. I felt I was blushing, and took fright.

Gilbert was still holding the tips of my fingers as I left the ballroom. Outside, an old gentleman with a stiff brush of pepper-and-salt hair was admonishing my brother Vivian.

'The war's been over seven years, and it's up to you young fellows to see that it doesn't happen again. You'd better keep an eye on our friends across the Rhine, you know. Decent people some of them perhaps, but they want keeping in order. . . .'

Vivian looked at us appealingly. But Gilbert guided me to the half-landing and set me on a window seat. I remember tracing the outline of the leaded panes with my finger,

while he turned upon me the whole battery of his charm. That engaging smile, that odd, gay lift of his left eyebrow, and a voice like wine and honey. I was bewitched, following his words with the same intuitive delight that I had followed his movements in the dance. And so it was settled.

'Were you ever ambitious, mother?' said Lindsay.

'Not in the least. I've had enough to do without that.'

'I know. If you're ambitious there isn't room for anything else. Like the way father can never have a holiday. Wherever he is, he's always noticing something that might come in useful. And for me it's the same with painting. By the way, Conrad offered me that big attic as a studio, and I was rather tempted, just for a minute. But isn't it horrible? He was so humble and timid, and then he tried to bribe me.'

'That doesn't sound a fair way of putting it.'

'It wasn't a fair offer. Although afterwards, I must say, he told me I could use it anyhow. I suppose that was decent of him, but a bit feeble.'

'It's just that he's kind and considerate.'

'How dull it sounds. I only want a fascinating husband; but of course not for ages. The first thing is to learn to paint, and I'm going to work harder than ever next term. I'm in exactly the right mood.'

She had come to rest standing by my chair. I put my arm round her and pulled her nearer. She looked down at me, her mouth resolute, her eyes suddenly blinking with tears.

'Lindsay, my darling.'

She slipped to the floor, and turned her face against my knee. I stroked her smooth, dark hair, and felt her muscles slacken against me.

The door opened very softly. Nanny, bringing back a

dress she had been ironing for me, tip-toed over to the wardrobe. As always, I had the feeling that her small bright eyes, the tired eyes of an old woman, had seen everything. Lindsay jumped to her feet.

'I must get my boots off before I can settle down to a good cry. Nanny, may I start on your portrait tomorrow?'

'Get along with you,' said Nanny, 'I'm no picture.'

The small, brown, wrinkled face lit up with an almost girlish smile. Nanny passed her hand over her thin white hair, drawn back so fiercely into a tight bun.

'You'd never think it,' she said, 'but it was my hair that was my pride and joy.'

'I remember when you could sit on it,' I said.

'I was born too late,' said Lindsay. 'I've never seen anyone sitting on their hair. But I admire it as it is, Nanny. It's not fashionable, but it's nice.'

She ran out of the room. Nanny collected her cap and crop.

'What's been upsetting her?'

When I told her, she put into one incredulous syllable all I had been thinking and feeling.

'Him?'

We looked at each other, a fugitive smile behind our solemn eyes. Nanny, a party to that secret engagement so many years ago that it is almost in another world, keeps bright and new the memories of those she has cared for, and so loved. To her, the long vista was brief, crowded with landmarks, the near and the distant past closed up together.

'Well, I'd never have thought it,' she said. 'Poor Mr. Conrad hasn't ever had a lot of luck. It's no wonder we none of us know whether to laugh or cry.'

Lindsay was late for dinner. 'I do wish she wouldn't keep us waiting,' said Gilbert.

We had started our meal without her, and I had put the dishes to keep warm on the hearth. 'Hardly waiting,' I said.

'Whether we wait or not, it creates an air of unrest. If she's much longer, we'd better send the food back to the kitchen.'

But then Lindsay appeared, with a well-powdered, unrevealing face, very self-contained, very much a young woman of fashion.

'Well, what have you been up to?' said Gilbert. She looked startled, but quickly collected herself.

'Oh, nothing particular. I'm sorry I'm late. Don't hold up the pudding, will you, I won't be long.'

'Darling, you must eat more than that.'

'I simply couldn't, mother.'

'What's the matter with everybody today?' said Gilbert fretfully. 'Even Conrad seems to have something on his mind, he forgot to send over those logs he promised us. And when I rang him up just now. . .'

Lindsay lifted her head in alarm. 'What did he say?'

'Nothing much. Only I thought he sounded as if he were starting a cold. I suppose that was why he hung around this afternoon. We ought to have passed him on to Nanny, it's a treat for her to make a fuss of anyone. I advised him to take some quinine.'

We were struck dumb. Lindsay choked over a stifled giggle. Gilbert regarded us indignantly.

'What have I done now? Really, I don't see why I'm treated as if I was a criminal or lunatic. I was hoping to have a peaceful day for once, and then I find we're practically out of firewood, and you're all late for meals, and ready to snap my head off.'

Lindsay pushed her chair back. 'Do you mind if I go? I'm not hungry.'

'You can stay five minutes surely?'

'Not if you're in a rage. I've had enough scenes for one day. You may as well know, I've just told Conrad I won't marry him.'

Gilbert stared at her. 'I should think not. What an extraordinary idea. Was that' — he looked at me incredulously — 'what he wanted to talk to you about?'

'I suppose so.'

'You mean to say he told you, mother, and you didn't warn him?'

'How could I? I said it was for you to decide.'

'That's too bad,' said Gilbert. 'If only he'd spoken to me, I could have dealt with it, and avoided this senseless disturbance. . .'

For me, there was more of it to come. As I crossed the hall, Nanny beckoned me from the landing. Gilbert, annoyed with me now, had taken Lindsay's arm, and she was explaining to him exactly how she had got Betsy over a jump she had hitherto stubbornly refused. I slipped upstairs unobserved.

'You ought to come and look out of the top window,' said Nanny, 'I don't know what to make of it.'

It was quite dark, but we could see the headlights of a truck in the stable yard.

'It looks like Mr. Conrad's van. He must have come over with the logs while you were at dinner.'

Indeed, a broad, recognizable figure was moving in and out of the pale fan from the rear light. I drew away from the window, fearing he might look up and see us watching.

'Everyone is crazy today,' I said furiously. It was a relief to feel quite simply angry. All day, great ragged bundles of other people's emotions had been lodged upon me, and I had used up all my capacity for receiving them

benignly and had even lost my curiosity towards their distant and shadowy sources. I ran downstairs and, without pausing to pick up a torch in the hall, felt my way across the back yard. An occasional thump, and the reflections of the headlamps, liquid and glossy on the ivy above the stable door, guided me. As I came through the arch, I had a glimpse of Conrad's bent and patient back. With a great triangular log gripped against him under each arm, he kicked aside the door of the shed. I heard the logs pitch one by one on to the pile, and when he turned I was standing almost behind him.

'Look, Conrad, this is really childish. What is the object of making a demonstration? Even if it's not easy to go on behaving as if nothing had happened, at least we have to try.'

His face was in shadow. He lifted out two more logs, and stood holding them. The door gently swung to.

'Gilbert seemed harassed; and I hadn't anything better to do. I hoped you'd be at dinner, and I needn't disturb you.'

'Surely you know how Gilbert invents crises? I told you we were all right till the end of the week, and you could send them over any time. It wasn't necessary to come over yourself, particularly if you have to go out of your way to avoid us all.'

'I see I've done the wrong thing again; but I may as well finish the job. You'd better not stay out without a jacket.'

'I must find the horse-shoe we use for propping the door.'

Holding the door back, I felt around with my foot. Conrad moved back and forth in silence. I gave up searching for the horse-shoe, and just stood there, faintly shivering. He, finally, was the first to speak.

'I suppose I was hoping to see you, or Lindsay, or some-

one. I didn't explain myself properly. I know she's very young, and I wouldn't dream of rushing anything. I could wait.'

That I very well knew. Alas, how unfortunate to have only the fatal gift of waiting. What had I done to him? And what could I do now? I tried to tell him the truth.

'It's no use waiting. You must give it up. Why should you make yourself unhappy when we all think you the nicest man on earth and the dearest friend we have? You make me worry about you.'

'You mustn't do that. After all, I really knew this would happen. I'm that sort of person.'

He ought not to have said it. Thoroughly exasperated with him, I went back to the house. Lindsay had gone up to bed. Gilbert gave me a short lecture, which I accepted meekly. He is always certain he is right; and that, at least, is better than expecting to be always wrong.

Chapter 2

FOR once, it was a relief to get back to London. Lindsay has had a stretch of settled weeks in the Art School, and I have occupied myself with all sorts of improvements in the flat — among other things, the new paint which I had promised myself when the war ended has now been laid on with my own hands. Gilbert, as always ceaselessly active, divides his time between the Middle Temple and the House of Commons. I see him only at breakfast, on occasional free evenings, in bed, and very briefly when he comes back to the flat to dictate letters. His private life, in the home, is bound to politics.

His secretary, Evelyn, is a soothing presence in the household. Young, sufficiently pretty, amiable, quiet and competent, she puts everything gently in order, and makes no demands for herself. My only complaint is that she is difficult to talk to. When I am at home we have our lunch together, and I find myself running on about our family affairs, simply because I have never discovered her other interests. What she thinks or feels is a mystery to me still after nearly two years, and I wonder what prospects this work offers her. Yet she seems quite contented, typing away in the little room at the end of the corridor, and spending her evenings with a self-effacing mother, and two robust, hard-working sisters. I only know that much

about them because I have occasionally taken the whole family to the theatre; and it was Mrs. Mathews who conveyed to me in her thin, neutral voice, that a theatre was 'a quite exceptional treat, as we hardly ever go out, except of course for Evelyn who has her sewing classes'. Evelyn blushed, as if even this little item of her private life should not have been obtruded. Once or twice, an unremarkable young man has called for her after work, and I have been hastily introduced to him; but Evelyn never burdens me with confidences.

We are all, in comparison, monsters of egotism. I cannot feel satisfied with any visitors' admiration of the gay, roseate colours of my drawing-room; they must also examine and praise the professional finish of the paintwork. Evelyn, of course, is the first to tell me that I can 'make a success of *anything*'. Poor darling, it doesn't occur to her that it would be quite beyond me to make any sort of success of the life she has to lead.

I was once told, when I was still in the age of credulity, that fern-seed conferred invisibility. For several days I kept some in my pocket, and in private rubbed it on the palms of my hands and the soles of my feet. When nothing came of that, I collected another big handful which I swallowed, edging my resolve past an unshakable dread of poison, in small doses. My brother Vivian, who objected to the dry and musky smell which rose off me, forced my secret. 'I shall laugh like anything,' he said, 'if you make yourself invisible and then *can't get back*.'

I suppose Kathy must have been away at school just then. She petted and scolded me, and always rushed to the rescue if I was in any sort of trouble. 'Don't *listen* to him,' she said, when Vivian teased; and her angry voice, her impatient grip of my shoulder, seemed to jolt me out of the credulity which Vivian found so tempting.

But the fern-seed was certainly a secret between him and me. I was terrified, and immediately gave up my experiments. For a few days, he made a point of looking at me with his eyes focused at a distance, and I had to run to mother or Nanny to be re-assured. I could not bring myself to explain my fear, and my mother was severe with me, and Nanny occasionally impatient. I could have asked nothing better, for at least it was quite obvious that they saw me. There was no need to ask *what* they saw. Probably some simple hieroglyph ('She is making a nuisance of herself') represented for them that period when I endured unexampled dread. One does not need to traffic in witchcraft to be invisible in that sense; it is a condition to which we are all accustomed. And when I look at Evelyn across the lunch table, and see only the figure of the perfect secretary, I sometimes wonder if that is the serviceable carapace she likes to live under, or a false image dictated by my own indifference.

The situation as it is suits me so well that I am not likely to make any notable effort to change it. Misgivings only cross my mind when I am given some chance intimation of how easy it is to cast over some other creature a cloak of darkness, spun out of one's own incapacity to see what is obvious. At this moment, I find myself responsible, as a member of a school management board, for a child of six who has never been heard to talk. Some remote acquaintance of the parents has taken up the case, and there has been a scandal. Why was he not sent to a special school? The only reason we can give is that none of the teachers apparently had noticed his disability; the mumbling noises which struggle from his lips have passed for speech. Meanwhile, at closer quarters, the other children have treated this oddity with wary contempt, and although

he has preserved an astonishing fortitude towards them, his mother tells us that lately he has been setting out for school in tears. That is a measure of the lengths to which negligence can go among perfectly well-intentioned people.

The discovery shocked us all; and our meeting — a stormy one — went on much longer than usual. I expected the flat to be empty when I got back. But Evelyn was waiting, on the look out, and intercepted me in the passage.

'You haven't forgotten Lady Maberley's party?'

'No, but I must change. Are there any messages? Is Gilbert coming here?' I had no time to spare, and hurried to my room, with Evelyn following me.

'He said he would pick you up. Can I do anything?'

'If you could get my black shoes out for me. . . .'

'These?'

I had taken my suit off, and was brushing the dust of the committee room out of my hair. Evelyn pottered about, tidying.

'And Lindsay rang up. She wants you to make her apologies, she's working late.'

'I believe she works too hard. And so do you Evelyn. You ought to have gone home.'

Automatically, as if that also were her job, she was putting my jacket on a hanger. Her expression was slightly forbidding. Not for the first time, she made me feel I had said too much. Very politely, she reminded me that I was not her employer.

'I thought I might as well stay to get the letters signed. I'm not in any hurry.'

After all, I was ready before Gilbert arrived. I never manage to look quite like a fashion plate, but I was satisfied that I was certainly very suitable, very correct,

in a black dress and pearls, and an expensive black hat with a pearly plume. I felt well armed for spending, say, three-quarters of an hour with a crowd of people in whom I am not particularly interested.

Gilbert went straight to his room, and, after a minute or two, came in to collect me. I could tell he was in a good mood, because he looked at me, and obviously with pleasure. London certainly suits him. Rushing from one appointment to another, he is animated, expansive, good-humoured. As he watches for signs of a turn in the political tide, he is confidently establishing his own position. Evidently the day had gone well; and Susan Maberley had invited, he told me, several people he was anxious to see. Driving across London, he started to tell me his plans for the summer.

'Did Evelyn show you the list of people I want to ask down?'

'Not yet. I was rather rushed.'

He gave me some names — friends, acquaintances, colleagues — without exception men who are associated with his inner group of young politicians. I said rather doubtfully — 'Shouldn't we arrange some gayer company for Lindsay? She thinks of nothing but work now, and neglects all her friends.'

Gilbert burst out laughing. 'Are you looking for someone to help her to forget Conrad? I don't think it's necessary. Still, if we've got a free week-end. . . .'

He was swept away from me as soon as we reached, at the head of the stairs, the fringes of the party. My hostess, gaunt and stooping, with the impulsive, clumsy gestures of a schoolgirl, took a crustacean grip of my arm, and led me off to the far room.

'I can't tell you how relieved I am to see you. This has all got quite out of hand. I didn't know I'd asked so

many people, and I told the press they could photograph one of Michael's paintings. You know him, don't you? His show opened today, and I wanted to give him some encouragement. Look out for that wire, it's something to do with the photographer. I didn't realize they were going to bring such a lot of apparatus. Do you think it was a mistake? I don't want people to feel they're absolutely *forced* to look at the picture.

'I don't think they do,' I said. There seemed to be an invisible cordon round the camera. The young artist gave me a guarded smile, but I was not allowed to stop. It was clear that Susan, dispensing unfinished smiles and waves of the hand as we laboured through the crowd, had some special assignment for me. I followed obediently in her wake, quite happy to avoid the eye of anyone who would have wanted to keep me.

Then I suddenly caught sight, across the room, of a face that did not leave me so indifferent — a narrow, aquiline face, not obviously handsome, but with the fine elegance of a Dürer engraving where every line (the curve of a nostril, or a fold on the lower eyelid) is done with absolute precision. Yet if I should describe it, feature by feature, I should call up a false image, impassive and severe. In fact, the first and dominant impression is of mobility and responsiveness.

I have known Stephen for some years, and although we meet comparatively seldom — both families were scattered during the war — I can always rely on him to exorcise the peculiar fevered boredom of this sort of occasion. He is not a witty or brilliant talker, perhaps 'he is too little of an egotist, too observant and too receptive, but he has the great gift of conveying, even in a snatched and interrupted conversation, a flavour of leisured friendship. In a gathering where one is tempted (for fear of missing something)

to keep an eye roving beyond the immediate company, he is one of the few people who do not grudge the whole of their attention. Talking or listening, his face is alive, reflecting the movement of a delicate and generous mind.

I find him difficult to describe even to myself. Perhaps that is why I like him so much. Some people (his wife, Claudia is one of them) make an immediate and definite impression because they are not like anyone else. Eccentrics, rebels, stubborn or wayward spirits, their every gesture has the stamp of an extraordinary personality. By contrast, Stephen is a creature of convention. Tradition has formed his appearance, his manners, and his life-history; and he gives you no encouragement to think that there is anything remarkable about him. And yet to me that is remarkable in itself.

He was standing in the embrasure of the window listening, with almost deferential courtesy which I could not help thinking somewhat misplaced, to an excitable, small, round man with a polished rosy skull. I had half a mind to join them, but my escape was forestalled.

'Don't start looking around for your own friends,' said my hostess, commanding and imploring. 'You must help me out with the two strange beings who run the gallery. Michael claims they've been angels to him, but no one can think of anything to say to them. And they won't be prised apart.'

Mercifully, the noise was overwhelming, for the crowd shifted as she spoke, and the beings were right in front of us. I was introduced. One of them was elderly, with the round, bonny face of a Lowland Scotswoman framed unexpectedly in a mantilla of exquisite black lace. The other, red-haired and painfully short-sighted was perhaps ten years younger, and wore aggressive tweeds, like a student. Susan, with a nervous smile, handed me a drink

and swiftly disengaged herself. I said I hoped the private view had gone well. The mantilla turned towards the pebble-glasses.

'How many people did we have, Priscilla?'

The reply was inaudible, murmured into the suave folds of lace. I wondered if I had been shouting and moved a little nearer.

'I'm told that people are beginning to buy paintings again,' I said. A pair of dark, expressionless eyes (that must be why someone once told her she looked Spanish) defied me to substantiate this wild rumour. I leaned towards Priscilla, who looked at any rate less hostile, and finally caught a breathy whisper.

'Iris has worked so hard.'

'I know Michael thinks you have done wonders.'

Priscilla seemed to be trembling with embarrassment. 'Oh, not me. It's you who have done everything, isn't it, Iris?'

'Nonsense, my dear, you have taken over all the jobs I particularly dislike. It would have been torture to me to sit at the door all day. I'm only afraid you've completely exhausted yourself while I . . .' she contrived to look both deprecating and complacent '. . . have been busy on the things that come easy to me.'

I was interested to see her profile, more roman than I would have expected. Her voice, muted to the same volume as Priscilla's, was deeper and more resonant. I felt she was mastering with an effort the forceful tones of a successful and dominating headmistress; and I had very little doubt that Priscilla would go on sitting by the door as long as the exhibition lasted. It was she who remembered my presence.

'Iris is so splendid with people. And of course, artists are difficult. Even Michael.'

Iris began to explain, but mainly to Priscilla, how easy it was to keep Michael on the right lines if only one knew how to set about it. I thought I heard her say that Claudia had spoilt him. 'And of course takes all the credit,' she added, 'for discovering him.'

I knew Claudia sometimes took a fleeting interest in young artists, but I could not imagine her spoiling anyone. A gifted and successful portrait painter, she is so ruthlessly occupied with her art (or perhaps it would be more accurate to say her profession) that she has very little attention to spare for anything else. That easy, open and impulsive manner, which appears to offer and invite affectionate friendship, serves equally well as a defence against it. I know no one who can execute with more airy grace the miserable gesture of brushing off a commitment.

There are many clumsier ways of claiming the status of a dedicated spirit. I have always admired Claudia, and might feel more generously towards her if I liked her painting. But I find it increasingly fashionable and empty; and, on top of that, a very poor excuse for failing to look after Stephen.

She has never shown any particular interest in making life easy or comfortable for him, and I should be sorry for him, if I dared. Instead, I remind myself sternly that pity would be an impertinence, since he has never given any sign of being sorry for himself.

Iris laid her long monumental hand, weighted with several great rings, on Priscilla's yielding shoulder. Their conversation had become so exclusive (only isolated phrases reached me, like splashes from a fountain in a light gust of wind) that I felt I could well leave them alone with it. Stephen had moved from the window, and I hoped that I should not find him with Claudia. The fact that they are both better company alone may mean

nothing, most wives and husbands are the same, but it is sad to be reminded of it.

I considered briefly the curious and only half animate group in front of me. Some artist, I thought, might have posed it for a conversation piece. Life-size, in a massive frame, eight feet or so by twelve, with a spaniel or two in the foreground, and an unidentified male figure retreating into the top left-hand corner, it would do very well. Priscilla's glasses must be taken off her face, and thirty odd years off her age, and she must be given some object to hold, a dead pigeon or a broken bowl. The expression and stance of a child who habitually incurs rebuke were there already.

Indulging myself in fancies, I let the minutes slip by. It seemed so likely that someone would come and detach me, and I was disinclined to make a move myself. How to take leave of people who do not acknowledge your presence is a problem for which there is no elegant solution. The press at my back prevented an unobtrusive withdrawal; and I hesitated to break their tenuous intercourse with conventional adieux. There was a brutal extravagance about that, like throwing a brick through gossamer. But I was finally driven to it. 'I think I should go and find my husband,' I said.

The web was tougher than I thought. The brick bounced. Priscilla looked round, but could not focus beyond their own charmed circle, and was quickly re-absorbed in it. I decided I was free.

I had hardly moved three steps when I was stopped in my tracks by effusive greetings from the man I had last seen talking to Stephen. He introduced himself — 'Polting's my name' — as a great admirer of Gilbert's. 'He's a very able fellow, you know. We expect great things of him.'

It was not an easy lead to follow. 'Yes, I do know,' goes rather beyond a seemly conjugal pride to the pitch of arrogance. 'Do you?' sounds sceptical. It was hardly my place to say that Gilbert is also very ambitious for himself, or that I shrink from any close interest in politics for fear of finding myself in the opposite camp. I played safe.

'There are a great many things to be done,' I said. It seemed to strike the right note of modest confidence, for he nodded approvingly. Then his face clouded.

'Another year or two of this system,' he said, 'and the country will be finished. Do you know some of my work-people getting six pounds a week, quite young fellows they are too, keep on pushing for more? You'd hardly credit it. And look at all they come by for nothing. Free doctors, free milk, free schooling, a bit of extra cash for each of the kids. And then they turn up their noses at six pounds. I married on less myself.'

'All the same,' I said, 'it is rather different now. *I* shouldn't know how to bring up a family on six pounds.'

'Well,' he said triumphantly, 'look at the prices. With prices as they are, of course it's impossible.'

It was an effort not to laugh, and probably I looked instead excessively serious. He seemed on the point of patting my hand and telling me to stop worrying my pretty head. I caused a diversion by suggesting we should go and look at the painting.

The party was sorting itself out. In the corner, a group of men — most of them recognizable public figures — let out a clap of laughter. Gilbert, faintly smiling, his left eyebrow cocked, had made some shrewd point. My companion made a move to join them, but I guessed, whatever tolerance Gilbert may feel towards his supporters, he was not likely to stand the strain of this one.

'I noticed you were talking to a friend of mine,' I said.

Mr. Polting raised invisible eyebrows. 'We got into quite a heated argument, I'm afraid. It turns out we're in the same line of business. A bit of an idealist, isn't he? But I've been in industry all my life, and I was able to tell him a thing or two, seeing that he's new to it.'

Mr. Polting's cheerful condescension riled me. I rose in Stephen's defence. 'He isn't altogether inexperienced,' I said, 'after all, he's been running the family firm very successfully for several years, ever since he was invalided out of the army. And his job there was engineering.'

'Tanks, wasn't it?' said Mr. Polting. He seemed to think very poorly of them, Quoting Stephen, I remarked that even technical jobs seemed to consist mainly of dealing with people. Mr. Polting brightened up; this was his own subject.

'The point is,' he said, 'it doesn't do to be too soft with them. They take advantage. It's all very well to have a lot of fancy ideas, but to my mind we'd do better to get back to the old ways. I pay people to do their job, not to start up an argument with me, or tell me how to run my business. If I was paying people for their brains, I wouldn't keep them on the bench, as I explained to your friend. But you can't expect a man who's come in at the top to grasp all the practical details.'

'You mean he might see the wood instead of the trees?'

'That's right. What? No, you're getting me wrong.' Mr. Polting looked at me with suspicion. Then he snorted. But he was not looking at me. We had arrived opposite the painting, and, after one pained glance at it, he turned away.

Michael, and a young man whose face I almost recognized, were helping the photographer to pack up his gear. I greeted them from a distance, the photographer crouch-

ing between us. 'Excuse me,' he muttered, as he shifted some heavy object past my toes.

He was wearing a raincoat over a dinner jacket, and was so obviously *not a guest*, that I felt a pang of shame and embarrassment. Yet, as I asked him whether he had had time to enjoy the party, I also envied him a little, because he had at least had something to do. He straightened up, still holding yards of flex like escaped entrails. His cadaverous eyes gazed at me mournfully. 'Just a job,' he said.

Michael laughed good-humouredly, and thanked him for the trouble he had taken. 'That's all right,' he said, and edged away from us, manœuvring his load towards the door. Now able to look at the painting at my leisure, I found myself standing on the edge of an uncompromising, wild landscape, a little dreamlike, with flashes of burning colour emerging, as I looked, from sombre browns and greys. It might be unpractised work, but not laboured or diffident, and it gave me immediate pleasure, with the promise of a deeper pleasure if I came to know it better. Haltingly, I tried to put what I felt into words.

I was very conscious that my ignorant praise was not worth much; and Michael's air of composure at first unnerved me. Yet it did not seem an expression of arrogance, rather of serious attentiveness which in itself was flattering. Without being in the least nervous, or avid for compliments, he made me fed that he really minded about what I thought. I began to enjoy myself.

'I wish Lindsay had come,' I said, 'I would have liked her to see it too.'

The other young man, who had been listening to us with eagerness, as if Michael's success were his own, broke in.

'Why didn't she come? I haven't seen her since you

took us both to the zoo some time at the beginning of the war.'

I was puzzled, but only for a moment. I had quite forgotten that Stephen and Claudia had a grown-up son; or rather, I had thought of their son as still a child.

'Why, of course, you are Colin. How stupid of me.'

'Probably I've grown,' said Colin, looking down at me, smiling.

'About a yard,' I said. But I could see now that he was still the same boy who had dragged and urged us on a zigzag course through the zoo, who had uttered insane cries until the gibbons answered him back, who had exchanged low moans with the eagle owls, and had driven the orang-outang into a rage of excitement by leaping up and down in front of him. He had lost none of his nervous energy; and it was still, like a child's, evident in his restless, loose-jointed frame and in his unself-conscious, open countenance.

He and Michael must be about the same age, but in every other way they are quite different. In Michael, one already sees the man he will become in ten or twenty years. His appearance and manner have a certain elegance and finish — evidences of a studied taste — which might seem grossly affected if the taste were any less good. His hair, I noticed, was a little too long for convention but far too tidy to put him in the class of bohemians. It was, like everything else about him, in a style of his own, only very faintly ostentatious, and only very slightly absurd.

In contrast, Colin is unfinished, experimental, impromptu; one does not know what to expect of him. He is still growing up. His bright, hazel eyes, flecked like Claudia's, have all her vivacity, but no sign of her calculating obstinacy. Reminded of her, I asked if she had come to the party too.

‘Of course,’ said Colin. ‘She’s more or less adopted Michael. We all have. And now she’s got him to worry about, she doesn’t feel so disgraced by my sordid addiction to science. At present, let me tell you, I am earning my living by counting earthworms.’

I laughed, and asked him if that was what he liked. He hesitated, and jerked his head as if to throw back a non-existent strand of hair. I had a momentary fear that this vulnerable, helpless creature, who had absent-mindedly allowed his barber to clip him much too close, might also have slipped into the wrong job.

‘But he dotes on it,’ said Michael. ‘He’s a real scientist — with an endless capacity for donkey-work. That’s the true affinity between science and art; you can’t, as they say, delegate. You have to find things out for yourself.’

‘And it was a stroke of luck,’ said Colin, ‘to get a job at the research station.’ His face, now very serious, was visited by an extraordinary likeness to his father, and I felt I recognized in him something of the same patient and imaginative intelligence. Michael was looking from one to the other of us with an expression of friendly, meditative interest. I wondered what he saw — the reflection of our thoughts in our faces, or simply some fortunate conjunction of form and colour.

His attention was distracted by Priscilla. She must go now, she said, but hoped to see him in the morning. As they discussed their arrangements, my heart warmed towards him, for he made her forget her shyness. Cheerful, affectionate and matter-of-fact, a little deferential as one might be to a popular aunt, he brought her out into the open. She found it safe (as it had not been with me) to speak above a whisper, and even gave him, as she left, an easy smile.

The party was beginning to break up. Gilbert had disappeared, but I knew I must soon, like Priscilla, let myself be whistled away. And then I suddenly saw Stephen standing in the doorway, looking about him; looking, I felt certain, for me.

Let him find me, I thought. I switched back my attention to Colin, who was urging me to ring up Lindsay, and bring her along for the rest of the celebrations.

'There's a vast supper laid out in mother's studio. Doesn't that tempt you?'

'Very much, but we are all busy. . . .'

A light hand touched my elbow. I turned expectantly. It was not Stephen.

'Amyas, my dear, I didn't know. . .'

He kissed my cheek. To the public, he represents the majesty of the law in its most august form; but I knew him first as a generous godfather, and then as a dear friend. The gentle, reedy voice which (out of misguided curiosity) I had once heard pronouncing a terrible sentence held for me the authentic tone of a lenient affection. He reproached me with having failed to come and see his hyacinths.

'And now I only find you, my dear, just when I am obliged to leave.'

He went on his way. I savoured the luxury of waiting for Stephen to come. I wanted to tell him how delightful I found his son; to scatter a little light scorn on poor Mr. Polting, who I suspected had given us, separately, the same lecture; to ask about Priscilla; and to exchange some gossip about what had gone on during the long interval since we last met.

We have never, in the general sense, confided in each other; but because I can talk to him so easily, I have fallen into the harmless and unexacting habit of saving

things up for him. These bits and pieces are of no great consequence, they are simply fragmentary impressions, isolated thoughts and conjectures, in which no one else would find the slightest value. They lie undisturbed in the backwaters of my memory for weeks or months, and then float lightly out in the stream of our conversation.

But this time, the occasion was snatched away. Stephen, already almost beside me, was halted by Amyas.

'If I am giving you a lift, my dear fellow, I shall have to take you off with me now.'

I just heard Stephen making some apology to Michael; I had turned my back on them all, in childish disappointment, preferring not to use the currency of formal regrets, and perhaps a hurried handshake. Let him go. If fate chose to be against me, I could be obstinate too. This day, or another, what did it matter? These were the terms of our moderate, long-standing friendship, and I was determined to keep to them. So I turned away, distrusting myself, alarmed by a novel sense of dramatic issues.

I assumed he would understand my regret, and share it; but one thought followed another, and I was confronted by a new possibility — that the kindness between us was entirely an invention of my own. I told myself brutally that I had no reason to think otherwise. Why should he take our ordinary, social exchanges at anything but face value?

I felt wretchedly depressed. Looking round, I saw that the whole party had collapsed. The scatter of people who remained seemed waiting to be tidied up, like the abandoned glasses, and the cigarette stub which was still smoking on a plate of salted almonds. It was high time we went home.

I had forgotten Claudia. On my way to dig out Gilbert

from the next room, she broke over my melancholy with a rush of welcome.

'Darling, how wonderful to see you, it seems like years. . .'

I bent my head to kiss her. Having once, on some chance occasion, embraced, we had never had reason to give up a habit that had become entirely meaningless. Certain of the distance between us, I touched her soft cheek, and caught a faint breath of her perfume, an echo of herbs, not flowers. As always, I was moved by her beauty, the beauty of a miniature being like a hummingbird, living at a speed beyond the rest of us; and wearing a rainbow of colour which, on a larger scale, would have been inexpressibly vulgar. She was in a state of vibrant excitement.

'I must talk to you . . .' but I think she only meant she must talk to somebody '. . . Will you come back with us? You can't? What a misfortune. But you must certainly come and have dinner with us sometime soon. Will you? You know Michael is living with us now, since Colin went off into the wilds. Stephen of course has ceaseless meetings and things — he's ratted on us this evening — but we manage to be quite gay. And Michael's work is improving enormously. . . .'

She did not wait for any answers. I had a grim picture of Stephen and Cohn being quietly pushed into the background. But perhaps it suited them. Colin, certainly, seemed fond of Michael.

'Have you seen him?' said Claudia. Of course, it was Michael she meant, her protegé, her adopted son.

'Yes, I've been talking to both of them,' I said. Claudia's expression hardened. 'I don't understand my own child,' she said impatiently, 'and this sloppy style of his irritates me. I suppose I've been a failure with him;

and perhaps that's why I enjoy so much being able to do something for Michael. I had such a struggle myself, I know what it is.'

My heart sank. I had heard the story of Claudia's struggle before. A year or two of appalling poverty was followed by a middle-class marriage, from her point of view equally disastrous. How can one paint in Woolwich Arsenal? she says, not so much disappointed, as embittered by having made a bad bargain.

But this time, the sulky shadow lifted from her face, and, sparkling again, she went on to talk of Michael with touching sympathy and understanding; and then with unaffected gratitude.

'You know, working with Michael has done something for me too. I'm full of new ideas, and disgusted with my own bad habits. I can see I've been repeating myself, just because that's what people order, but now I'm determined to break right away from it. Stephen thinks I'm insane, but he's quite helpful. We're planning to spend a few weeks out of London — Scotland or possibly Wales where he has to do some dreary visits for the firm. Then Michael and I can work, and Stephen and Colin can amuse each other.'

'But darling,' I heard myself say, 'you must choose Wales, and then you can all come and stay with us on the way down there.'

There was a split-second's pause. Would that interrupt the programme?

'I won't run you in for a lot of social life,' I assured her.

Claudia threw back her head and gave a bold, gay laugh.

'If that's a promise,' she said, 'there's nothing I would like better.'

I was able to tell Gilbert, as we drove home, that I had arranged the perfect week-end party for Lindsay.

Chapter 3

I H A D been looking forward to their visit, but today, when they are due to arrive in the afternoon and I have far too much to do, I was made to regret it. Gilbert protested that he had always thought they were coming tomorrow, and hurried through his breakfast with an air of blaming me for disorganizing the day. Lindsay came down late, and dawdled through her food, grumbling, distracting me from the necessary duty of planning my morning.

'What can I do with them, mother? Michael's all right, but the other one I don't even know. Besides, I ought to take Betsy out. She's getting much too fat.'

I was considering whether Mrs. Fletcher, who comes in from the village to give us some random help, could be trusted to keep her promise of dealing with all the meals. 'You ought to have thought of that earlier,' I told Lindsay.

'I was busy. Still, I suppose I'll have to cope. Do you suppose they play tennis?'

'I should think so.' I decided I must offer Mrs. Fletcher a bigger bribe — perhaps a joint of the pig we had just killed, to be paid on Tuesday.

'We could start off with tennis,' said Lindsay, with resignation. 'But we can't play tennis for four days. Why

on earth did you ask them for so long? We may all hate each other.'

'Give them a chance.'

'Oh, it's all right, I won't disgrace you. I can take Betsy out before breakfast, if the worst comes to the worst.'

I might just have time, I thought, to get down to the village before lunch. I implored Lindsay not to make a martyr of herself, and reminded her that she would probably find a lot to talk about with Michael and Claudia at any rate. She reached out and broke off a corner of toast, and ladled a spoonful of jam over it. As she tilted it into her mouth, a long drip fell down her chin.

'We don't really think much of her at the art school.'

'Oh?'

'I agree that she's very talented,' said Lindsay, with a portentous air, as if she were quoting, 'but it doesn't seem to have come to anything. I don't like her ideas. If I show her any of my work, which is the last thing I'm thinking of doing, she'll probably advise me to take up shorthand typing. I should resent that, from her.'

Silently, I cursed the art school. Lindsay always talks now as if there were no painters since Rembrandt; and I begin to doubt if they learn anything there besides this easy habit of contemptuous criticism. I reminded myself that it was bound to wear off in time, but I could not quite control the irritation it always rouses in me.

'You will wipe the jam off your face, won't you?' I said as I got up to go. A violent blush swept over her pale skin. She scrubbed her lips with her napkin, and would not look at me.

'I wish you wouldn't treat me like a baby. That's just what *she* will do, if I give her the chance.'

I was ashamed of myself for speaking so sharply, and furious with her for making me feel in the wrong. But I

had no time to bother with her, no time to do anything.

I hurried upstairs to help Nanny, perhaps hoping for a little peace and encouragement. But I found her pottering rather miserably round Claudia's bedroom, and the first thing I did was to scold her for having made up the big four-poster bed by herself.

'It's much too heavy for you. You ought to have waited.'

'I thought you were never coming,' she said haughtily. With her hand on the small of her back, like the poor old women in advertisements, she went to fetch some towels.

It was months since Nanny had had one of her moods; I could have cried with vexation. And then I found that the bed in the dressing-room had not been done.

'I didn't see that it was necessary,' said Nanny, with a knowing look at the four-poster, quite big enough to hold three people. That shocked me. I had forgotten that there was a ribald country woman under the starched apron.

'We can't tell what they like,' I said weakly. 'After all, it isn't as if they'd stayed here before.'

'She was here once as a girl. I remember her well, like a little gypsy, we put her in the night nursery.'

I had a fleeting vision of Claudia as a young girl, a strange young girl we none of us knew what to make of. 'She has changed,' I said.

'We none of us get younger,' said Nanny, resentfully, as if it were my fault. I escaped to the pantry, where I had already assembled great armfuls of leaves and flowers. I had thought Lindsay might help me, but now I was happier to be alone, gradually regaining my good-humour and self-possession.

It was the right cure. In a very little while I was humming to myself, as I sorted out a mixed bouquet for

every room in the house. I was soothed by the balm of a familiar, delightful occupation, and absorbed in my own inventiveness. I doubt if there is any pleasure so simple and so pure as this minor act of creation. Every arrangement is different, because it springs from a different fancy. One bunch grows round a particular flower, or a particular curve of stem; another from some chance combination of colours thrown out at you from the disordered heap; and certain vases make a mute appeal of their own. However ample your provision, you are driven out into the garden, searching for something . . . something . . . that you only identify when you see it.

I made several excursions from behind my thicket of foliage, my curtain of flower-scent, and the acrid smell of cut stalks. The sun was shining. I gave myself a present of a twig of lavender to keep in my pocket. No one was about but old Morse (who does the garden and the odd jobs, while young Morse, who is well over fifty, looks after the sheep). He was patiently hoeing, and chatting in a loud voice to the bees.

'What do you tell them?' I asked. He smiled all over his wrinkled face, well knowing he was not expected to answer. His conversations with the bees are too complicated to report; and perhaps, after all, it is just an excuse for talking to himself.

A sign of madness, they say; but I don't know why. Singing to oneself, which isn't so very different, is quite respectable. Lazy with the heat, I loitered back into the house, singing snatches of a madrigal, and rubbing a leaf of lavender between my fingers.

I had nine big vases of flowers, and several little ones for the bedrooms. It took me some time to find the right, the perfect, the ideal place for each one of them; and they were heavy to carry. When I took the last one in to the

office, I sat down with an ostentatious sigh. Gilbert looked up from his papers.

'Do you think it's going to be a perfectly horrible week-end?' I asked him. Now that I had recovered my spirits, I was able to say it.

'I don't see why,' said. Gilbert. 'I thought you'd been looking forward to it.'

'Everyone's in a wretched temper. Lindsay wishes I hadn't asked them.'

'She'll get over it. What are we going to do with them?'

'Nothing. That's Lindsay's complaint. I promised Claudia I wouldn't fix anything at all. And now I'm afraid they'll die of boredom.'

I received a cold, reflective glance. 'You never remember,' said Gilbert, 'that you always get worked up beforehand.'

'Do I?' I was really surprised. Probably it was true, but how had he noticed it? And why had he never thought it worth mentioning before? But I was pleased too. It is agreeable to feel that even when he seems most detached, he may yet be according me a secret share of his attention.

'I do like you, Gilbert. Tell me some more about myself.'

But that was asking too much. He gave me a sketchy smile. I remembered I was very busy, and took myself away. Gilbert does not really understand at all. If I am very much looking forward to something, a little anxiety sharpens the edge of expectation. And now I have conveyed to him, in a roundabout way, that I depended on him to help, I need not be too anxious.

The luxurious midday heat, penetrating the house, caressed me. I let my thoughts drift, absorbed in a poignant sense of physical existence, a vague sensitivity over my skin, and an easy delight in unhurried movement.

Chapter 4

IN the first pantomime I ever went to there was one scene which I can still reconstruct. It was a great cave, with a thousand stars glittering out of indigo shadows, and the undulating tendrils of sea-plants and plant-like monsters lit up in purple and crimson. 'They must be Holothurians,' Vivian whispered in my ear, and this name (which I naturally thought he had invented on the spur of the moment) far from reducing the mystery, exalted it. As we gazed, the lights grew colder, and brought into existence, on a patch of the stage where there had hitherto been nothing remarkable, except perhaps that the stars had not twinkled, a bevy of mermaids. These must have been the young women who had lately paraded in flesh-coloured tights and dinner jackets of American cloth; now they combed their seaweed hair over their opalescent bosoms, and swayed their scaley green tails. Another metamorphosis, and the remainder of the chorus rose out of obscurity in the guise of sword-fish, that is to say, wearing silver tights, and with a single tusk projecting from their close-fitting helmets. There was a dance, in which the mermaids expressed terror (so far as they were free to move) and the sword-fish, whose legs were left free by a design of tail which swept out behind them rather like a kangaroo's, stamped and butted the

air with their little round heads. The stars danced and winked like mad.

At the first hint of new texture in the lighting we were ready, this time, for something. We searched the stage. Where could a new wonder be hidden? All that we now saw had certainly been present from the start, and it seemed impossible that our sharp, ready eyes could be deceived again.

But we were taken by surprise. The back-lights went up, suddenly, creating a blue sky, cut by a jagged outline of rock, with the principal boy striking a noble attitude on the highest point. She burst into song. The lights wavered once more. The sword-fish vanished, then the mermaids, and finally the Holothurians. All that remained was Sinbad the Sailor, her thick legs planted on the mountainside, where stars grew like daisies, heaving her lungs out in a skull-cracking soprano.

She rather spoiled the show for us. We did not approve of girls pretending to be boys, and she came as a miserable climax to a thrilling spectacle. But we discussed for days the absorbing question of how it was done. Chloe was quite certain that all the characters crept up secretly under cover; Kathy chose not to inquire; and John claimed that he had been told the secret *under oath*. It was Vivian and I who experimented with sheets of coloured celluloid and glass, and discovered that we could blot out bits of a picture at will.

I have remembered it because, with eight people in the house, our stage is crowded, but the characters move continuously in and out of the lights. And nothing has turned out as I imagined. I hoped that Stephen and I would improve our acquaintance — but I have hardly had time to talk to him. I expected Claudia to be, as I have often seen her, brittle and aggressive, but she has

chosen instead to confide in me. Lindsay already treats Michael and Colin as if she had known them for years; and Gilbert, at the top of his form, has set himself out to be the perfect host.

I wish I really liked Claudia. Sometimes I do, but my feelings blow hot and cold. With the rest of my family, she has been a great success. Gilbert produces his best jokes for her, and Lindsay, with Michael's encouragement, looks like becoming another of her young disciples.

I thought at first she was trying to bewitch us all; but perhaps it is only a desperate struggle to forget that she is not happy with Stephen. There is something about her social manner which can only be described by the word *galant*, far-fetched as it sounds referring to someone who has, on the face of it, a comfortable and successful life. It is particularly marked with Stephen, for instance, when she lays a possessive hand on his arm, or, with an air of great good-humour, makes a sly dig at him.

I don't want to be unfair to her. It is only once or twice that she has made me shiver with embarrassment. But she always eclipses him. Even when I am partly charmed by her, I suffer on his behalf.

Otherwise she is the easiest and most appreciative of visitors. From the beginning, she made me feel she was happy to be here; and her first words, almost, were to ask me who had done the flowers. Then, when Lindsay, rather glumly and abruptly, asked the two young men what they wanted to do till tea-time, it was Claudia who broke the ice by recommending tennis. 'They both say they're paralysed — after driving all day with their legs wound round the luggage.'

As the rest of us sat drinking our tea in the bland shadow of the beeches, a close-fought game was finishing. Excited shouts and laughter reached us, softened by distance,

and merged in the rich harmony of high summer, with the broken chatter of birds, the soft hum of insects, and the burr of a harvester from the cornfield beyond the house.

Stephen looked happy, but I was already finding him oddly silent. Claudia talked for two. The whole place, she said, was wonderful; the scones (which Nanny had made us as a sign of contrition) were delicious; and the garden was perfect. Her quick, searching glance, her brilliant smile, gave sincerity and meaning to the conventional words of praise. I began to tell her some of my plans — a creamy prunus, perhaps, against the strong green of the yew; and somewhere, I wanted a quince. But should it be there, or there?

Her eyes followed my gesture. She reflected, seriously. 'Surely,' said Gilbert, 'we have more quinces than we can eat.' Claudia and I, with the same vision of lucent blossom above the green grass of spring, put this irrelevancy aside. Gilbert took no further interest.

I heard him ask Stephen about some current industrial controversy, and then, in his confident way, supplying his own answer. Stephen let him run on; and I felt faintly irritated. He is too gentle, I thought, looking at Claudia, who was suggesting yet another position for the new tree, where it could he seen from all the windows on this side of the house.

Gilbert paused, well satisfied that he had marched a neat set of arguments down the right road. Stephen threw in some question. Gilbert narrowed his eyes, laughed (delighted to be shrewdly challenged) and made a sweeping movement with his hands.

'Well, let's start again.' He took a cigarette and then, rather as an afterthought, held out the box to Stephen. 'What would you say is at the back of it?' He was still

holding the box, not noticing that it had been refused.

'It's no use,' said Claudia, with a disagreeable edge on her voice, 'Stephen has no vices.'

'Poor chap,' said Gilbert. Claudia laughed bitterly.

'But it's me you should be sorry for. Imagine what it's like. I smoke, drink, gossip, I'm wildly extravagant and fiendishly bad-tempered. And Stephen is a constant reproach to me on all counts.'

'You do us both an injustice, my dear,' said Stephen. He spoke in his light, ordinary tone, only very slightly exaggerated. There was an echo in it of my own dispassionate and judicious utterances, when Gilbert has made me look stupid and I would like to hit him. We are all too well-behaved. Claudia looked gratified, as if she had gained some advantage.

The tennis players joined us, evidently well pleased with themselves and with each other.

'It was a *grim* game,' said Lindsay, her eyes shining. 'Marvellous.'

On one side of her, Colin lay stretched on the grass in a loose, classic attitude, propped on one elbow; beyond her, Michael sat cross-legged, his neat head symmetrically balanced on his compact torso. As she turned from one to the other, I watched her vivid face, wondering which she liked best. It was impossible to guess. They had already become a trio, with mysterious, half-uttered jokes of their own.

'Tell us,' I begged, hearing her rare, low-pitched chuckle.

She looked up at me bewildered, the space of a generation between. 'It wasn't anything,' she said. 'They are just trying to teach me to improve my service.'

They hastened back to the court; Gilbert, now anxious to pick Stephen's brain, took him off to look round the

farm; and Claudia and I gave ourselves a last cup of tea. While I was pouring it, she turned a lingering, dreamy gaze at the house, the garden, and at me.

'Isn't it astonishing that we have known each other more than twenty years.'

'Only there was a long gap. I don't really know why.'

'It's quite simple,' said Claudia. 'I never saw Vivian again after he brought me to that disastrous dance.'

'Oh, dear, were you miserable?'

'You needn't worry,' Claudia said, 'it was a long time ago, and I've got over it. I don't suppose you noticed me particularly. You were very much taken up; I watched you with envy.'

It was the dance where Gilbert and I had got engaged; but I had noticed her. We called her 'that odd girl of Vivian's', and she wore a full, waisted dress of inky-green satin, which might now look romantic, but seemed then wholly barbarous. I was dressed in a shapeless tumble of pink net, which I try hard not to think about when I remember that dazzling evening.

'You were all rosebuds with any amount of dew on them,' Claudia went on. 'I pretended to despise you, but I was horribly lonely. I thought I was being a load on Vivian. He introduced me to your other brother, who was correct but reluctant.'

'John, of course.'

'Obviously, I wasn't his type. I met his girl afterwards in the cloakroom, and she gave me a safety pin to hold my shoulder-strap out of sight. She meant it very nicely, no doubt, but I detested her.'

'Probably we all did, although I don't remember which girl she was. John's girls have always been the same — stupid and condescending.'

'That was it. She improved my appearance, and

depressed my spirits. I stayed hiding in the cloakroom. Vivian said he tried to find you to come and wheedle me out.'

'I wish I'd known.'

'Oh, it didn't *matter*. I plucked up courage in the end. But I was obviously a disappointment to him. I never even really knew why he invited me.'

I suspected Vivian had thought we all needed shaking up; and, recognizing in Claudia a stubborn and rebellious spirit akin to his own, had taken for granted that her nerves were as tough. He had no mercy on his own terrors. On the contrary, his life was spent in seeking opportunities for reviving them, and proving his own courage.

'Someone told me he did some gun-running in the Spanish war,' said Claudia.

'He never admitted it to me, but it's quite likely. He had a cargo boat of his own. Then he prospected for mineral deposits in Alaska. It was always something new.'

'I wonder if he would ever have settled down.'

I thought, never. The spectacle of John, with his solid business growing like a lump of coral, layer after layer, prohibited it; and John himself, protected by that calcined structure, and by all the shock-absorbing devices that money can buy, never succeeded in shielding himself from Vivian's contempt. He was furious when Vivian refused a job with him (giving the reason that he didn't choose to get fat); but I saw his pale, puzzled blue eyes turn sorrowfully to the curve in his own waistcoat.

John escaped finally to a spur of the business that had started to form in South Africa, where he found himself a pretty and conventional wife, turned out of the same mould as the girls he used to bring to our dances. Vivian remained on the run, wild with enthusiasm for each of his

projects in turn, but not forgetting to note the ups and downs of John's companies.

'I never understood him,' said Claudia, sighing. 'Did you know, he suddenly appeared in my bedroom in the middle of the night?'

'I had no idea,' I said. 'What an uproar there would have been if anyone had heard him.'

'It wasn't what you think. Apparently he planned to cheer me up by reading me *The Ancient Mariner*.'

'And did he?'

'No. I threw him out.'

'Poor Vivian.'

'I was sorry afterwards.'

Claudia smiled sadly. We had almost conjured up between us the ambiguous, tormenting, romantic figure of Vivian. It seemed we had both loved him, suffered his incalculable cruelty, and the odd, sudden moods of affection that so often came as a surprise.

'You are not in the least like him,' said Claudia, 'except perhaps for something about the forehead and eyes.'

She proposed that she should do a quick sketch of me. 'Look,' she said, 'I'm tearing up all your daisies. My hands need employment.'

She was already looking at me in a new way, as if I were a bowl of fruit, or a boot on a chair. That made me laugh. 'I shan't flatter you,' Claudia told me severely. It was an engaging offer, brusque and refreshing. I told her I would willingly lend her my face, and she could do what she liked with it.

We moved to the mellow, slanting light of the drawing-room. I sat on the window-seat, against a striped curtain, and did my darning, while Claudia worked in silence, every movement of her small, broad hands precise and confident. She was using a pinkish crayon, and I won-

dered if I still looked to her like a silly rosebud. Then my thoughts strayed back to the dance, and to the night following it, when I was sleeping in a daze of happiness, and Vivian crept along the passage, and Claudia lay awake, sorry she had sent him away.

'I think you had better stop darning,' she said, 'and talk to me. Your face is beginning to look like an old sock.'

'What shall I talk about?'

'Anything that interests you, and doesn't need a long answer. My best sitters usually talk about their husbands.'

'And do husbands talk about their wives? I've always wondered.'

'Not quite so much; but more than you'd think. Of course, I don't have to listen.'

'What appalling secrets you must hear.'

'Yes, just like the hairdresser and the masseuse. But you look . . .' she ducked sideways, and found a new angle '. . . like one of the lucky ones.'

'I am. So there's hardly anything to say about it, and certainly very little to show for it.'

'A nice house,' said Claudia (she was giving me, in an off-hand way, a choice of subjects), 'a delightful daughter, and a devoted husband who gets shamelessly spoilt.'

'He needs it,' I said.

'Why?' said Claudia absently. I tried to tell her about Gilbert's grim childhood, his elderly and ailing parents, the guardian who (hating and distrusting intelligence) refused to supplement his scholarship; how Gilbert lived through Oxford on a small loan, economizing on his meals, his clothes, and his friendships; how my godfather befriended him while he was reading for the bar; and how he set himself to acquire the social confidence which he saw other people enjoying as a birthright.

'And he succeeded, Claudia, in everything. He was so

determined. He has to succeed. He can't bear to think there is anything wrong anywhere.'

'So you're still interested in him,' said Claudia. I could not tell if it was a question or a statement. She got up, and leaned her drawing with its face against the wall.

'Well, that's worked; I've finished. We can look at it in a minute.' She lit a cigarette and drew at it impatiently. Then fidgeted about the room.

'Aren't you pleased?' I said. She shrugged her shoulders, looking sulky. But she came over and sat down in the other corner of the window.

'I wish I knew what it was like,' I said, 'I mean, creating something.'

'It's hell,' she exclaimed, so savagely that it made me jump. 'Oh, I don't mean the hard work, or the endless mistakes that have to be put right, or the bad habits that have to be cured, or the tricks you have to play with yourself to bring about one moment of sincere vision. What's appalling is perpetual *doubt*. And there is no way of judging what you've done.' She stubbed out her half-finished cigarette on the window-sill, and immediately got up to get herself another. 'I suppose,' she went on, as she walked across the room, 'one might have some confidence in posterity; but after all one never hears what it says. So you go on for ever asking the same question, *will it do?* It's the same for any sort of artist. All the evidence — paintings, writings, music, a piece of acting — is always ambiguous; everything depends on how you look at it, and who it is looking. And yet a painting isn't really finished until someone has looked at it. I daresay a poem isn't written until its read. And actors certainly need an audience.'

She stopped very suddenly, as if she had run into a new thought. She was standing quite close to me, looking down

at me and frowning. I hardly think she saw me. Swept away by her vehemence, I waited for the next words; and, as I waited, I was caught by a treacherous following wave, of fear.

'Stephen,' she said. Yes, it was fear I felt. I did not want to know. But her voice, lighter and colder, reassured me. 'Stephen doesn't know how lucky he is. Every week his factory turns out so many actual switch-gears which actually work. If there are a lot of them, and they work properly, and people are clamouring for them all over the world, he knows he has done well. For *us*,' she threw back her head arrogantly, 'it's always much more difficult.'

'He must understand that,' I said.

'I don't think so,' said Claudia. She repeated it again slowly and scornfully. 'I don't think so. Have you ever heard him play the piano?' I shook my head. 'It's quite extraordinary,' she said. 'He can get all he wants out of playing to himself — that's all there is to it. When he comes to the last note, it's finished; he's done what he intended. No questions, no heart-searchings, no doubts.'

Her own intensity kept on getting the better of her. Again, she tried to curb it, with a shaky laugh. 'He plays quite well, you know.'

Again, I hoped that she had come to the end of what she had to say. I was on the point of getting up, when she suddenly clenched her fists, and said:

'Oh, I am so *bored* with Stephen, I can't endure it.'

I only gave a quick gasp of horror. 'Are you shocked?' she said smiling. 'I suppose you would be.'

'It's such a waste, Claudia, such a shame. . . .

'Yes, *that*,' she said contemptuously, 'of course it is. What of it? There hasn't been a sudden or major crisis, it's just a chronic condition that never gets better or worse. Stephen lives inside his shell, and I live inside

mine. Just a nice friendly arrangement for keeping out of each other's way.'

'It sounds quite horrible.'

Claudia now decided to sit down quietly beside me, and began to talk in a detached, practical way that made my flesh creep. 'It suits him,' she said, 'because he's above all things self-contained. So far as I know, he's quite happy. But I've got completely bogged down, and I think I shall have to make a break. . . .

'Oh, my dear . . .' I was not so much reproaching her, as simply imploring her to stop. But she went on as if she were disposing of an argument.

'No, you're different,' she said. 'You've made a success of a conventional life, but I haven't got it in me. And now that Colin's off our hands, I'm very much inclined to set up separate establishments.'

'But what does Stephen think?'

She explained to me, as if she were discussing some simple business arrangement, that it seemed more practical to find him a flat first, and then suggest that he should move in to it. 'And I think it's kinder, don't you?' she said.

'I don't know what to think.' That, at least, was quite true. In the confusion of my feelings there were no landmarks, only a vague sense of grief and outrage. 'I'm sorry,' I said. That was true too; I was even sorry for her.

'It's all right,' she said, 'I don't need sympathy. I just wanted to talk, like the Ancient Mariner.'

She jumped up very briskly, picked up her drawing-board, propped it on a chair, and stood back to look. I came and stood beside her. She went on staring at her sketch, for the moment, I felt, quite unconcerned about what I might think of it. It was, like everything she does,

supremely accomplished, and at the same time, more subtle and living than I had expected. It gave me a shock of surprise and pleasure, in the same way that a sudden burst of sunshine, or a gust of wind sharpens the sense of physical existence to ecstacy.

I stood outside myself, and the blurred, fluid substance of the self I live with, was focused in pure and delicate lines. There was I, my level gaze revealing no impress of the shifting and doubtful images which take lodging in my mind, my mouth unsmiling, but touched with a kind of expectant irony.

'Well,' said Claudia, 'I can draw.'

'It's lovely,' I said, moving back into my own world, 'but I don't think it's like me.'

'Very likely not. It was just something I thought I saw.'

Chapter 5

SINCE that odd hour of bizarre intimacy with Claudia, I have felt wretchedly shy with Stephen, as I might be about meeting someone whose pocket I had picked. This morning, I walked round the garden with the two of them, but I found I was only able to talk to Claudia, even on the innocent topic of flowering shrubs.

Claudia reminded him that he had promised to stretch a canvas for her. Although he has told me he loves doing odd jobs with his hands, that took me by surprise. I thought of our postmistress who, after enduring years of cruel unhappiness with her husband, remarked quite casually to me, when the separation order was made, that she was going to miss the cup of tea he always made for her first thing. The postmistress at least knew that she did not only stand to gain; Claudia believes that she has nothing to lose.

Today they quarrelled. Stephen has a professional call to make in these parts, and had fixed it for this evening. For some reason, Claudia was annoyed. 'It's a discordant note,' she said. I took it for idle teasing, but when he was not persuaded, by these means, to change his plans (and indeed, why should he?) she chose to make an issue of it. There was a stupid argument, in which he grew more obstinate and she more enraged. Yet, as her voice rose

and he answered her more curtly, it was quite obvious that they had fallen out by accident, about nothing. Stephen could have fixed his visit at any time, and Claudia has no real interest in keeping him with her. She only wants him to do as she says.

It is all very painful for me. More so, now, because I have become involved with her. It is immaterial whether I like her or approve of her. I have not been asked for sympathy of the heart or the mind, but I have accepted, with her confidences, a more primitive fellow-feeling, like an involuntary current in the nerves. In the company of our two husbands, there is a wicked sense of complicity between us. Because of it, I am deprived of the feeling I once had for Stephen; he is becoming the remote, indifferent figure of Claudia's imagination. But at the same time, I find myself looking at Gilbert with sharper eyes. The conventional happiness which Claudia pretends to envy, is a much more complex affair than I have ever admitted. The effort it continuously takes (even my stage-fright before the week-end was partly an elaborate method of asking Gilbert to be helpful) makes me tired, in the ordinary, vulgar sense that I am left with a deposit of rage and resentment. Claudia has unwittingly stirred these depths, and let loose a poisonous emanation. Although Gilbert remains agreeable and charming, I feel at odds with him, because I am conscious that his amiability is unreliable, often short-lived, and dependent on my own ingenuity and vigilance. If anything goes wrong with the food, if he discovers that old Morse has interpreted some precise instructions in a peculiar fashion of his own, if Conrad (who is lunching here tomorrow) bores him — if any one of a thousand small misfortunes happens — Gilbert is liable to disappear for the rest of the week-end.

Disillusion has been creeping through me all day. He has an old-fashioned and ceremonious way of calling me, occasionally, 'my dear', which ordinarily never fails to touch me. In the language of those cheap books, with a varnished picture on the cover of semi-final stages of rape, and nothing within but pious and timid sentiments, it 'plucks at my heartstrings'. But when I heard it today, I only thought him condescending.

'My dear,' he said smiling, benevolently handing off some impulsive remark I had thrown into a serious argument. There was a brief pause. Then he turned to Stephen. 'When I was a junior office boy in the coalition. . .'

'He means, under secretary,' Lindsay whispered to Michael. This little affectation of Gilbert's still strikes her as amusing; I have heard it too often. If only he were not so self-conscious about his achievements, I should enjoy them so much more.

We were all dawdling on the lawn, waiting for lunch to be ready. Claudia was poring over the local paper; Colin lay on his stomach, chivvying some minute creature up a blade of grass. Lindsay dropped down beside him.

'Do you know all about beetles, too?' she said.

'Almost nothing. Too little.'

'It must be so dull,' said Claudia, without looking up, 'learning more and more about less and less.'

Colin caught my eye and grinned. He had just been telling me a little about his work, so limited and specialized, but still a window on the world he sees with passionate curiosity — the world of innumerable, interrelated societies of living things.

'What extraordinary things you can buy in this part of the world,' said Claudia. 'Do any of you want a French-speaking parrot?'

'What colour is it?' said Michael.

'Unspecified.' Claudia looked up at him, screwing her eyes against the sun, with quizzical affection. 'Are you thinking of training it to sit on your wrist, like a falcon?'

'Oh, do,' said Lindsay. We all laughed. I could see that Gilbert was trying to remember some of the dockside swear-words he had been proud of knowing in his youth. Claudia forestalled him.

'It's described, rather strangely, as suitable for children,' she said. 'Perhaps it recites La Fontaine.' She sounded bored, her fantasy already enfeebled. Gilbert looked at his watch. Lindsay complained of ravenous hunger. I glanced at Stephen, and caught the vanishing point of a distant, wondering gaze, unrelated to anything done or said, which must have been fixed on me.

'Oh, listen to this,' cried Claudia. 'They're showing *A Night at the Opera*. . . .

Instantly, a transformation came over us. One could tell at once that Lindsay and Colin had not seen it. They looked on with puzzled faces, while the rest of us, struggling with laughter, recalled in broken sentences the funniest moments.

'Isn't that the one,' I said, 'where they all crowd into . . .'

'And two poached eggs,' said Michael, throwing his head back.

'And the *beards*,' Claudia exclaimed, her voice rising in a ridiculous squeak.

'What are they talking about?' said Lindsay to Colin. 'Have they all gone mad?'

Gilbert was making rending motions with his hands, and stiffening his face into solemnity.

'Oh, and the *contract*,' cried Claudia. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

‘And the scenery coming up and down. . . .’

‘And the bench in the park. . . .’

‘And the way they move the beds. . . .’

‘Stark, staring mad,’ said Colin to Lindsay. Michael was playing an imaginery harp, and Stephen was tapping out a tune on his knee with long, straight fingers.

‘The party of the party of the first part,’ said Gilbert. I was laughing till it hurt. Claudia waved her arms in despair.

‘I can’t go on,’ she gasped, ‘it will kill me.’

‘When I saw the Marx brothers in Aberdeen,’ said Stephen, ‘nobody laughed at all.’

‘But what *happens*?’ said Lindsay.

‘Well,’ Michael began, collecting himself.

‘Don’t spoil it for her,’ said Stephen.

‘You shall all see it this evening,’ said Gilbert. Claudia looked at me inquiringly. ‘Would you enjoy that?’

I told her I should like nothing better. ‘Early supper,’ said Gilbert, ‘and we can pick up a drink and sandwich afterwards.’

The prospect pleased us all; and I am looking forward to a long stretch of time when I need not worry about Claudia, or Gilbert, or myself.

Chapter 6

It's no use making plans. The one person in the household that I had not considered suddenly became of the greatest importance. I found that Nanny was ill.

I was ashamed of myself for not having noticed. I knew she had been peevish and difficult, but it was not until we were laying the supper-table together, and I saw how slowly and clumsily she was moving, that I thought to ask her if anything were the matter. Even then, I spoke out of impatience, prepared to be brisk with her, expecting some obscure pointless grumble, the rare symptom of her black moods.

But she did not immediately answer; and I looked at her more carefully. She was setting a single glass on the table in an uncertain fashion, as if the surface were indistinct or just out of reach.

I put down a pile of forks, and went and took her by the shoulders. She tried to shake herself free, but not before I had seen that she was almost weeping. As she turned her head, a single tear crept past her thin, pale eyelashes.

'You must let me blow my nose,' she said, with a sad attempt at a smile. 'I'm all right. It's just this pain I've been having. . . .'

'What pain? Where?' She leaned against the sideboard as if she were hardly able to stand, her face crumpled like

a sobbing child, breathing harshly through drawn lips. I pushed up a chair, and almost forced her into it.

'I'll get Lindsay to see about supper,' I said, 'and then I'll put you to bed.'

Obstinately, she struggled to her feet again. 'I'd rather look after myself, if you don't mind. It's only something's disagreed with me; and I can't enjoy my food like I used to. You get on with your supper and look after your visitors. I'll be better in bed I daresay. . . .'

She gave my hand a quick squeeze, recapturing for an astonishing moment the benign, protective, autocratic presence of my childhood. Then she hobbled to the door.

As soon as supper was organized, I filled a hot-water bottle and followed her upstairs. She had taken off her dress and was sitting, shivering, in her wicker armchair. In a sort of insensate sympathy, it creaked gently as each tremor passed through her. I put my hand on her shoulder.

'Dearest, you must let me help you.'

'If you'd just put the bottle in the bed, and then find me my nightdress out of the drawer, the second one, there.'

Her nightdresses are the same as they always were, fine, well-washed flannel, with modest frills at the neck and wrist, and a narrow piece of insertion round the placket. I took the top one off its neat pile, and held it to warm by the fire. Spread out like a tent, it looked as if it could cover two or three people. I remember how large, and solid, and comfortable she had always appeared when she got up for us in the night. Now, I thought, it is my turn.

I was very worried; but she could tell me little about what she felt like. 'This pain' had been with her for a few days, or weeks it might be; it was just something she'd

been living with, somewhere round about in her stomach, not very bad, it hadn't woken her once she was asleep, not more than once or twice, and a little rest would be sure to settle it. That was all she could say; but she looks wretched, and it is not like her to give up in the middle of a job of work.

And the more resolutely she asserts that there is nothing the matter, the more clearly I hear her doubts. Even the clean nightdress is a pitiful sign that she sees herself approaching, with due decency and order, a period of sickness; and is reluctantly preparing to expose her stiff, wizened body to the sight of strangers.

'Let me help you undress,' I said. I wanted to do all I could for her, and knew it would come easy and natural, since we are bound by a steady and consistent affection. But she is proud and shy like a young girl whose body has always been her own secret; and she would not take my help. 'I can still look after myself,' she said.

On my way downstairs, I rang up and left a message for the doctor. Gilbert, searching round the house for me, found me at the telephone, and stood restlessly at my elbow.

'Surely that's hardly necessary,' he broke out, the moment I put down the receiver. 'It must be just some slight upset.'

How he loathes illness, sorrow, suffering of any kind. It does not exist, he says to himself, hide it, keep it away from me. To that unspoken wish I could not find an answer.

'If we're going,' he went on, 'we ought to have started ten minutes ago.'

Lindsay called from the hall that everyone was ready. I told Gilbert there was no need to spoil his evening. 'Enjoy yourself,' I said, out of empty habit; and waved to them all from the landing, waving away Claudia's polite

regrets, and Lindsay's protestations that she should stay at home instead.

Now Nanny is dozing; and I am sitting alone, waiting for the doctor to come. One moment, I tell myself I am making mountains out of molehills; the next, I am clutched by a cold dread which makes it a labour to breathe. The rest of them, I suppose, are laughing till they cry.

Part Two

Chapter 1

THE doctor, who is too much of a friend to scold me for bringing him out on a fool's errand, can find nothing at present to worry about. Indeed, Nanny looked better at once for seeing him; and insisted on getting up tomorrow. That, he said, looking at her over the top of his glasses and wagging a stumpy finger, depends on how she behaves.

He is a great favourite of hers, ever since he presented Lindsay with a jar of tadpoles, and told her the measles would be cured by the time their tails fell off. Nanny, at her wits end for new devices to amuse a child of five, was grateful and impressed; and still quotes it (since the time worked out exactly right) as an example of successful treatment.

Now that she is ill, he speaks to her too in his blunt and buoyant style as if she were a child. Perhaps that is the secret of his popularity, for I could see her reviving, preening herself a little, delighted to be gently bullied. As he left, he patted her shoulder.

'Now you do as you're told,' he said, 'and stay there till I get round in the morning.'

That frightened me. I had left them alone for a few minutes and I thought it might mean that he had found some serious symptoms. But he reassured me.

'She's likely to have a good night's rest,' he said, 'and so can you. How's the family? I haven't seen Lindsay lately, but my daughter tells me she's grown a very handsome young woman.'

'I think so — but I might be prejudiced.'

As I opened the front door, the wind pushed it back against me. The weather was beginning to break up. Above the hills, where the moon, not yet risen, threw a pale, dispersed radiance, a great cloud moved across like a shutter. I could hear the trees stir and sigh, and I smelt the sharp, storm-laden air. A few minutes later, the first drops slapped against the window, and upstairs a door began to rattle on a loose latch.

Nanny was fast asleep. When I shut her window, she stirred and muttered but did not wake. I went round the other rooms on that side of the house — the dressing-room immediately below, and the big bedroom. Claudia had left a scarf on the window-seat. When I opened the door, the wind snatched the fine, bright silk, and shot it to the floor.

I picked it up and folded it, and then stood at the window, watching the golden reflection of the room light on threads of rain.

Why should I have felt suddenly so lonely? I have never feared solitude and often long for more time to spend by myself. But I found myself listening for the mysterious noises that an old house gives out from unknown points of strain, as people sigh in their sleep; and I walked downstairs very softly as if I were avoiding notice. It was Vivian who said the house was haunted; I had refused to believe it. But even when the sheeted dead have become stage figures only, very difficult to take quite seriously, these ghostly noises can still pull at other metaphysical dreads.

It is sometimes possible to keep them in order by

practical means. I retired to the drawing-room, shut the night out behind the heavy curtains, and lit the fire. With a long evening in front of me, I was determined to settle down to comfort and pleasure. It had become much colder since the rain so, while the fire burnt up, I wrapped myself in the long, black cloak, lined with tartan, that my mother used to wear in the pony-trap. I piled a number of books on the sofa beside me — a thriller, all blood and wisecracks, a new novel, with a set of characters who wilt rather than suffer, a scandalous biography, and the parish magazine on which, no doubt, the vicar will want my comments. I picked them up in turn; and found nothing to beguile me. I was still chilly, and uneasy and empty-hearted. Yet I knew myself to be fortunate in so many ways and I was ashamed of the depression that mounted up within me the moment I was off my guard.

I knelt in front of the fire, and worked the bellows till all the logs were flaming, and the resinous sap hissed from the cut edges. Then, still restless, I pulled my cloak closer round me, and went out into the hall to listen, in case my invalid was stirring. No sound. I was still alone.

The big bell on the hall table reminded me that she had no way of rousing us if she needed anything. I took the bell by the clapper, then went upstairs once more. It was as much for my own sake as for hers; I rather hoped she would be awake, and that I might sit with her for a while. But she was still sleeping, and more deeply and quietly now. There was nothing more for me to do.

I spent a little while in my room brushing my hair. It occurred to me that I might be better in bed. The evening was over.

Was it from my bedroom that I first heard music? I can't remember. There is some mystery about how I

knew another evening was beginning. But when I went down to tidy my books, the shadow at the turn of the stairs did not press so close; and then I was certain that someone was playing. I could not recognize a melody; it was muffled by our thick walls, and lost in the skirmishing wind; but a few distinct notes brought life to my solitude, like the small, sweet cries of birds.

When I opened the door, Stephen was still sitting at the piano, but not playing. 'Well?' he said, and came across the room to me.

'It's all right,' I told him. I went up to the fire, and slipped the cloak off my shoulders. I had not dared to expect him; and, if I had, might have felt also some apprehension because of the strangeness and distance which had been between us. But astonishment put me at ease; I laughed delightedly at my own confusion.

'I don't understand,' I said. 'Weren't you with the others? Oh, no, of course, you had someone to visit. How quick you've been.'

Stephen smiled down at me. 'I didn't make it,' he said. 'I turned round and came back again, in case there was something I could do.'

'That was kind. But there is nothing. I'm afraid you've been dragged back on false pretences.'

'I like being here,' he said.

I thought he looked tired, and made him sit in the deepest chair with a single light behind him. Then I gave him a drink, hoping he would not notice (although I don't know that it would have mattered) that my hand was very slightly trembling. I was tired too, very ready to take refuge in the peaceful circle of warmth and mild light. I curled myself up on the sofa with a cushion behind my head.

'And now you can tell me,' I said, 'everything you've

been doing since I last saw you. What happened to that lonely young inventor you discovered last year? And how is the new factory going. Tell me. . . .'

I never know why it's supposed to be rude to talk shop. I can't do it myself, because I haven't a trade. But I love listening to it. The real bores are the people who persist in chattering about things they have never really taken any interest in themselves; and it is ridiculous to bar the very subject which may well interest them above all others. Stephen needed no encouragement. Bit by bit, I began to see how he filled up his days, finding practical means to make the work run smoothly, and fostering the intangible force of confidence.

'But I'm talking too much about myself,' he said.

'Oh, no, you haven't told me nearly enough yet. It's still too abstract. I want to know how big the factory is, and whether your office gets any sun, and if you have pictures on the wall, or only charts. Does your secretary arrange a vase of flowers sometimes, and can people come and see you whenever they like? Tell me everything.'

He answered my questions in order. 'Now,' I said, 'I can picture you sitting there.'

One of the reasons I like him so much is that I always feel free to say whatever comes into my head. With most people, that is impossible. The moment you relax your guard, and move off the well-worn tracks that habit has made safe, you see them immediately turning bored or uneasy. Even with Gilbert I can only give myself a sense of freedom by recognizing the boundaries at a distance and keeping well inside them. It is a process which is not deliberate from moment to moment; thought is quick, and can safeguard a certain sense of spontaneity. Nor did I, with Stephen, deliberately feel my way towards

a larger horizon. I only let myself go and then found that I had taken one or two significant steps.

I had made an admission. Anything I said earlier, perhaps out of a feeling warmer than ordinary politeness and friendship, might still have been read in those terms; I had only committed myself to something that was known already. But now I had gone a little further; and I had frightened myself, like a child, playing some wild game with an indulgent parent, who adds a final touch of extravagance, and then abruptly realizes that this may be the breaking point. I was afraid I was being tiresome. It was one thing to tell him I was happy in his presence, and quite another to disclose a tenderness that might follow him in absence.

I was prepared to retreat, to ask if he would play 'Piquet' (our favourite game at the moment), or to play to me. I might even have suggested that it was no longer worth waiting .up for the others. But that was not necessary. He looked slowly round the room.

'I've always wondered what sort of a house you lived in down here.'

'Is it what you expected?'

'Oh, it's impossible to guess. I only knew you would have made it very much your own.'

'Do you think so? I sometimes feel it's the other way round. I haven't tried to do anything special with it, it's about all I can manage to replace things when they wear out. And the few pieces of furniture I never really liked are going to last for ever. All the same, I wouldn't care to live in a room that seems to come straight out of an exhibition.'

'Have you lived here all your life?'

'Not quite. When my grandfather was alive, I only visited. We were here for the first Christmas I really

remember. Then we came here to live. When I married, I thought I'd left it for good, I saw myself condemned to London for ever. But my parents died young, and none of my brothers and sisters wanted to uproot themselves, so if Gilbert and I hadn't come here, it would have been sold. Lindsay was seven then, and we were still hoping we might have some more children; and I couldn't face letting it go. I suppose I have always thought of it as my home.'

I was not looking at him while I spoke; perhaps because I hesitated to meet his eyes. There are some dreams where, desiring only to prolong them, and incapable of controlling the images which are gathering to destroy themselves, one seems to attempt, even in sleep, a sort of withdrawal, a disavowal almost of the sense of pleasure, in the hope that it will not burn itself out so quickly. So through a long pause I stared at the pulsing, purple shadows in the heart of the fire, and did not turn my head.

There are so many kinds of silence; the hollow gap into which, out of nervousness, one throws any distraction that comes to hand; the comfortable, relaxed, familiar silences where no effort has to be made; the wary silence of curiosity; and the bitter silence of hatred. This was another silence, rich and sweet and happy. Yet it became unendurable. I was afraid we should find no way of breaking it.

I shifted my position, gave him a quick glance (yes, he was still watching me) and then, believing he was about to speak, and fearing some new and difficult turn in our conversation, I gave it a direction of my own.

'This room was quite different in the old days. All the chairs had petticoats down to their ankles — it was one of those chintzes with parrots on them, and I thought they might bite my legs. There were photographs all over the

walls, and garlands of roses in between. And the mantelpiece was crowded with ornaments. But. I must show you one thing that has been here always.'

I took him over to the Victorian, glass-topped table, where my mother kept her 'treasures', a collection which included anything, so long as it was small, from a porcelain patch-box with a most exquisite wreath of tiny flowers, to a handful of cowries we once collected at the seaside.

'It's the silliest arrangement in the world; but I'm keeping it for my grandchildren. All children are bewitched by it. When I wasn't tall enough to see over the top, I used to go methodically round the glass panels at the side, trying to get glimpses of my favourite objects. It used to be locked then, but the key vanished years ago.'

I lifted the lid and took out my grandfather's big gold watch. It has no dial, only filigree figures, to mark the hours, and the works are visible. In the centre, a quarter-inch man stands with a featherweight hammer raised. 'Listen.'

When I pressed my thumb on the repeater, there was first a whirling noise, like birds rustling through a reed-bed. Then a momentary check; and then the purest, most melodious note I have ever heard. One, two, three, four, five. . . .

'It thinks it's midnight.'

Six, seven, eight, nine. . . .

I held it out to Stephen so that he could see the little blacksmith beating on his anvil. We watched him together.

Ten, eleven, twelve. . . .

The last crystalline chime, falling on silence, released me. I had been standing there, my shoulder almost touching Stephen's, unable to move. I had done nothing, it seemed, to relieve the extraordinary sense of weight

and pressure which so captivated and disquieted me. On the contrary, my mind was invaded by an overwhelming realization of something I had obviously known, but hitherto regarded lightly. We had never before been alone together.

As soon as I moved away, I was able to think I was making too much of it. Chance had given me one evening of unexpected happiness. Let that be enough. At least I knew that he had been happy too. We went back to the fire as if, by mutual consent, we were keeping a distance. For my further reassurance, I took his chair, with my back to the light, leaving him to take my place.

'Tell me some more,' he said.

'Well, there was an upright piano just behind where you're sitting, and a revolving bookcase which creaked when it was spun round, and an oil lamp on a complicated brass standard. There would never have been a fire at this time of year. My mother thought it a crime. I remember this room being rather cold. And it had the oddest smell — a strong smell of brass, and of frayed silk (do you know it? a little dusty?) which must have come from the pleated panel behind a lot of rose-wood fretwork on the front of the piano. That's something I don't understand. Is it that when you're three feet high or so your nose is much more sensitive, or that you're always climbing on the furniture and putting your face against the things you touch, and drawing it all in through every sense you've got? Because whenever I think of this house in my grandfather's time, the smells are what I remember. Have you been in Gilbert's office? It's all business-like and sterilized now. But when it used to be called the study, it was very cosy, and smelt of oil lamps and dogs. The dining-room was the least nice, that had a smell of horse hair off the chairs, which were so slippery it wasn't

easy to sit in them when your feet were off the floor; and they scratched your nose when you knelt against them for family prayers. Then the pantry smelt of zinc and tea-leaves, the bathroom of hot-water cans, and the attic — oh, it depended what you were looking for — the dressing-up-box had a smell all its own, of metal brocade, and velvet, and leather — but when you first went in you just smelt apples.'

I came to a sudden stop, feeling all at once tired, impatient and strangely at a loss. 'Do you really like listening to all this nonsense? You mustn't let me keep you up gossiping later than you want; the great thing about a holiday is to go to bed early, and have long nights of lovely sleep.'

I began to collect my books. He leaned his head to read the titles, and I sat down, for a moment, beside him.

'Do you read in bed? I put some books in your room, but I don't know if they're what you like. You ought to look around. Or will you have one of these?'

I don't think he was listening. Nor was I paying much attention to what I was saying. I had pushed the books to one side, and let my hand lie idle on my knee.

I must have known it. When his hand came lightly down on mine, it cannot have been astonishment that raced through me like a paralysing drug. That was what I first thought. Why else should I feel that everything had come to a standstill — unless it was a last desperate impulse to run from a climax I had already seen, almost too clearly, in imagination. It was an irrelevant and momentary impulse only; any strength it may have had was lost hours ago. It gave one last flicker, depriving me it seemed, for a second or two, of the use of all my senses. Then I put my head down on his shoulder, simply because I could think of nothing else to do.

He put his arm round me, and kissed my eyelids, first one and then the other. I felt his hand moving down my side, feeling its way. Because of a kind of shyness, leading me to hide the ecstacy on my naked face, I did not stir; and then a trail of light kisses along the line of my hair kept me waiting for another, and another.

In the ordinary business of living, even periods of the greatest happiness (and my life has been happy) are tempered by a host of minor frictions, unregarded sacrifices and disappointments. We live in compromise, creatures that at best learn only by trial and error, and to act beyond our strength and skill. Because this condition is so normal and so permanent, to resent or struggle is almost the identifying sign of a spoiled, peevish or morbid nature. The rest of us are more capable of taking the rough with the smooth, and by and large can accept the fact that one goes with the other.

But what a reversal it is when the fact itself is challenged; when one's whole being, spirit and body, blessed with a natural and spontaneous grace, moves with ease in a new world where nothing can go wrong, where every movement, every word, every thought even, has an inevitable lyrical beauty.

This was something that, since my youth, I had not known. I have perhaps been loved, certainly desired, and it would be stupid to deny that has given me pleasure, ministered to my vanity, my confidence and, naturally, my looks. But, my own heart untouched, I have kept within the ordinary terms of kindness and good sense, conscious of some obligation, but not tempted to enlarge it, and concerned mainly with protecting some comfortable friendship. In fact, like all women who are not miserably unattractive or openly disagreeable, I have learned a certain dexterity in sending men back to their

wives in good order, knowing that nothing has happened which can afterwards be a serious embarrassment to anyone.

Now none of this applies, in spite of the fact that in the legal, although not in the biblical, sense we have done nothing.

It was strange how easily we read the chart of the depths where we might not sail as if, on a small boat plying up and down a close-set group of islands, we had found a simple way of confirming that we were on some ocean bounded only by unknown continents. We must have talked a little, as I lay with my head on his shoulder, but whether he spoke my thoughts, or I his, that I cannot say.

There was a moment when we drew away from each other. He took my face between his hands, and gave me one slow, deep kiss. It was not long after that (or at least so I think; but time had stopped) that I left him. Was I frightened? Not in the least. I only wanted, or perhaps knew that he wanted, to draw out the lingering sweetness of a love that was neither impatient nor grasping.

It was after we had said our first good night, and I had put on my cloak again for a lonely journey through the draughty house, that I noticed the watch still lying on the table. I played him one more chime.

'Time has stopped,' he said. It was still midnight. One, two, three, four . . . then he kissed me very gently — peaceful, good-night kisses — up to twelve. Then we leant against each other, shaking with laughter.

'How wonderful,' I said, 'on top of everything else, you are a little bit silly as well.'

'Of course. Are you surprised?'

'Only delighted. Delighted with anything, silly or serious. But would you think it too silly if I lent you my

watch to keep you company in the night. Its voice is sweet.'

Sweet. . . sweet. Trip no further. I could not leave him quickly. But the moment came at last. He took me to the turn of the stairs, and watched me go. Out of sight, I heard the chime again, an echo of my voice, an echo of my kisses. I smiled to myself, happy to be not wholly separated.

I was glad to be alone for a while. The knowledge that I had done wrong (so frail against the conviction of having done well) made me at least want to hide the happiness for which I could not feel guilty.

I was in bed when Gilbert came in. I could see it had been a good evening. Is there any other woman, I wondered, who would not be satisfied with this husband? Smiling, slightly flushed, his strong black hair disordered, as it so often seems to be, by its own energy, he had the whole bearing of a man who might well claim devotion. He had once had mine; and, although my constancy was flawed, I was still fond of him. Perhaps more fond of him than I had been; for I found myself watching him with indulgent affection as he sat on the edge of the bed to unlace his shoes, and let them drop to the floor with a fearful bang.

'Well,' he said, 'everything all right?'

'Yes.'

'What did I tell you?'

I was not in a mood to be irritated. Indeed, I felt he way saying it in plain friendliness, without (as I have often imagined) any intention to wound or triumph. That robust optimism of his, which can seem callous, and a useful device for avoiding uncongenial jobs, is attractive too.

He settled down at my side, with his arm, according to our comfortable habit, across me.

'It was good,' he said, yawning prodigiously. 'You ought to have been there.'

'I wish I had been,' I said. I was not lying. I should like to have two lives.

Chapter 2

I WOKE with a violent start, my back arched and rigid, only the final image of my dream still with me. Four or five cups and saucers in a peculiar, very beautiful shade of dusty pink, were laid out on a round table covered with a velvety cloth of greenish black. When I jumped out of sleep, I saw the cups shaking.

My first wild thought was that I was late for some meal. The day was overcast; the time uncertain. But Gilbert was sleeping obstinately.

Of course, I must have heard the bell. I hurried into a dressing-gown and ran upstairs. Nanny's door was swinging open and I found her in the bathroom, retching over the basin.

'I'm sorry. I oughtn't to have rung. I was afraid I couldn't get. . .'

Another spasm took hold of her. A muscle on her thin neck tightened like a rope and she clutched the edge of the basin for support. I held her shoulders, trying to take some of the strain of the fearful contractions, too strong for her light, frail body. In a brief interval she began, touchingly, to apologize again for being a nuisance, looking at me with wounded, desperate eyes, her face pale and wet with sweat. She hardly noticed when I undid the top button of her nightdress which seemed to be too

tight; and then I had to hold her again. Except when a major paroxysm stiffened her, she was trembling from head to foot with cold and exhaustion.

As soon as she could listen to me, I told her she was coming back to bed. She shook her head. She had left her hair loose, and it hung in damp grey wisps along her cheeks.

I took a blanket out of the linen cupboard and wrapped it round her.

'I'd sooner be in here,' she said, 'it comes on so sudden.'

It was no use promising to make her comfortable. Her distress hung round the duties I should have to do. 'It isn't nice,' she said; and attempted to swill out the basin with uncertain, trembling hands. I couldn't explain to her (although she knew it very well in herself) that my concern, and the practical necessity for doing the job in hand, made me quite indifferent to anything disagreeable in it.

I had to scold her a little, and then, with one arm round her and carrying a towel and basin in the other, I supported her down the corridor. We made the journey; and it seemed when she lay down that the fit was passing. I sponged her face, and combed back her hair, and then said she must lie very quiet for a few minutes while I went to dress.

The relief did not last. I had to turn back before I got to the door. The attack, this time, was even longer and fiercer, although there was very little vomit now, only mucous, forced out with agonizing pain from a hollow stomach, with here and there a fine thread of blood. At first, she struggled in the intervals to wipe her mouth, but as she grew more exhausted, she no longer troubled with it, and hardly noticed when I did it for her.

It was impossible to leave her alone. I stretched out

one hand and turned her clock round to face me. Only quarter past seven; no one would be awake for at least an hour.

She lay back and shut her eyes. A bluish pallor, invading the healthy russet of her skin, was for that reason more ghastly. Her mouth was twisted, but I thought she might be trying to smile. When I took her hand, she pressed lightly on my fingers, and moved her lips.

We had somehow communicated; but I felt between us a great barrier of suffering. Her face was smaller, as if the flesh had wasted, and the bone worn through on the shining knobs of her forehead, and the sharp ridge of her nose. Above all, her pinched nostrils, drawn in so the tip of her nose looked more pointed, seemed an unmistakable signal of pain. I asked her if it was very bad.

'Not quite so bad just now,' she said, but when she opened her eyes, there was fear in them.

'Tell me,' I said.

'I don't know . . . I don't know what's happening to me.'

'You must let me go and ring up the doctor. He'll be very cross if we don't tell him at once.'

'Do you think I'm very ill?'

'I don't expect so, dearest, but we want to make you better quickly. Let me arrange you, and I promise I'll go and come back in a flash.'

'I'm afraid. Don't go away.'

'I'll wait a little.'

I don't know what impulse it was, when her hand relaxed in mine, that made me steal over to the window and look out. It must have rained all night, there were big puddles in the drive and the trees were dripping. But for a moment no rain was falling from the lowering sky.

I heard the bolts of the front door being drawn, and

Stephen came out. He looked very happy, as he briefly studied the weather, and then walked a few steps to pick a leaf from the bay tree. On another morning, how much I should have enjoyed watching him, all unconsciously, dreaming his time away until he saw me again. But this morning, I only looked for help. He rubbed the leaf between his fingers, sniffing it, and then at last raised his head. I did not want to raise the window, or to call, so I tapped very gently on the pane until he looked up.

'What is it?' said Nanny.

'I was waving to Stephen, who seems to be out very early.'

She tried to say something and failed. I had meant to go and meet him outside the room, but I was needed where I was. A moment or two later, he knocked at the door, and I was then able to go to it.

I don't know how we would have met that morning in more ordinary circumstances. What do other people do? After some occasion that has made them really into different people, do they greet each other at breakfast, or in the office, or after church without, as they say, batting an eyelid? Or is there a lingering and expectant delight over them that everyone recognizes? Or do they strain so after discretion that every word and gesture has an unnatural stiffness? And, if so, do their hearts, following their actions, grow a little colder, so that they wonder if this can be the man?

Perhaps that is what I should have felt; but everything was crowded out by the knowledge that here was someone I could trust, someone who would not ask a lot of questions, or expect a lot of explanations, and take for granted that, if I gave him no attention or thought at all, it would be for a good reason.

'Will you wake Lindsay, and ask her to come here? And then ring up the doctor, and tell him. . . tell him. . .'

I gave my message. Lindsay came in soon after.

'What have I got to do, Mother?'

'My dear, don't look so scared. If you can just stay here for ten minutes. . . .'

After a longer pause than before, which made me feel I could safely leave them, Nanny suddenly began speaking in a stronger voice.

'I'm a nuisance to you, I know. You shouldn't trouble with me. You should both go and look after your guests. There'll be a lot to do today, and it seems as if I wouldn't be much use. This is a funny pain. Not so sharp as it was but it makes me feel bad. Run along now, you've both got things to do.'

I tried to calm her. I told her I was leaving Lindsay with her for a little while.

But, Mother, what can I say to her?'

'It's no wonder you don't fancy it,' said Nanny. 'Let me alone now, there's good children. . . .'

It was a relief to hear her speaking more like herself. But to Lindsay it was all a horror. Although I saw the attack was passing, I felt I must stay. I told Lindsay to fetch me my clothes from my room. As soon as she could speak again, Nanny whispered very softly to me, in a querulous, tired voice: 'Don't let me die.'

What is there to offer? Even if I had been able to judge the level of my own anxiety, and found it shallower than hers, it was not reason she looked for, to stem the crushing invasion of weakness and fear. I tried to put consolation in my voice (hardly choosing what I said) and held her hand very tightly so she knew I was there, and caring what became of her. It seemed to do some-

thing. I even sang one or two of the songs she taught us in the old days. . . .

> Someone stole my heart away,
> Riding on a load of hay,
> I looked up, and he looked down. . . .

When the doctor came at last, I went outside to tell him first what had been happening. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Gilbert lingering as if he wanted to tell or ask me something. But I felt we might be short of time, and turned away from him into the bedroom.

Oh, how small she looked, huddled in the bedclothes, small and frightened like a mouse ready to dart back into its hole. But there was no cover for her; the doctor was preparing to examine her. I turned the sheet down, and rolled up her nightdress. She was submissive now and, despair outstepping every other impulse, she let him pass his hand over her stomach. She was very thin and her brownish skin was wrinkled and shrunken; but in one place it seemed to be drawn taut and smooth over an inner swelling. As the doctor touched it, I saw the muscles bulge, and she let out a little moan. He drew the clothes up, and got briskly to his feet. Then waited till she had relaxed again.

'Now we're going to get you into hospital. I'll just tell them you're coming, and order an ambulance. . . .'

She was beyond responding.

'It will take some time to get here,' I said. 'Should I drive her? Ought we to hurry?'

'Well, the sooner the better of course. There's no need to get in a great state of distress over an hour or so, but if you feel you can, there might be something to be said for it. It's possible she'll be more comfortable sitting up,

and it seems, from what you tell me, that this attack may be easing off for a while.'

The next half-hour was confusion. I had some breakfast on a tray while I was dressing; then I found Nanny struggling to make herself 'tidy', and plaited her hair for her, in two short, thin plaits (such as she ordinarily has at night) tied with black tape; then I paid a quick visit to Claudia. She was sitting up in bed, ready, she said, to do anything she could, but in the meantime keeping out of the way.

'I'm afraid you will have to look after yourselves a bit. I'm sorry. Lindsay will see about lunch, but if you make sure she starts it early enough — otherwise you may not have it till tea-time.'

Claudia waved her hand as if brushing all these minor problems away. 'Don't worry about us, my dear. You're a wonderful woman, and I admire you. I'm so completely helpless if anyone is even mildly ill. But you must trust the rest of us to get on all right on our own.'

Lindsay was waiting for me. 'Is Nanny very ill? Is she . . . is she going to die?'

'My darling, it's no good making any guesses. They may have to operate on her — the doctor says there's probably something stopping up her stomach — and they'd take it out.'

'I'm afraid I wasn't much use to her.'

I had forgotten that. Poor girl, I could see from her despondent face that she had been mourning over a failure and, not realizing that she could now help me most by forgetting it too, was trying to tell me she was sorry.

'You needn't blame yourself,' I said. 'It's partly practice. Once you've had babies wetting your skirts and messing up your collars you really feel differently for

ever after. As soon as we've gone, and that will be in about ten minutes, will you try and put it all out of your mind and look after the house, and see that everyone has proper meals, and doesn't mope?'

'Can't I drive you to the hospital?'

I told her I had already asked Gilbert to take me; but, seeing how anxious she was to show that she was, after all, dependable over some things, I told her to find out if he would like her to take his place.

'Settle it between you, only remind him that there will be quite a lot to do here.'

I hardly knew which of them I wanted. I had asked Gilbert for the entirely practical reason that he was the better driver, and had given him no chance to remind me that he regarded the whole enterprise with horror and disgust. All the same, I was certain he did; and, if there was any crisis on the journey, I might find him a liability. Lindsay at any rate intended to take a real part (and would certainly not remind me that we should have waited for the ambulance) — but it was not so easy to spare her here.

Let them settle it themselves. I got Nanny, now calmer but inert, dressed after a fashion, and supported her downstairs. It was Stephen who was waiting for me by the door.

'I'm taking you in my car. It's a bit bigger, and I think you'll be more comfortable.'

What a relief that was. Not so much because I had fanged to be with him and only thought it too much to ask, but because a load of care was immediately lifted off me. Everything was quietly arranged. Gilbert was grateful and Lindsay, having taken the edge off her remorse by making a generous offer, was just as pleased to have it refused.

I need not be concerned about them; and for myself, I had the companionship that was right, for the astonishing reason that it felt less positive, and so less demanding, than theirs. I was not distracted, as I should have been with either of them, by any personal feelings; but quite satisfied that Stephen and I could do together whatever had to be done.

In fact, it was an uneventful journey. Our patient, baulking at the shocking fact of 'being sent away' needed a little persuasion to get into the car; but, once there, she lay back passive. As we started, I leaned forward to tell Stephen to turn left at the end of the drive, and then . . .

'It's all right. I went over the route with Lindsay, I think I know it.'

I sat back, and again took Nanny's hand in mine. As her physical sufferings diminished, they made way for the other, mental anguish, which bore on her even more grievously. She began to talk to me, half weeping, in spite of anything I could say or do, repeating the same, sad, broken sentences again and again.

She did not want to die. It was wrong to send her away from her own people. She was frightened. She ought to be ready, she said, to go when our blessed Lord called her; but, in pain, and among strangers, 'not feeling herself', she feared she should not recognize his voice. 'I shall be alone,' she said.

What is there to do? Remembering the plain beliefs of my childhood, and the language of them, I spoke as simply as I could.

'I am here, darling, and I am sure you will stay with me on earth for years and years. And when that is over, you won't be alone. There's Mother, and Father, and Vivian. . . .'

'He was a rascal, that one,' she said, faintly smiling

for the first time. 'The worst of you all. But he had a loving heart. Only he wouldn't be patient with me like I am now. What do they want with a weak silly old woman? I couldn't be any use to them. And your mother used to say there was no one could brush her hair like I did. I used to go down and do it for her after I'd given you younger ones your baths. She used to knock when she came into the nursery. That was my place. I had everything the way I wanted it, and she said there never was such a happy nursery. You was all good children.'

'You were good to us.'

'I daresay.'

Then she began to worry about the hospital. Would they let her do things the way she liked them? Would she be allowed a glass of water by her bed? Was it true that they took your false teeth? Did they make you wear hospital nightdresses that hadn't been properly washed?

'No, look, there are nightdresses for you in your case — it's there on the front seat. And I shall come and see you, and bring you anything you want. You must remember to tell me.'

As we drove into the town, the bells were ringing. It was easy to pick out the people who were on their way to church. A noah's ark family, wooden in their Sunday best, turned in at the lych-gate. After them a lank, lean spinster, hung with scarves and beads, came almost at a run, swaying on her elongated, out-turned feet. Then two plump, sensible girls, the sort whose faces, twenty years ago, would have shone with soap, but who now wore a discreet and charming make-up. Then a man and a boy. Then a little girl in new shoes, methodically jumping the puddles, shining now under a fitful gleam of sunlight.

Then there were people with other preoccupations. A huddle of lads in square blue suits, and with larded hair, hung at a street corner, waiting. Waiting for what? Perhaps for the pubs to open, or for the gay young women who, as soon as they had finished curling their hair and ironing their frocks, would walk past them in twos and threes, letting out purposeful screeches of laughter at nothing at all. Or perhaps they were just waiting for their bodies and minds to catch up with the life they were leading already, clocking in and out, and doing a full week's work with the fathers of families; and in the meantime enjoying, a little listlessly, the company of their own kind, where communication could be kept up through a set of disjointed cracks, and friendship was demonstrated by pummelling one another in the ribs.

'You must tell me the way now,' said Stephen, as the traffic lights turned green.

The hospital lay half a mile or so beyond the town. It is a new building, rather bleak, with the sharp-cut lawns and paths of a toy fort. There was no one to receive us. The porter, who was busy with a broom and pail, suggested we should go to the out-patients department, round several blocks, and that someone would be along in a few minutes to see to us.

Perhaps privilege is wrong; but I have not the strength of mind to resist exploiting it when I think I have a good cause. We had already got Nanny out of the car, and she was sitting forlornly on a narrow bench where, apparently, the porter particularly wanted to sweep. Quite prepared for any further battle that was necessary, I asked him if I might ring through to the house surgeon or the matron. I suppose it was because I was able to call them by their names that the effect was so electrifying. In no time at all we were surrounded by pleasanter and

more competent people, and Nanny was whisked away — a mute object — before I realized, or had a chance to say goodbye to her.

We were put into an empty waiting-room attached to one of the specialist clinics.

'New paint,' said Stephen.

'Yes, that's cheerful, but it's a pity it's so high and narrow.'

We sat on a bench on the third row, two in front of us us and four behind. There were a few notices on the wall. People seemed to have fingered them, and scribbled over them with blunt pencils, for they looked much older than the paint. One, almost illegible, recommended patients to have their something something ready.

'Could it be blue cards?' I said. 'What are those, I wonder? Perhaps it doesn't really matter that no one can read it — I imagine this room full of people who have been coming every week for half a dozen years, and know all the ropes. Ought we to do anything? Ask someone something? Or make sure that the right people know where we are?'

'I don't think so. It's bound to take some time.'

'These benches are narrow, aren't they? I'm glad I'm feeling well and strong.'

At half past twelve the porter, who had now got the impression he should treat us with respect, came in with two stiff cups of tea. There was a cayfe down the road, he said, but he thought we might not know of it. We asked him if the doctor knew we were still in the building.

'Oh, Sister will be down to see you,' he said, 'any time now. She'll be along, and you'll be able to go and get your dinner at the cayfe.'

We drank our tea. It was as if solid tea had been scraped off the sides of tin teapots, and melted in condensed milk

(sweetened). But it was reviving, once you got the taste past your tongue.

'Do you take sugar?' I said.

'No.'

'Nor do I.'

We tried to play noughts and crosses, but it was always a draw. Then we tried twenty questions, but neither of us were really concentrating, lost the track, and could never guess the answer. I would have liked to lean against him and cry; but it hardly seemed the place. Someone might come for us at any moment; and the bench was so narrow that if you shifted forward, so that the back no longer hit into your spine, you were liable to slip off it.

We went over and looked out of the window. The rain, having held off for a few hours, was now falling steadily, drifting in grey swathes across the sodden landscape.

'She was always such a pillar of strength,' I said. 'She used to say "it's all right", and it was all right; or "you'll be better tomorrow, you'll see", and you were better. Now I don't know how to find the right sort of comfort for her. It may not be all right; perhaps she won't be better tomorrow.'

'You were sweet to her.'

'Was I? If it was me, I should like to be told exactly what danger I was in, or at least I think so. But so often it doesn't seem right to do as you would be done by; other people may want something quite different. "It's nothing", one ought to say, and then make oneself believe it. Oh, I wish they would come and tell us something.'

When at last we saw the doctor, he told us that the surgeon had examined her, and that they were getting ready to operate.

'In view of her age, there is a certain risk; but the risk of delay is greater.'

He is a young man, a little pompous, and rattled off the technicalities as if for form's sake, hardly expecting us to understand them. I gathered that they suspected some form of growth in the lower intestine, and that it was impossible to say whether it could be removed successfully until they had operated 'in the first instance for exploratory purposes'.

'How is she?'

He suddenly looked very boyish. Away from the textbook, he became a simple-hearted, perhaps rather stupid, young man with red hair and quite attractive freckles. He shrugged his shoulders.

'She is being rather difficult.' He reflected for a moment, and then, looking very solemn, found the right word. 'Unco-operative. But we know how to manage people.'

I had a horrible vision of poor Nanny, ruthlessly managed and more terrified than ever. I asked if I might see her for a moment.

As I came into the room, the sister was giving her an injection, while a nurse, to prevent her struggling, held her firmly by the shoulders. Of course, that was what they had to do; but when I saw the silent anguish of her face I was glad I had been given permission, although reluctantly, to come to her.

'You must let them do it,' I said. 'I have been talking to the doctor, and you must trust us to do what is best. . . .

As soon as she saw me she relaxed a little. Is it true, she seemed to be asking, am I really with people who will look after me? Have you really not abandoned me?

'I'm still here with you,' I said, 'and it won't seem any

time at all until you wake up, and nurse and sister will be here, and I shall come and see you again.'

It was as if I had made an introduction. I had vouched for these people whose professional and business-like way had seemed like hostility. Now she looked at them as if their faces might be recognizable, and some of their actions well-meant. She gave a long sigh, already a little drowsy.

In view of her age, there was a certain risk. That meant I could not count on seeing her again. I stayed with her until she was asleep.

Chapter 3

THE next few hours stretched interminably. It was raining again, out of a featureless sky like an old, grey blanket. At the cafe, a pale, gawky young woman, thoroughly amiable but baffled by our eccentricity in wanting lunch so late, 'found' us some baked beans. At the next table a couple were having tea. They had the dank, uncared-for faces of the destitute, like old stone floors, incapable of revealing anything but endurance. He was leaning forward, and muttering to her endlessly in a slurred, indistinguishable accent. She fidgeted with the loose thread where a button had come off her coat, and stared at him. 'No,' she said, 'no.' She never said anything else. Just no, again and again.

Stephen rubbed a spy-hole in the steam of the window. A man in a yellow cape went by on a bicycle, raising a plume of spray. The rain fell relentlessly. No, said the woman. The waitress offered us some little yellow cakes with fluted edges. She was sorry, she couldn't manage coffee, but there was always tea.

In spite of the pitiless rain, we went for a walk through the woods. It was no use going back to the hospital for a couple of hours, and it seemed impossible to stay drinking cups of tea in a room smelling of wet wool, with the rain pattering on a tin roof. Under the trees, the rain fell

softly and persistently, slipping through the wet leaves, gathering in huge drops on the tips of twigs. Once we clung together, in silence, for a moment or two. We were like wet trees ourselves, with cold, smooth skin, and rain dripping down our hair.

We were invited to have tea — china tea this time — with the matron. She had had the pleasure of meeting my husband, and was sorry she had not been on duty and able to have a word with me in the morning. She hoped there had been no difficulties. 'No, indeed,' I said. I was no longer concerned with minor difficulties. For the moment, she had nothing to tell us, so with formidable graciousness she acted as a hostess and a woman of the world. It had been so interesting, she said, travelling during the war. She had been in India. So had Stephen. They discussed sanitation and regretted that neither of them had ever met anyone who had actually seen the Indian rope trick. It appeared they had once passed through Calcutta on the same day. 'How small the world is,' she said.

I expected bad news. I began to notice the hollow feeling of anxiety swelling just before each intake of breath. Every time there was a step outside, my muscles braced themselves. I was pressed into the conversation. Did I know America? Yes, one short visit, but no one can say they know America unless they have penetrated beyond the eastern sea-board. Had I felt suffocated among all those high buildings? No, I said and tried to describe the dry, exhilarating air, the enthusiasm and whole-hearted generosity of my American friends. She said there had been a great deal of feeling about the black troops round here; some people said that they should never have been sent over, and others held that, since they were fighting the same war, they should at least have

been treated as equals by their fellow citizens. She, for her part, was convinced that, although it was a pity so many silly young girls had lost their heads over them, it was un-Christian to forbid marriage. I said I had heard that a number of English families were anxious to adopt the children. There are difficulties, she said, there are difficulties.

Between them, she and Stephen found subjects to bridge a great chasm of time. On an impeccable social atmosphere, the surgeon made an actor's entrance, his smile encouraging, his silence as he crossed the room leaving us still in suspense. We were formally introduced.

'So far so good,' he said.

The operation was over; the growth — that was what they found — had been removed. She was still alive; everything had gone as well as could be expected. The relief which I hoped to feel did not come. It was clear that their expectations had been very moderate, and we understood that several hours must still pass in which the after-effects of shock might be very serious.

I rang up Gilbert there and then to say I must wait and that we were not likely to be back until some time after midnight. He told me firmly that I must be insane to think of driving back at night. 'The weather's appalling over here, and the road's likely to be flooded. You'd far better get them to put you up at the Hand and Flower and come back first thing in the morning. I don't want you ill too.'

I did not feel quite so homeless when I got into the hotel. The chambermaid lent me some slippers, and dried my shoes. The mirror in my room had a strange, greenish, deep sea shadow in it, and a hint of undulations. I thought I looked terrible. But I was re-assured by Stephen's delighted smile of welcome when I joined him

in the lounge. We went into dinner in the wake of a bored, prosperous, middle-aged couple who must have weighed thirty stone between them.

To them, the waiter delivered what was evidently a standing order for one double whisky and one double gin. We made the extraordinary discovery of some pre-war hock.

'I don't know that it's the correct drink with stuffed marrow,' said Stephen, 'but it should be pleasant.'

I found I was able to laugh now. The wine, dry and sunny and subtle, found my dark thoughts already weakening and turned them in retreat. I wondered what people were thinking of us. Too old to be on our honeymoon, and too interested in each other to have the weight of a well-established marriage at our backs, we must have been a puzzling spectacle.

'Perhaps I ought to have sent you home this evening,' I said, 'and got Lindsay to come and fetch me.'

'Does it embarrass you to be seen having dinner with me?'

'Oh, no. It's not one of those clandestine arrangements. It was presented to us. Anyone may see us. Even the chief constable who, I observe, is in the far corner. We'll talk to him after dinner to show our sincerity.'

He poured me some more wine. 'It would have been very difficult for you to send me home.'

'For me, certainly difficult,' I said, 'but I don't know what Claudia will think of it.'

'Claudia never pays any attention to conventions,' he said cheerfully. 'She goes her own way.'

'Oh.'

Claudia seemed a very small and distant figure, going her own way, on the whole resigned to the fact that she had lost him years ago. But I could not let her go unremarked, waved off by my fiat, indifferent gesture.

‘Did you notice the Assembly rooms next door,’ I said, ‘where she and I once danced.’

‘And she quarrelled with your brother, the brother who died.’

‘Yes, Vivian. He wasn’t kind to her. He was never kind — but I loved him.’

‘So did she. She was still reeling when I first met her, and then . . . I persuaded her to marry me.’ He laughed bitterly. ‘I thought her very forlorn, and decided providence had sent me to look after her.’ His face was suddenly old, lined with regret and self-contempt. I knew it would be easy to make his eyes light up again.

‘You look after me very nicely. I’m grateful for everything you’ve done for me.’

‘I love being able to.’

We looked at each other for a breathless moment, but a kind of apprehension, an echo of some threat striking from the mirrored walls, and the flat murmur of strange voices made me quickly drop my eyes.

The waiter brought us trifle.

‘This is the same cake,’ said Stephen, ‘that we were offered for lunch down the road’

‘How extraordinary, so it is. Perhaps we’d better eat it this time, or we may have it for breakfast.’

I rang up the hospital immediately after dinner. There was nothing to report. The anaesthetic had not yet worn off. I began to feel as if I had been drugged too. I could hardly listen to the chief constable’s account of his new system for intelligence and communications.

‘Last week,’ he said, ‘we picked up a stolen car ten minutes before the loss had been reported.’ He arched his chest, and his kind eyes shone with satisfaction. It was impressive, but I could not conceal that I was yawning.

‘You should be in bed,’ he said.

‘I’m so sorry. It’s rude of me. But the day’s been tiring, and I have to wait up in case they want me at the hospital.’

‘You take my advice, and go and lie down for a while. No good knocking yourself up, you know. . . .’

He escorted me to the bottom of the stairs. I said goodnight to him and to Stephen, and for some reason shook hands with both of them. ‘Will you ask the girl at the desk to fetch me at once if there’s a call?’

It only occurred to me afterwards that it was all play-acting. Obviously I should see Stephen again, whatever happened. In the meantime, I longed for a rest, and was grateful to my old friend for directing me to it, and for taking Stephen off to the more cheerful atmosphere of the bar. I was pleased that they liked each other.

The chambermaid, pitying my condition, had looked after me wonderfully. There was a hot-water bottle in the bed, and a bright pink rayon nightdress laid out. I was very much tempted, but the prospect of having to dress again was too grim. So I lay down as I was, with the hot-water bottle propped against my spine.

I tried to think what I was to say to Stephen, but instead found myself wordlessly dreaming of his actual presence, seeming closer to me now that the ardours of the day’s undertaking had almost reached a finish, and I felt, not wholly reasonably, more hopeful. I tried to raise an image of Gilbert, to remind myself that I had only one life, and that it was his and mine; but his face, although I could see it more clearly behind my eyelids than Stephen’s, drifted away again, powerless over my imagination.

Some dreams are without images. Wild terror or delight can approach, in sleep, not embodied in actors, or in scenes, and may then be even more extreme. So, in the receptive, only half-waking state where visual memories are often peculiarly vivid and poignant, I was engrossed

by an indescribable, featureless sense of expectancy. Waiting for Stephen, I fell asleep.

I woke to see him come in, looking so happy that I knew he had good news. The report from the hospital was encouraging and he had simply taken the message without troubling to call me. He came over and sat beside me on the bed.

'I still love you,' he said.

'Still? It's only, after all, twenty-four hours.'

'More than that.'

Yes, that was certainly true for me too. I cast back over the weeks of summer.

'Perhaps it has been longer. Has it? I remember I was terribly disappointed that you didn't speak to me when we met at that party in July.'

'I only came because I knew you were going to be there. And you only arrived after I had begun to despair of you, I worked my way in your direction, and then found you so engulfed with two women — you were staring at them, you know, as if you were learning them by heart — that I decided I must wait a little; and then Lady Maberley told me her husband was looking for me, and I must go and rescue him from the next room. She made sure I went, too. . . .'

'I know how she does it. She made me feel the whole party depended on my being sociable to those two extraordinary women. And then I wasn't very much of a success with them. I really wanted to be with you. I hoped you would suddenly tap me on the shoulder, and take me away.'

'I should have had the courage. But you know, you had been in my mind for so long. I had remembered too often the way you lift your head, and smile at me with your eyes as well as your lips, and then sidle away from

this person and that person, and make yourself alone with me. And then when I saw you, I thought I might have invented everything, just out of wishing for it. There you were, with a life of your own and friends I didn't know, and a hat that made your face a different shape. . . .'

'Didn't you care for it? Shall I throw it away? Its purpose is to intimidate formidable strangers, but my friends are not supposed to pay it any attention. I would have told you.'

'Oh, the hat was splendid. It only reminded me that I was counting on a great deal. I rebuked myself for vanity.'

'Ah, that was treachery. You can be as vain as you like where I am concerned. Shall I promote your vanity by telling you how I waited for you? I must have been a little bit in love with you already. But you didn't know?'

'How could I? I had never thought about it; although, certainly, I had thought about you.'

'Yes, I too. It must have started long ago. Do you remember meeting me once at Hamley's, when we were both buying Christmas presents for our nephews and nieces?'

'Oh, yes.'

'That was during the war. You were in uniform, looking very distinguished; and you advised me on choosing a kite. And ever since, when I have occasion to go there, I take a look at the stairs to see if you are just coming down them with a bundle of rails and signals under your arm.'

'That must be five years ago.'

'But we never met there again.'

'I noticed that. I looked for you too.'

'We ought to have known it couldn't happen twice.'

I could well believe that we had loved each other through a long, slow courtship of five years. When he took me in his arms and kissed me it was as if a vast tide, having mounted insensibly under the influence of unseen forces now suddenly swept over the sea-wall. Yet only twenty-four hours ago, we had assumed the existence of impassable limits and, rejoicing in the discovery of our love, which seemed so infinite in its nature, had hardly felt the frustration of our circumstances. It was a new discovery that the barriers might crumble, now or sometime, and that they existed in fact only in our own wills.

How tempting it is to see oneself as the victim of irresistible forces. Sensuality, so innocent in its disregard of any other claim, and imagination so ruthlessly bending to itself the materials of sense and thought, together generate a power before which one feels not so much weak as non-existent. Yet, at the moment of feeling most defenseless, the history that led up to it still proves intention. Innocence itself can follow an unconscious strategy, and it is possible to take, under cover of an affirmed principle, exactly those steps which are fated to destroy it. Because of my conviction (and he had shared it) that the final treachery towards Gilbert and towards Claudia was impossible, I now lay in his arms, only longing to show him that my love equalled his.

The whole night was before us. One kiss had revealed its vistas, and for the moment he held me (for I was trembling) very gently against him, and gently stroked my hair.

'My love, my darling,' he said, so softly that I seemed to feel it, not hear it. I put my free arm over him and pulled him even closer.

'It seems,' I said, 'that I could love you beyond all reason.'

‘Ah,’ with a long sigh of pleasure he rested his cheek against mine. We both lay quite still. Outside in the yard, there were footsteps, and a bucket was set down with a rattle.

‘The world is still going on,’ I said, ‘I can hardly believe it.’

I preferred to forget it. Somewhere in the world was Claudia with whom I had a sort of friendship. Somewhere in the world was Gilbert, who, if he could not love me, at least trusted me, and depended on me; and Lindsay, still partly a child, needing a child’s mother, a loving and unquestioned being whose life and thoughts were unshadowed. I wanted to forget them all. I might have done so — subduing my obstinate mind to the reckless impulses of my heart and senses — but Stephen lay so still and silent beside me that I knew his thoughts ran with mine.

‘You know,’ I said, ‘this may be too much for us.’

I felt him draw away from me and sit up. When I opened my eyes, I half expected to see him turning away, going back to the real world where we could never be together again. But I found him looking at me as if he sought an ineffacable image to take with him.

‘Oh, yes,’ he said. ‘Yes. I know that. I have been trying to persuade myself of it all day. But not, as you see, to very much effect.’

We both burst out laughing. It was a relief to take out this unwelcome thought and have a look at it. The tension lapsed a little. Still smiling, he lifted my lax hand by the wrist and let it drop again. I could give him at least this will-less hand to play with, while we waited and wondered what we were to do.

Under the harsh glare of the centre light, his face was unfamiliar, with deep, theatrical shadows. I remembered

with a stab of regret that I had not yet allowed my fingers to stray over it, learning its features by touch as well as sight. I had had so little time. So little time, and yet how confident I was that his feeling for me was deep and tender and dependable. Only, because he had given me so much, I feel a momentary uneasiness. He had so occupied and delighted me with the pleasure of receiving his love, that I feared I might have been less generous with him. There had been so little time to think how I might give him pleasure; and there were so many ways, as yet unattempted, in which I might confirm for him what he had done for me.

'I have never been so happy,' he said. Then I did stretch my hand out, and as if yielding to an obsession, touched his forehead and his cheek and his lips. He kissed my palm.

'I never knew it could be possible,' he said.

Of course, I might have known he would say it. As he spoke, my anxiety drifted and faded to oblivion.

'It's a miracle,' I said, 'how you always divine what I need to hear before I even quite know it myself. You never fail me, never make a mistake.'

'I? Then it's the same miracle for both of us.'

'I wonder if we can manage the real miracle, and make each other happy without making ourselves and everyone else miserable.'

'We might,' he said. 'I feel as if we could do anything.'

I understood that well. A soaring sense of power and liberty took possession of me, while, through a long pause, we remained motionless and silent, searching each other's faces for the inevitable reflection of our own thoughts. But a moment came when I could not look at him any longer. All human faces, in ordinary times, are as much a defence as a revelation; and when, under the stresses of great feel-

ing, the whole nature of another being lies open and unguarded, it might be impiety to see too much or, overwhelmed by what is seen, to act impetuously or with anything less than superb delicacy. My senses responded too violently to lead me aright if, as it seemed, his soul and destiny were in my keeping. I turned my head away.

Then I disengaged my hand, and got up and went over to the window. I drew the curtain back and saw, through the reflections on the glass, that the sky seemed to be clearing.

'I must look at the weather,' I said. I opened the casements. I heard him follow me across the room, and then we stood side by side, looking out. The yard was streaming with water, shining like snake-skin under a single yellow lamp above the arch; but the rain had stopped. A high wind shredded the clouds from the sky and a light chip of a moon danced between them.

'We could have got home,' I said. 'But I'm pleased we didn't.'

'Claudia says there's a tree down across the road.'

'Did you talk to her? Are they all quite happy?'

'She says they had a good day. She says Gilbert misses you.'

'And Claudia?'

'She's really much happier without me,' he said, very calmly.

'I'm sorry for both of you,' I said, 'and it seems so extraordinary. Oh, look, the moon has decided to stand still, and if you lean out you can see the whole of Orion about the chimney pots. It ought to be fine tomorrow.' I could not tell if he wanted to talk about Claudia. 'You mustn't tell me any more than you really want to,' I said.

'You can know everything, my dear, now. It would have been impossible until yesterday.'

'Oh, yes, I knew you could never go round searching for sympathy. So many people do, you'd be astonished, even men who are quite respectable on every other count. And, of course, all women.'

'Not you.'

'I would have very little excuse for it.'

He sighed. I turned my eyes from the turbulent sky and looked at him again. In the dispersed and feeble light, his face was ghostly and exhausted.

The image of Gilbert was standing at our backs, demanding how we could explain ourselves. There was no explanation. I made one half-hearted attempt to draw in the enticing argument that treachery of thought, having outstripped action, might make action insignificant.

'But it is not quite true,' I said sadly. 'It's only very tempting to feel we might finish what we've started. . . .'

'Do you really believe it would finish anything?'

'No.'

I forced myself to imagine what it might start. There was indeed no question of once, and never again.

'It would be heaven,' I said, 'but it would have a very seamy side.'

'In a few hours we shall have to go back and face everybody.'

'I know. And pretending to be the same people that we were before.'

It seemed madness to make this necessary pretence more difficult. I said so.

'Because of course it isn't just tomorrow. I begin to see us involved in every sort of lie, and anxiety and contrivance. And so risking what we have already. Everything has been so perfect, I could not bear it to be spoilt; because, you see, I love you. Is that a good reason?'

Before he could answer we heard steps and voices in

the corridor. We had felt ourselves alone in a sleeping world, but we were not. I held his arm, enjoining silence. The door of the next room opened and shut, and a thin ribbon of light slid between the curtains. We both instinctively drew back from the window. Haphazard vibrations of voices and laughter reached us, not intelligibly through the air, but entangled in the structure of the building, mingled with running gutters and gusty wind. I dropped my voice to a whisper.

'We shall never be alone. We shall never be able to have secrets. And perhaps, if we sacrifice something, we shall find that we can keep the rest.'

'If that is how you feel. . . .'

'Am I unkind? I don't mean to be. Exactly the opposite. I don't want to lose you altogether.'

I knew he understood and believed me, and that was the greatest happiness he could have given me. As we said good night, I felt wholly satisfied, as if we had rejected nothing. It would be false to say that we had chosen duty at the expense of love; we had chosen rather to preserve our love from base and miserable expedients.

Part Three

Chapter 1

We set ourselves a very high standard. There were to be no more secrets. The secret we had already seemed not intolerable. We were given, when we got home, exactly the welcome that suited the occasion as it must appear to the world. Gilbert was delighted to see me — one or two invitations had come in that ought to be answered at once, and he hadn't been able to find my engagement book. Evidently he missed me. He kissed me affectionately, and told me he could write the notes himself (which he detests doing) if I would check the dates.

'We haven't anything that week,' I said. It's quite safe.'

I was back in my ordinary life. Claudia, a perfect guest, told me how nice Lindsay had been, and conveyed to me that the only flaw in her enjoyment was the fact of my absence, and the sad reasons for it.

'Everything's going very well now,' I said. 'I saw her for a minute this morning, and she tells me everyone is so kind to her. She sent you a message, Lindsay. Her love, and she hopes the young men are helping you with the washing up.'

'I've been training them,' said Lindsay, 'and they've made a lot of progress. We've nearly finished all the house-

work and started to organize a picnic. Would you like that? Would it take your mind off, as Nanny says?'

'If it doesn't mean too much walking. I am tired. Forgive me, Claudia, if I go and change.'

Lindsay followed me up to my room, and hung over me as I did my face.

'You are lucky, Mother, to have a face that doesn't need a lot of fussing. You look wonderful, and you must have had the most awful time.'

'In a way. But it's such a relief it's over. Do I really look like a human being? I feel I must be a wreck.'

She knelt beside me and tilted her head.

'Just look at us. No one would ever believe you were my mother. Sisters perhaps. And sometimes I feel older than you are, and that I ought to look after you. I really think it would do you good to come on the picnic. You can walk ten steps from the car and go to sleep in the sun. Claudia is pining to get up on the hills, and we can all go for a walk and leave you in peace. It's all arranged.'

'That's sweet of you, darling. I shall enjoy it very much, if I don't have to do anything, or think.'

'Nothing of that sort. I can run a house wonderfully — for a day or two — and everyone has helped, even Father.'

'But apart from the housework, how have you all got on?'

'Wonderfully. I do admire Claudia. She's so neat and quick about everything, and when she's in the mood, so funny. We were all feeling so gloomy after you left yesterday, and she took us in hand. Did you ever hear about her trip across Canada when she was nineteen? You must get her to tell you, it's wonderful.'

It was painful to be reminded of Claudia's charms and virtues, but a relief too, for it proved that I had been touched by no breath of suspicion. I let Lindsay rattle on.

'I always expect people with tremendous guts and nerve to look like steam-rollers. But she's so small and elegant, not in the least beautiful but madly attractive. She makes me feel huge and clumsy. Oh, how I long for self-confidence. Do you think there's any hope that it will suddenly descend upon me when I'm twenty-one?'

I couldn't help laughing. 'Darling, you are far better able to face the world than Claudia was at your age.'

'She pretends she was a most miserable being until she grew up, with untidy hair and wrinkled stockings. Only that's so difficult to believe.'

'It's true.'

'I'm afraid you don't really like her as much as I do.'

'Of course I like her. She's very charming and very talented. Only I've known her too long to go wild with enthusiasm.'

'Am I raving? You see, I think she's going to help me a great deal.'

'I'm very glad.'

'I like him too, but I don't know what to talk to him about. Was he helpful yesterday?'

'Very.'

'Claudia says he's always good in a crisis, because it's such an opportunity to show unruffled calm. She is funny. Father and I both had slightly bad consciences, but she managed to relieve our minds.'

It was becoming more than I could bear and, almost on the point of snapping at her, I sent her away to turn a bath on for me. I had not yet been alone with Gilbert and needed to collect myself. As it turned out, he was in his blandest mood, attentive and pleasant. When, later, we got out on the hills, he and Lindsay were both anxious I should rest a little by myself; but by that time my sleepiness had worn off, and I wanted to go walking with the

rest of them. I dared not put Stephen in the position where he might feel he could stay with me.

We hardly said a word to each other; but that made no difference whatever to my conviction that we were still, in a certain sense, alone together. While, from the summit of the hill, I was showing Colin the lie of the land — the smoke of the distant town, the glimpse of river by our own bridge, and the Folly erected for an unwilling bride who could not live without sight of her father's house — while I pointed in this and that direction, and repeated names and legends, I found myself looking at Stephen, who stood with Gilbert a little in front and below, with such pride and pleasure that I could hardly attend to what I was saying. But I heard my voice go on, and Colin answering as if he had noticed nothing. In the same way that one breathes steadily to turn off the threat of a faint, I talked steadily and fluently to keep my feelings within tolerance. I had never known that sight could give a sensation no less acute than touch.

As if I had touched him, Stephen turned round to me. I thought he paused before he spoke, but that may have been the same illusion that I had of myself. At least, I was certain that he told me something quite unconnected with his words. All he said was some apt comment on the delicate and airy grace of that silly, useless tower on the next hill-top.

'And did it save the poor girl's life?' said Michael, behind me.

Gilbert laughed quite heartlessly. 'It was just a fancy,' he said. 'Probably she was tubercular or something, and it wasn't discovered; so she took it out of her unfortunate husband.'

'Don't listen to him,' said Lindsay, 'it's really the most romantic story. Her husband was wildly in love with her,

and determined to gratify her slightest wish. He searched, as you see, for the most gifted architect he could procure, and took endless trouble over the plans. She was very weak by that time, she thanked him, and closed her eyes and sent him away. He must have known that she could hardly endure the sight of him, but he forgave her, and worked like a demon exhorting the builders, and I have heard he even did some of the carving on the inside staircase himself. In the end, it scorned that she was actually dying, and there was still a few feet to go. So they went on working after dark, by torchlight, while she, I suppose, lay in her bed and waited for the end, one way or the other.'

She told the story seriously and slowly, giving it a sort of grotesque gothic nobility. At this point she paused, possibly for effect or possibly tripped on the thought that it was after all both ridiculous and appalling. I thought she might be going to laugh, but the tension held.

'And what happened?' said Colin at last.

'The tower was finished late one evening. He lifted her out of her bed and carried her under the moonlight across the fields and along the big ride. He struggled up to the top chamber, and told her to open her eyes. But of course she was dead. And he threw himself fifty feet to the ground.'

'A lot of nonsense,' said Gilbert. 'He ought to have given up spoiling her.'

Lindsay laughed and leaned against his shoulder, rubbing her cheek on it affectionately. 'Did you really think it was a true story? That is a compliment, because most of it is my own invention. And there, to prove it, is the monument to my unhappy hero's devotion.'

'Or else,' said Claudia, 'to his obstinacy and egotism. He might have let her go.'

'Can we get in and look at it?' said Michael.

It was entirely chance, not choice, that gave me a moment with Stephen at the base of the steps. Gilbert insisted on going first, since some of the steps were broken, and the children raced up after him. Out of politeness, I drew back to let Claudia go past me, and it was with no sense of contrivance that I hesitated before I followed. I could hear them all chattering like magpies up aloft, and Gilbert telling them fiercely not to crowd him. I felt that Stephen and I had been invited to wait a little.

I thought he was going to kiss me, and that pleased me. But he only twisted his fingers in mine; and that pleased me too. It was right to be scrupulous about adding to our secrets and, so long as I knew he loved me, I believed that was all I needed.

Chapter 2

I HAD no idea, then, of the desert of time that lay in front of me. For three weeks after they left us, I did not even know where he was. Now that they must be back in London, I am no better off; but at least he has an address if my resolution should break. Claudia sent a note from Abergavenny, thanking me, and saying how delighted she was to know us all better, and hoping we would be able to have dinner some time with them in the autumn. She and Michael were doing a great deal of work, and it was a pity Lindsay wasn't with them. Both boys sent messages to her. Stephen was 'amusing himself somehow'.

When that letter came I was still in a state of exaltation. My days were full, but with duties that allowed me to think and dream, and I thought of Stephen continually. I went over in my mind again and again all that had happened. I remembered how he had looked, what he had said, what I had felt, and whenever my attention was released from what I was doing, I went back to some particular moment, as one turns to the favourite pages of a book. Yet I was not obsessed to that unhappy pitch where one's thoughts begin to blunt the edge of day-to-day experience. Indeed, I have never seen the countryside look so brilliant, or enjoyed so much the varied pleasure of our summer holiday. It was easy to give Gilbert the

unexacting, mildly entertaining company which he seems to need above everything else; easy to disperse the grim associations of the hospital when I went visiting there; easy and delightful to talk to the matron about 'that friend of your husband's who had spent some time in India'; and even quite easy to organize our rat-catching on the farm so that it actually has been done. No one seems to have found me pre-occupied, but in fact I was wholly occupied with thinking of Stephen, except possibly for a little while when I went riding with Lindsay.

I laughed to myself over Claudia's letter, wondering how far he might be occupying himself in the same way as I did. Rather less, I decided cheerfully, since men are so different, but certainly to some extent. Fancies of the utmost banality (as, for instance, that he might be looking at the same huge harvest moon, with the same wild and lovely ideas in his head) came to me with a fresh, poetic poignancy. I was not ashamed of them; only a little ashamed that I had sometimes mocked them, and raised my eyebrows over the well-worn images which so often look shabby in print. How well they serve their purpose in life, where any more elaborate expression, intended to convey the intensity of love, utterly misses its simplicity.

My heart aches. That phrase, in a newspaper report of some disreputable case, always sounds so flimsy, as if the letter (filched from a waistcoat pocket and produced afterwards as evidence) had been composed of cheap, prefabricated sections. But what else can one say? One is obsessed by something in between a physical sensation and a state of mind, impossible to identify by the organs of sense or thought. So the heart, that responds without perceiving, appears a fitting seat for a formless, nameless and persistent condition of suffering.

I am searching through what is to me a long period — the few weeks since Stephen left. Although it has seemed, at any moment, timeless and interminable, I realize that I am now describing the later part of it. At first, suffering would have been an absurd word to use. Yet, as time went on, the same images that had given me, then, ecstatic pleasure, became a source and a symbol of pain.

How and when did that happen? I think it was soon after Claudia's letter that I first noticed it. I had come up to my own room to tidy some clothes, and sat down for a moment on the window-seat. I think I polished my nails, but when I came to myself; the buffer had fallen on the floor. I looked at my watch. I had been sitting there for nearly an hour, doing nothing, only idly dreaming of him.

I felt rather tired, very unwilling to go on with my jobs, and longed to sink back into reverie. Yet even my thoughts had an air of exhaustion about them, as if they had become a little stale. I had indulged the same thoughts too often, and they had become a sort of ritual, no less compelling because the life and meaning was beginning to seep away. With a flat sense of discouragement, I revived my memory of our final conversation in the inn bedroom. I remembered what we both said. But the same words, which had dropped like wine and honey in that charmed darkness, sounded stilted and arbitrary. We had talked — but to what purpose? We had kissed, but there was nothing left of that, not even an echo of the violent feeling which I knew had passed through me. I began to doubt my own memory, and to wonder whether, if I met him suddenly in an unexpected place, I should be able to recognize him.

I suppose love, like anything else, can easily become boring. Probably it was boredom that made me, suddenly, so acutely wretched. I saw that I must set myself some

engrossing task, and began to think my way round the house, wondering what I could do to save myself. Without warning, Lindsay burst in on me.

'Oh, Mother, you aren't even changed. Had you forgotten we were riding? I was really beginning to hope you were getting quite athletic — don't tell me you've lost interest again.'

Oh, my darling Lindsay, how grateful I was to her. I would have liked to beseech her to heap demands upon me, to pester me with company and her conversation, to remind me continuously that she needed me. She bustled me into my clothes.

'Come on, come on. Hurry up and get changed. I've brought Jerry over from Conrad's for you, and we've got a couple of hours.'

They were splendid hours. Lindsay told me that I looked divinely beautiful, and a glance at the mirror in the hall confirmed that I certainly looked well enough. I felt a mischievous spasm of regret because Stephen could not see me; but then, once we started, I forgot him completely. I thought of nothing but our swift movement, the single movement of horse and rider, through the bright evening air.

In the woods, a few leaves had already fallen, and the shadowy rides were haunted by the fecund smell of autumn. It was summer again in the open. Lindsay, waiting for me on a little knoll at the edge of the meadow, called out to me, her voice carrying with that sweet, rounded tone that belongs to sunny days.

'Race you to the bramble-patch!'

I waved my hand in assent, and kicked my heels into Jerry's ample flanks. He is really too big and too broad for me, and that adds to mad excitement of the race since I depend on balance, not grip.

'And back,' shouted Lindsay, as we approached the brambles neck to neck. She made a wide sweep. Hoping to steal an advantage, I cut the corner very fine. For a moment, I thought I was slipping. Jerry stumbled, and recovered. I felt him pounding forward under me, and heard Betsy just over my shoulder. A green woodpecker laughed at the edge of the wood. What joy, what pleasure it was, what heavenly oblivion.

'A fair win to you,' said Lindsay. 'I didn't know you were so daring. Jerry's in a proper muck-sweat.'

'I shall be stiff,' I said. 'I really am out of practice. I must do it more often.'

'That's all right,' said Lindsay. 'I'll keep you up to it.'

Mercifully, she has; and I have, on my own account, undertaken to re-upholster all the dining-room chairs. I take them out into the garden one by one, and each chair gives me at least a full day's work. Several hundred nails have to come out, which needs strength as well as skill, then when the frame is clear, the webbing has to be stretched by main force, then stuffing and cover is cut and fitted. I am making, I must say, a very good job of them, and I have found a wonderful fabric — a soft green, with fleur-de-lys all over it — for the top covers. They have been much admired by Gilbert's political friends who were here in force last week-end.

Three of them I know quite well, and both like and respect. They are youngish and intelligent and enterprising, and I can believe that they may do some service to their cause by discussing policy with Gilbert. The fourth, who was brought (I imagine in error) by one of the others, turned out to be my old acquaintance Mr. Potting. Gilbert was furious about him, and gave me to understand that I had better keep him away from the rest of them as much as I could.

Well, that was as good an occupation for me as any other. We walked round and round the garden; I exploited his politeness by taking him for walks which were far too long for his taste or his figure; and finally consoled him by allowing him to sit down while he held wool for me to wind. It dawned on me that he had a great deal of money he might contribute to the funds; but that he could only be a drag on the discussion that was now taking place. He told me several times that Conservatism was not to be identified with reaction. I said I hoped not. 'Monkey Brand' won't wash woollens, I said to myself, slightly embittered that Gilbert should have given me this sordid job. There was some reason in wanting Mr. Polting's money without his talk, but I thought it very vulgar of Gilbert to depend on my fine eyes to get it for them. Lindsay was disinclined to help me. 'I shall scream,' she said, 'if he goes on and on, and that will make everything worse. Besides, I'm sure he's developing a secret and respectable passion for you, and thinks I'm in the way. Anyhow, I've got a date with Conrad.'

I am pleased that Lindsay and Conrad arc friends again. On terms of uncle and niece, they are thoroughly suited to each other. They spend a great deal of their time together, Lindsay tells me, in silence, doing odd jobs, or exercising his pair of idiotic and slavish cocker spaniels. She is working very hard and Conrad admires her paintings uncritically, every one equal. 'That is nice,' she says, 'but not particularly useful. I do miss Claudia.'

Lindsay has had a postcard from Michael — a wild, rocky picture of the coast of Pembrokeshire. I have not been shown the other side, but she has asked me if I yearn too for this strange and primitive landscape. I have promised her we shall go there sometime.

The postcard came after the week-end party broke up,

and Gilbert had gone back to London for a few days. The house felt very empty. Nanny was still away, and our cook had a daughter visiting and could not, as we would understand, oblige so often. Lindsay and I had our meals in the kitchen and reduced the housework to a minimum. After the full days of the week-end, my own pre-occupations were unloosed upon me again.

Again, with a difference. The exaltation was gone, the boredom was gone. Discipline, in fact, appeared to have been effective. I found that I could no longer remember very clearly what had happened.

I should have congratulated myself. That was what I had intended when I said we must not write and must not, until it came naturally and easily, meet. I had hoped for a gradual mellowing in both of us, for how else could we find a tolerable future? Yet I found it an intolerable deprivation to lose what I had so poignantly remembered. I would willingly have had it all back, even the monotony of hopeless brooding, if only I could have something to hold on to in an existence which, since he had entered and left it, hardly seemed real.

The postman tapped on the kitchen window. Lindsay jumped up from the table and took the letters from him. 'Five for Father and two for you.'

I set aside the bill, and opened with a sense of pleased expectancy the envelope addressed in the elegant scholarly hand of my sister Chloe. She had no news of consequence to give, she said, but as always her letter was methodically and lucidly arranged, and beautiful to look at. She had taken two of her sixth form girls to Rome and Florence, and the expedition had been an unqualified success. She feared the educational reforms at present before the House might bear hardly on children of exceptional ability. She hoped not. Fortunately, she was still able to give them

what was after all the most necessary help — personal interest and encouragement and, in her own subject at least, although she was not wholly satisfied with all her staff, a high standard of teaching. For the first time in my life, I envied her her job.

I looked up to see Lindsay smiling over her postcard.

'It's from Michael,' she said, 'they're having a terrific time. It looks like a pretty good place.'

She turned the card over and handed it to me. So that was where they were. They had stood, perhaps, on that indomitable headland, watching the waves beaten up and back in high clouds of spray.

I had mourned my release too hastily. The emptiness of my heart was suddenly filled, not with the memories of Stephen that time and intention had now weakened and subdued, but with a longing for his actual presence so intense that my hand shook.

'Have you been there?' said Lindsay.

'I don't know. I'm trying to place exactly where it is. I think I may have stayed once in that little white house in the right-hand corner.'

She took the card back. I am still enslaved. Not to any roseate dream, not continuously, and not pleasurably. After hours of precarious calm, his absence may at any moment clutch at me like a cold, creeping wind, bearing no breath of promise, and linked with the harsh, elemental images of rock and water.

I am glad Nanny is not here. On my visits to the hospital I can keep up a brisk conversation through the whole visiting hour, telling her what Lindsay and I are doing, describing the weather, and relating any events there may have been on the farm. If I were seeing her continuously, I should begin to dread her observant eye, her experienced intuition, her upright conscience. Above

all, I should dread my own need to confide in someone. I am so desperately alone. I even caught myself looking speculatively at Conrad, when I last visited him, wondering if I could confide in him.

I was immediately ashamed of considering, even, an action so corrupt, and recoiled. I suggested going out to Lindsay, who was rubbing Jerry down after a long ride. Conrad looked surprised, and sank further back in the armchair, stretching his gaitered legs more comfortably.

'Let her come when she's ready,' he said.

I hovered about the room, picking up his books and reading a sentence here and there. He seemed to have very little to say to me, but the silence was cosy and reassuring. He appeared thoroughly content. It was a pity I could not ask him how he had achieved it. Is he one of those who choose to love inaccessible people, and withdraw with relief when the impossibility of their love is confirmed?

Lindsay followed tea into the room, the spaniels slithering at her heels. Conrad would not let me pour out. It was a pleasure for him, he said, to look after the two of us. Lindsay chattered away, quite adequately encouraged by his slow, mild comments. I answered when I was spoken to; and my heart ached.

Chapter 3

I HAVE seen him. At last. Within the last two days I have seen him twice. Not for very long and on terms, more or less, of discretion, but it has been enough to make me wonderfully happy. It has not even been necessary for him to tell me he loves me. That I never doubted. Even through the days of greatest melancholy and frustration I never needed reassurance; only a more actual sense of his existence.

It was a help to me when I first came back to the flat after the holidays to feel that I could, if I chose, lift the telephone and talk to him. But I put off doing it. I had told him there was to be nothing clandestine, and a call from me to his factory was certainly of that order. Besides, I did not know what to say. An invitation involving Claudia and Gilbert would sound perfectly correct to his secretary and the girl on the switch-board, if by any chance they overheard it, but it was out of the question. Gilbert was far too busy to spend an evening with people we had seen so lately, and Claudia might think I was pursuing them too eagerly. I would have liked to write to him, but that too was impossible. Although I might compose, simply for the sake of reviving our communication, a cool and harmless note, I could not supply any

answer for him to give if Claudia chose to inquire why I had written to him at all.

I assumed he felt the same hesitations. He must have known something about my movements, for Lindsay was in and out of their house while I was still in the country, waiting until Nanny was strong enough for the long drive back to London. I could not make out whether Claudia, or Michael, was the great attraction. In her conversation, it appeared that they both had very much the same sort of glamour. They were both, although at quite different stages, successful, and they were both prepared to treat her, personally, as an equal, and professionally as a disciple. She took up this role with ardour, as if she had been waiting for it. She seldom mentioned Stephen. Oh, he works, she said, he works; and then sometimes he plays the piano.

Their home, in a side-road near Regent's Park, is well arranged for people to lead separate lives. Lindsay described it to me in detail, and even drew me a plan. Facing the road is a conventional three-storey London house, more or less identical with its neighbours. Inside, the high, light rooms are rather empty.

'Claudia doesn't really live in it much,' said Lindsay. 'The studio is her place. I think she generally sleeps in it.'

Lindsay became almost incoherent about the romantic charm of the studio. It is at the back, enormous, with absolutely ideal lighting, and there is a door opening direct on to the canal towpath. Only privileged people (like Lindsay herself) are permitted to use that entrance. Others must approach from the front door, and risk having no answer to their ring, if Claudia is busy. Even those who are invited through the house, and down the short flight of wooden steps into the enclosed yard and so into

the studio, usually fail to realize that they might have taken a short cut. The other door is hidden by a curtain which, because of the arrangement of the furniture, has the appearance of being purely decorative.

Here Lindsay had met all sorts of congenial people, and even after I came back we saw less of her than usual. In our flat, there is a great deal of coming and going, but it centres mainly around Gilbert. Lindsay is charming, and polite and interested, but it is quite obvious that she is not among her own friends. In Claudia's circle, where she has established herself without losing a moment, she seems to have more friends than I can count. I have not even managed to identify more than one or two of them, as she calls them all by their Christian names. Adrian is a theatrical designer, whom Michael has been helping with a set for a new operetta; and Celestine (who appears to be Claudia's closest friend) works on a fashion paper. The rest is confusion; it was even some time before I knew whether Baba was a man or a woman.

It suits her wonderfully, and provides exactly what I knew she was missing last term. She works with less doggedness but with more real enthusiasm, and seems in every way more certain of herself. Even her looks have improved. The uneasy, evanescent grace which has always visited her intermittently is changing into a more stable beauty.

I have only to look at her, when she races out of the house before dinner, or stands beside my bed when she comes in late at night, to be delighted with the prospect of friendship between her and Claudia. But it is an ambiguous situation for me. I wait for her sparse references to Stephen, and encourage her to chat endlessly (although I must say, very little encouragement is needed) about Claudia's household, for the sake of imagining him

in it. Of course, it has done me very little good. Seeing him there, in my mind's eye, I long even more to be with him; and I mourn his loneliness even more than my own.

I am lonely, but I am not alone as much as I would like. Gilbert's policy group has settled down to an intensive period of work, and they often hold their meetings here. That is always agreeable, and sometimes even quite exciting; but I feel I am beset with people. Then, although I miss Lindsay when she is out several days running, when I do see her I may feel quite incapable of saying another word to any human being.

For the flat, with Nanny installed in it, is really overcrowded. Usually she stays in the country and keeps the house ready for us, but I did not feel that would do while she was still convalescent. I preferred to have her under my eye.

It has worked out, naturally enough, the other way round, and I find that hard to bear. Ordinarily, I am by myself in the flat a great deal (for I hardly count Evelyn's unobtrusive presence) and I have become accustomed to an independent, and almost capricious existence. If it suits me, I like to read in the morning and buy vegetables in the afternoon, and if I am not hungry I am quite satisfied with a very skimpy lunch. Our daily woman has been trained to work her way tactfully through the rooms in any order that fits in with my movements; and I have done any cooking that was needed, with considerable success, and without feeling the disagreeable pressure of organization.

I have had to alter all that. For Nanny's sake, meals must be regular and lavish, and she has to be persuaded not to take too much upon herself. Because there are more bodies to avoid, the daily woman has to be given

instructions, and, so that they may be carried out, I have to remember when to efface my-self.

But all this is only a mild irritation. What really troubles me (because it makes me ashamed) is that I am finding Nanny so difficult. I had expected her to be weak, but I had not expected her to be peevish, fussy and inquisitive. It was stupid of me, for of course it is quite natural. She has never in her life been seriously ill before and besides the physical discomfort, she suffers also from resentment. She complains because she is in London; because she feels tired; because I don't let her get about and do something; and because she does not think the furniture is properly polished.

I know her life is very dull, and I spend as much time as I can with her. Once we settle down together over sewing or a cup of tea, something of the old comfortable spirit still hovers just in the offing. But there are other times when I can hardly control my irritation — for instance, when I find her sighing over a table-top (just 'giving it a rub') or when I hear the ominous sound of furniture being moved, and rush out to find her 'just showing up some of the corners, so that they don't get passed over again'.

Worst of all, she has taken a great dislike to Evelyn. There is no reason at all for it as far as I can see except, perhaps, jealousy. Towards the charwoman, whom she feels entitled to criticize, she shows a sort of condescending cordiality, which has not so far been resented; but she will hardly speak to Evelyn, whose sphere she does not understand. Since I have more than once stopped her talking to me about Evelyn's faults (which I don't believe exist, and in any case are not Nanny's business) she has taken to muttering about them when she knows I am in earshot, but not in sight. I can't help hearing, in this way, that

Evelyn 'creeps about the house', 'knows everything' and 'has a nasty, sly, insinuating way of managing'. Perhaps it is cowardly of me not to take Nanny to task, but I don't know where to begin. Evelyn's silent and adroit efficiency could appear like that to an ignorant person who envied her assured niche in the household; but I have really so little sympathy with Nanny on this subject that I dread embarking upon it. After all, it was she who first taught me manners and it seems an outrage, particularly when she is the victim of her own physical state, to tell her that I think her opinion of Evelyn both false and spiteful.

Naturally, Evelyn herself is affected by it. I have apologized to her on Nanny's behalf; and made it clear that it is distressing for me too. Evelyn, of course, tells me that she lets it all slide off her, and I mustn't worry; but I do worry over what she had to put up with, and over the signs of strain I see on her face. When I am out to lunch, she now brings sandwiches with her to eat in the office. She dreads the brooding silence in the kitchen just as much as I should.

I very seldom ask Gilbert's advice, because he has enough troubles of his own, but one evening when I was feeling very desperate, I did explain to him what was going on, and asked him if there was anything we could do to make things easier for Evelyn. He told me blandly that women think too much about personalities and, in consequence, suffered from them quite unnecessarily.

'Evelyn's a sensible girl,' he said, 'she won't take it seriously.'

'I know that's what she says. But she's so good, and so anxious to help. I'm afraid she'll try to be too brave and silent, and then find she can't stand it a moment longer. It would be a disaster to lose her.'

Gilbert smiled in a way that seemed to be repellently complacent.

'I don't think there's much risk of that. She's always been happy here, and after all she spends most of the day in her own room.'

'I was wondering if it would be worth trying to get Nanny away for convalescence. It would be a relief to me too.'

'Might be worth trying,' said Gilbert, picking up the telephone and dialling a number as he went on talking, 'but I think you'll find in another week or two that it's all blown over. Nanny's just the same as she ever was to me, and once she's back in her stride, I don't think you'll have any more trouble with her.'

He managed to make me think it was all my fault. This is the first time in my life that I have not been able to talk freely to Nanny about whatever happened to be in my mind. I have to look about for subjects for conversation, and this gives it a brittle, artificial air, which I find boring, and which very likely makes her uneasy. She certainly pursues me with questions about what I have been doing, or where I have been; and this, which I might once have taken as a natural sign of loving interest, sometimes makes me conceal some quite harmless incident which I had intended to tell her because I thought it would interest her, or make her laugh.

Gilbert has a knack of giving me a bad conscience; and that night I could not sleep. He lay placidly beside me, easily casting off the strain of a day that had been, he told me at length after he had finished telephoning, particularly successful. They had hit on a particularly artful manœuvre for delaying a Government bill until, they hoped, after the election. I suppose I hinted that I thought they were mainly working on a policy of a more

positive sort, for he went on to explain, in his more oratorical style, how it all fitted together. Now he lay like a child with his arms thrown back over his head. I was tempted to wake him, just for the physical relief of curling up against him and receiving a little silent consolation. That would have come easy to him, but I feared I should be left with a familiar sense of disappointment. For it was something else I wanted from him. I wanted him to tell me what to do. On the surface of my mind, I wanted him to help me with our domestic troubles; but perhaps I really wanted him to help me in the situation I had so blindly walked into. Or perhaps I wanted him to be a different person.

I kept my lamp on, and tried to read. It was not very successful. If it was really my fault, if I had been handling Nanny badly, then there must be something I could do. I could think of nothing that was likely to be of immediate practical use. And so I came to the even gloomier conclusion that she had simply aged ten years in the last two months, and that we would have to get used to it as quickly as we could. She was my responsibility for ever and ever and there was no way of shelving it. I resolved to be more patient.

My resolution was tried almost as soon as I woke up. She brought me my letters and handed them to me one by one, not exactly as if she were reading the addresses, but as if she were weighing them in her hand, trying to get some sense of their nature, without having the audacity to try and find out who had written them.

One was from Claudia, asking us, as she had promised, to dinner with them. She was going to Scotland in the following week to do a portrait, and she suggested a date for the week after unless, by any fortunate chance, we happened to be free the day before she travelled. She

was longing to see us, and had so much enjoyed having Lindsay about the place.

I suppose I had been waiting for this letter; I had told Stephen that we must wait for some natural occasion when we could meet. I picked the earlier date, because I did not want to wait any longer than I need. Gilbert, mercifully, was not engaged.

Lindsay, who finished her new dinner dress in the nick of time, begged us all to dress up. I lent her my garnet ear-rings, a brilliant echo of the dull, rich surface of the cloth. I decided to wear black, not, I must say, because I was disinclined to attract attention, but because I preferred to give that impression. Velvet is kind to my skin, but a high neck-line, and a simple silver clip, are an advertisement of discretion.

Lindsay and I were quite charmed with each other, and Gilbert told us we were both dressed to kill.

'Our whole object is to do you credit, Father,' said Lindsay primly, and then laughed with pleasure, hanging on to his arm. Gilbert surveyed us affectionately. Yes, we were certainly a credit to him.

'We are going to have coffee in the studio, Mother,' said Lindsay as we drew near the orthodox entrance to the house. 'I persuaded Claudia. You really will be fascinated by it.'

I was already delighted by the graceful curve of the terrace, following, I imagine, the line of the canal at the back. At that moment the evening became real for me. I knew I could enjoy it for its own sake, without thinking too much. I felt very confident, very self-contained, as I went in to greet my hosts.

All the people for whom Lindsay had given me a curiosity were there. Adrian, whose coquettish good manners only playfully disguised an intelligent and

enterprising spirit; Celestine, her face like an admirable piece of colour-printing from her own paper who looked at me, I thought, with approval; and Baba, who turned out to be a gentle, elephantine middle-aged man, who plays eighteen-stone parts on the stage, and romantic heroes on the radio. We sat at a round table, candlelit. Lindsay, opposite me, looked radiantly happy and beautiful as she lent back a little to allow Adrian and Michael to talk across her. Baba, on my right, related to me his first essay on television, giving me the impression that the screen had literally and physically cramped him, as if he had been squeezed by force into a small box.

Claudia broke in on us. 'Oh, Baba, you must tell everyone. It's so funny.'

She preferred general conversation; or at least she liked to 'produce' each of her guests for the benefit of the whole company. She teased Celestine about an article which, she alleged, had been called 'What the fashionable woman is reading this week'; and Celestine, for whom fashion is an entirely serious matter, rose like a trout, a humourless, fishlike expression on her streamlined face. Gilbert complained that fashionable women were the only people who had time to read books at all; as an unhappy politician he confined himself mainly to roneoed documents and newspapers. He was inclined to think, though, that he wasn't missing very much, and went on to give us a brilliant indictment of contemporary literature.

The conversation flowed easily this way and that, a gay, accomplished game having, like most games, a certain air of contest. Lindsay, who took very little part, turned her bright, excited eyes from one of us to the other, as if she were watching tennis. I almost forgot for long stretches

that behind the performance there were other things going on.

It was Baba who reminded me. He was telling us some story when he made a gesture with his hand that I recognized as a theatrical trick of Gilbert's. This tough old actor had picked out of the airy persiflage a single point that might be of use and was practising to take it away with him. Yet no one would have realized that he was watching Gilbert with any particular intensity; or guess that he would remember him, if at all, not as the man who told an amusing story about Somerset Maugham, but as a man who held up a well-shaped left hand in a certain way.

Under the bright reflecting surface, permeable like water, not like glass, there were extraordinary currents. I was in love with Stephen who, on my immediate left, seemed also at a great distance. We exchanged suitable little phrases occasionally — light stuff which would not stem the eddies around Claudia's dinner table. We contrived, somehow or other, not to look at each other.

It was in the most natural way in the world that, in the studio afterwards, I urged him to come and have a meal with us while he was on his own.

'I'd like to,' he said. 'May I ring you tomorrow?'

'Ah, do,' I said, 'do.'

So we met the next day. Strolling down Holland Walk, with the leaves scurrying in front of us along the fence, we were able to talk a little about ourselves. It did not amount to very much — simply that we were both happy to be together.

It was Saturday afternoon. A young father with a blank, docile face waited by an empty push-chair while his daughter scuffed back and forth through a drift of

leaves. We made a detour round a string of children jostling along beside their leader and guardian — a lad of about seven. A very young couple passed us, silent, hand in hand.

He was pleased I liked Baba — one of the few friends that he and Claudia had in common. Had I noticed that curious sympathy, or perhaps empathy was a better word for a faculty so uncorrupted by sentiment, that lay beneath the grotesque charm, the flamboyant manner, the ironic egotism. Yes, indeed I had seen how he might slip into another personality, simply through the magic of assuming its outward expression.

'Then tell me about Adrian,' I said. 'I hardly talked to him.'

'Claudia is convinced he has great talents,' said Stephen coldly, 'but he's a bit too rarified for me.'

I remembered I had once been told that Claudia liked to surround herself with men who did not, ordinarily, care for women. 'They are the ideal friends,' she was reported to have said, 'for respectable wives — superb company and not a breath of scandal.' Yet when he talked of Adrian, I felt Stephen slipping away from me, his face masked with jealousy, not towards a rival, but towards an alien taste. I had made a false step into those established regions of his life which I could not enter without pain. So I drew back hastily, only zealous to preserve our two selves within our charmed circle, free from conflict and anxiety. When you send a soap bubble, floating miraculously in the dangerous air above the furniture, all you can do is to blow it lightly away from the jagged edges.

I touched his sleeve, guiding him towards a turning.

'Where are we going,' he said, smiling at me, thinking of no one now but me.

'We are going to have tea in a little out-of-the-way

corner. Rather better tea than the last time. And then I must go home.'

It was just before I left him that he asked me when he could see me again. 'It seems,' he said, 'very harmless.'

I promised I would let him know.

Chapter 4

THROUGH the autumn and the early winter we met often. It seemed so harmless. With the skill of convalescents, we avoided deep and dangerous feelings, and fed our friendship with moderate and easy pleasures. There were no great occasions, no crucial interviews, nothing to hide. We lent each other books, went occasionally to a film or a play, and visited each other's houses. It often happened that we were alone, not so much intentionally as because we both live with people who are very much occupied. Alone or in company, our conversation had the same character. I did not dare to remind him (or myself) of the past. The warmth and meaning it gave to our present could still be tacitly enjoyed, while we kept to the even and, comparatively, featureless course of friendship.

In the summer, I became a different person. It was as if I had passed through a lifetime, more than a lifetime, of change in a few full days. Since we had now elected to sterilize that whole area of our history, I cherished what was left, without expecting anything new or extraordinary. A road was closed; and I could not imagine any better prospect than staying where we were.

I was quite mistaken. If it is possible to close one road, it is not possible to bring all the processes of growth to a

standstill. Yet it was a long time before I realized that something unexpected was happening. I found myself getting to know him.

When I fell in love with him, I imagined that I knew him through and through. It seemed that everything lay open; and in a sense that was true. But there was no time to make explorations, so obsessed were we with our feeling for each other, and the words and gestures that expressed and evoked it. It is only in the intervals of love that other facets show, and since we condemned ourselves to an interval without a term, I began to see him as a deeper and richer character. When he talks to me about his work and interests, I see that he can be tough as well as generous, resourceful as well as patient. He has obviously been very successful; but it is not a story of personal success that he tells me. He thinks aloud, describing the people and situations that interest him, and the problems that he finds baffling. This world of his interests is one that Gilbert, for instance, would find intolerably circumscribed; but it is the right size for me. I can imagine what it must be like to live in, and understand how one could put one's whole heart into it.

Sometimes I feel I am living stretches of his life. Now that I know his old wound sometimes aches in cold weather, I notice his almost imperceptible limp; and feel my own left leg disposed to stumble in sympathy. I have a sort of clairvoyant knowledge of his tastes and moods, as he has of mine. I can tell by instinct whether he is inclined to talk about his own affairs, or longs to be distracted from them; and it seems I can always please him simply by following my own impulses, and saying what occurs to me.

I never knew this was possible. In childhood one feels identified with one's family, but growing up is a journey

into isolation. Everybody is a stranger. Every face hides so much, the most familiar voice has tones that one does not hear, and it may prove necessary to withdraw into self-dependence rather than to fumble helplessly and endlessly for some response.

I have completely failed to get acquainted with Gilbert. In twenty years, I have learnt the knack of looking after him; but there is something so alien to me about his whole cast of mind that I have never had any feeling of knowing it from the inside, I have simply acquired some familiarity with its effects. Even when he most charms me (and that has come easy) I have never lost the sense that we are distinct personalities, even opposites. I have never felt able to relax.

From the beginning, I was a little enslaved; and the price has been that I have become cool and wary, meeting as well as I was able demands which often seem arbitrary, and serving ambitions that I do not share. I sometimes wonder if he too is conscious of distance and tension. It seems unlikely. People are important to him as instruments and objects of power and beyond that he has very little curiosity about them.

I thought we married for love; but then I found we had contracted a marriage of passion and convenience. How binding that is. It is too late now to complain if he is negligent or exacting. He still depends on me to fulfil my side of the bargain.

My private life has been turned upside-down. Gilbert thinks of nothing but his political intrigues; and it is with Stephen that I can enjoy some domestic peace and comfort. Once when I raised my eyes from my sewing, I was on the point of telling him that we might have been married for years; but I restrained myself.

When I visit Claudia, it is always as one of a family

party; and we generally find her surrounded with people. There has been, to my relief; no occasion for private talk, but it appears she has not pursued the idea of a separation. For this, I feel a sort of contorted gratitude. I *could not* leave Gilbert; but I don't know how I should bear it if Stephen were 'free' and I too abandoned him to the freedom of an empty life.

We are better as we are. From the whirlpool of talk and laughter that Claudia loves to stir up from her studio (in the intervals of austere and intensive work) Baba and I can withdraw to the charmed peace of Stephen's music. He plays to us simple pieces that I like, and feel I can in my own fashion understand. It is not their fashion. I can guess that they both know a pure delight in sound — entirely unassociated with words or images — which has always been beyond me. I am ignorant and unpractised. But I am beginning to listen better. Sometimes Stephen plays me first some of the phrases I shall hear, and then the form of the music becomes more apparent. Baba sometimes supplies a brief knowledgeable lecture on musical structure. 'This is the ideal kindergarten,' he says affectionately, 'two teachers and one intelligent pupil.'

In my own house, Stephen has a passion for finding himself odd jobs. A loose door-handle, which has only given me an occasional, inactive sense of irritation, is now professionally plugged and screwed; the vacuum cleaner is oiled; and my lighter works.

For a long time, also, he has had his eye on the grandfather's clock in the hall, which we have prostituted, since it finally came to a stop, to the storage of umbrellas. In the end, he announced that he was going to take it to pieces.

For the whole of one winter afternoon, he was occupied

with my ancient and dignified machine, his gentle, intelligent fingers coaxing back the power of movement. First, he reduced it to its elements. Then took them, carefully laid out on a tray, to the clear light of the sitting-room window. There he pulled up a chair, and sat staring at what looked to me a collection of random junk, with an expression I can hardly describe. Curiosity, anticipation, and a kind of placid pleasure, were combined in it.

'Ah,' he said suddenly, 'I think I see.'

He laid out neatly on the window seat the fine tools he had so prudently brought with him. Then with an air of certainty he began his operation.

'I wish I understood machines,' I said. 'They must be such a nice change from human beings — so docile and consistent.'

He smiled without looking up. 'That's a big mistake. Actually, they can be just as perverse and stubborn . . .' he blew a speck of dust off the thread of a screw '. . . but there is a difference. One isn't for some reason quite so tempted to hit them with a hammer when they don't work. . . .'

'Has Claudia been having an attack of temperament?'

'Yes, and I was . . .' very delicately, he eased a spring into position '. . . stupid.'

'You have never been stupid with me.'

It was such a pleasure to see him suddenly looking shy. No one has ever paid him enough compliments, and encouraged him to enjoy being handsome and clever. He flushed faintly as he stirred a pile of miscellaneous components with the end of the screwdriver.

'I don't know about that.'

'Well, anyway, what was the matter with Claudia?'

'A lot of nonsense. She was annoyed about some seedy

young friend of Adrian's, who had apparently behaved very oddly. I told her if she wants to have a finger in Adrian's private life, she ought to be prepared for any . . . eccentricity.'

'But what should you have said?'

'Nothing. Just laughed. When she told the whole story to Baba, they both laughed themselves silly.'

At breakfast next day Lindsay informed us that she had joined the Labour Party. Gilbert frowned, and then lifted his eyebrows sceptically.

'Ten years ago,' he said, 'it was more fashionable to spend eighteen months or so among the comrades.'

'I'm serious,' said Lindsay.

'Oh, of course,' said Gilbert. He was in a hurry to get off, and pushed his letters across to me, and asked me to pass on some message to Evelyn. As he got up he patted Lindsay on the head.

'I'm serious too,' he said cheerfully.

'Don't treat me like a baby, Father. I'm nearly twenty. Old enough to feel ashamed if other people have wretched lives and no proper opportunities.'

'My dear girl, your Socialists don't give opportunities, they take them away. They've tied us all up in knots only a contortionist could wriggle out of.'

'Of course,' said Lindsay reasonably, 'there have been mistakes.'

'Naturally. They are working on a set of impossible ideas, killing initiative and protecting and rewarding incompetence.'

'You know that's unfair. You must admit, Father, that. . .'

Gilbert put his hand on my shoulder.

'I must leave you now, my dears. Let me keep my illusions, Lindsay, I'm too old to change them.'

As soon as he had gone, Lindsay turned upon me. 'Why didn't you support me?'

'Darling, not at breakfast.'

'Does he really believe all he says?'

'You'll have to ask him.'

Gilbert will give her a far better answer than I can. I remember much too clearly the time when he was first interested in politics. By temperament, he told me, he was a Liberal, but it would of course be frivolous to give his services to a dying party. For a period he aired his moral conflict here and there, asking it seemed the modest question, how he could best be of use to his country. That was really what disgusted me. He already had a great professional reputation, and it was shameless to put it up for auction. As a conscientious seeker after truth, he coquetted with both sides. Finally, after prophesying that the trades unions were likely to strangle the Labour Party for another half century, he joined the Conservatives, where it seemed his abilities would get quicker recognition. Perhaps he had been promised it; at all events he was picked young for advancement and, if the next election is favourable, he may not have long to wait for a big job. He is rather condescending about certain Labour intellectuals of his own age who are still grinding their teeth on the back benches.

It is a waste of time for Lindsay to argue with him about principles. But she keeps at it. Generally, he enrages her by brushing it all off, but when he is not actually in flight to some urgent appointment, he takes a few minutes to lead her into a maze of her own arguments, and brings her almost to tears. I beg them to stop, and they both turn on me indignantly. Lindsay says I am worse than Claudia; she has no settled politics, but it isn't because

she won't take the trouble to think. Gilbert then comes in on my side. He is quite prepared to do the thinking for the two of us.

We are all on edge. Nanny observes sagaciously that Gilbert will be easier in himself when they 'make him a minister', Very likely, but that's somewhere in the future. As for Lindsay, Nanny expects her to marry young, and hopes she will choose Michael, who is her most popular visitor.

He is charming, but I don't know if Lindsay has any serious interest in him. They like each other enormously, and I can see his influence in a great deal of her conversation; but I suspect it is only Nanny who falls into a romantic dream when they come into the house arm in arm.

Nanny always talks as if marriage were the cure for all troubles. She is much concerned because Evelyn shows no signs of getting engaged; and talks very sanctimoniously about what a great thing it would be for her. I have often thought the same myself, but I suspect that Nanny is mainly interested in any prospects that would get Evelyn out of the house. Perhaps I am unfair, but it is only since I refused to listen to complaints that Nanny has begun to fuss, instead, about Evelyn's private life.

Evelyn is the one person in the household who never weighs on my spirits. Her reserve, which used to worry me, marks out a region where nothing reminds me of harassing responsibilities. She withdraws into herself more and more, always helpful, and always uncommunicative. In the old days, I might have asked her what has happened to the shy and weedy admirer who used sometimes to call for her after work; but now it is a relief to feel that I need not know. There are enough complications

around me. Our brief; business-like conversations are a relief and pleasure.

It is several days since I saw Stephen. I have never been in such a tetchy and clumsy mood, and I am disgusted with myself. If Gilbert and Lindsay scrap, and if Nanny wavers between peevishness and nonsensical gossip, I ought to be able to think of something else to do with them. I hope I shall be able to see Stephen tomorrow. As soon as I am with him I shall become an angel of good temper, and remember how to enjoy things again. As likely as not, he will say something that makes me actually feel more tender towards poor, captious Nanny, and very likely he will remind me (as he has before) that children do argue with their parents and come to no harm from it. At all events, I shall start again with some fresh thoughts in my head.

I long for him. If I could see him now, now this minute, everything would be smoothed out. Perhaps I wouldn't even need to tell him anything. All my irritations would dwindle until they become not worth the trouble of telling.

It was stupid of me to think I could cure a headache by lying down in the dark. I have only thought and brooded, and now the longing to dream about Stephen hits me under the ribs.

Very rarely, very cautiously, I sometimes let myself indulge in the sweet, torturing dream of what our life might have been if we had been allowed to live it together. It is a dream of perfection. Our separate troubles, silences, rare ill-humours, have never kept us apart. Whatever we do, we are drawn closer. We should have married. . . .

I must get up. There are a lot of things to do. Gilbert has invited some people to supper, but is doubtful whether

two or four of them will come, so I must invent an adaptable menu. It is too late to ring up Stephen.

The front door bangs. Gilbert calls to me. Can I help him. . . .

Yes, I'm coming. Let me just comb my hair, and do something to my miserable face.

Chapter 5

GILBERT had left a sheet of important notes somewhere round the house. We searched for it everywhere. Evelyn had gone, leaving no sign of any stray paper, and it seemed most likely it was tucked somewhere inside a book.

'What have you been reading, Gilbert?'

'Nothing. Do I ever have time? I hope no one threw it away; it would take me hours to check all those references again.'

'It must be somewhere,' I said, feeling down the sides of an armchair, 'we never throw anything away.'

Gilbert and I searched in silence for several minutes. Then he looked at his watch, came across the room and kissed me, and asked me to let him know when I found it. As he was leaving the room, Lindsay ran in, and dragged him back to me.

'What's all this,' she said, 'about Evelyn leaving us? Can either of you explain it? I thought she was settled here for life. Has Nanny driven her out? Or what is it?'

I looked towards Gilbert. What a blow for all of us! He, however, evidently prepared, took it very calmly.

'Yes, she spoke to me about it this morning. I must say, it's awkward, at this moment particularly, but if she's made up her mind, that's that.'

‘But she’s been with us five years,’ I said, ‘we can’t just let her go. There may be something we could do to persuade her to stay.’

‘I doubt it,’ said Gilbert, ‘but perhaps there’s no harm in trying.’

I was still looking, while I talked, for his notes. He was standing comfortably in front of the fire, smiling to himself as if at a secure distance from the minor troubles of life.

‘It does seem a pity,’ said Lindsay.

‘Your mother,’ said Gilbert, ‘has always thought she should have a job where she is not so much alone.’

‘Yes, I still do. But it’s unbearable to think we may have made her miserable. I don’t understand you at all, Gilbert. It’s monstrous to take this matter-of-fact, heartless line about it. Although that doesn’t really surprise me! What is astonishing is that you don’t seem to realize how awkward it will be for you. . . ’

Gilbert looked at his nails and whistled, then shot a quick glance at me.

‘I’m sure you’d be the first to agree that we ought not to stand in her way.’

A commendable sentiment, but his unctuous tones (he had obviously made some other arrangement which suited him as well, or better) enraged me quite beyond control. I went to my bedroom.

Fate always takes a hand on Gilbert’s side. His notes lay plain to see on the mantelpiece. I was very tempted to score off him by keeping them to myself; but it was too babyish. I took them in to him at once.

He put them in his pocket absent-mindedly, without thanking me. After all, he had known I would find them sooner or later. I always do.

‘I was just telling Lindsay,’ he said, ‘I am planning to

share an office and staff with the rest of the group. . . . '

So Evelyn has been allowed to go. I told her I was sorry. She looked as if she was going to cry, and begged me not to discuss it. It is quite possible that Gilbert told her there was no longer a job for her; but I suppose it's not my business. No doubt Evelyn is capable of arranging her own affairs; but it is always distressing for me to see people enduring his high-handed treatment, particularly if they have been dependable and devoted.

He assured me that the new system will work very nicely. We have always been short of space in the flat, and his work is growing. That is all reasonable, but I don't approve. Perhaps I am a little frightened of having more freedom, more time to myself.

Chapter 6

I LIKE being alone. Since we are spending Christmas in London, I had to arrange a flying visit to the country just beforehand, so as to keep up the tradition of giving out the week's wages myself. I did not ask Gilbert to come with me. He would probably have refused — he thinks I make a quite unnecessary fuss about doing things personally — but I did not want to risk my solitude. So I took it for granted that no one else would have any time to spare. Lindsay was obviously relieved. She has hardly done any of her shopping, and Claudia is giving some sort of party.

'I shall be quite happy,' I said.

'Are you sure, Mother? You see, it's Colin's first day home, and I promised to be there.'

'Of course you must go. Remember to tell them how sorry I am to miss it.'

In fact, it was with a sense of great liberation that I set out on my journey. I was, after all, going home. The flat is simply a convenience, a roof over our heads, very little more than a machine for living in, complete with central heating, a refrigerator, an electric cleaner, and a telephone beside the bed. If we have to live in a machine, we may as well enjoy the benefits, but it is a wretched fate. I would rather have elbow-room and a house with some history, deserving respect and tenderness.

The house is there waiting for me; but I can only snatch a little time in it. At least I was determined to give myself a long day, and it was still dark when I left Gilbert sleeping. Outside, a grey smoky light was filtering through a high mist. I shivered as I waited for a taxi, but more with anticipation than with cold. An unfamiliar time of day gives any journey an air of adventure. It was in this fragile light that I first saw the coast of France; and I remember it too when I was rushed out to the hospital the day that Lindsay was born.

The day cleared as I drove to the station. The main streets were busy. Stolid groups waited at the bus stops, patiently following their daily routine. The side-roads were still empty. Behind the curtained windows of a row of rich houses people were hugging their last sleep. Only a red-haired paper boy went whistling from door to door, vaulting the low railings between the gardens, and leaving his big footmarks on the garden-beds.

My train was rather empty. I found a carriage to myself, and got out my book and my knitting, and prepared a forbidding expression for the discouragement of other travellers. I wanted to be free to watch, whenever I chose, the unrolling landscape I already know by heart. I was curious about the weather, which in town one hardly notices. Would there be a crackle of ice along the edge of the ditches? And would the sun be shining?

The train moved. I looked out at the triangle of buildings beyond the goods yards. They crystallize for me the excitement of arriving, or of starting out. They might be stage scenery, a gaunt background for the series of curving tracks. I have never seen anyone looking out of the windows; but there are windows, and something must go on behind them.

I heard someone coming down the corridor. I opened

my book at random and bent my head over it. The corridor door was pushed back.

'May I come and join you?'

'Stephen! I had no idea. . . .'

'Nor had I my dear. I only thought of it last night.'

'But where are you going?'

'There and back. To keep you company. That is, if you allow me. Otherwise I suppose I could drop off at Ealing Broadway.'

He was smiling. He had seen my face light up with pleasure and surprise. He sat down opposite to me, and took my hand. Then spoke more seriously.

'I really am a little diffident. Were you looking forward to a day's holiday from everyone and everything? If so, you can tell me.'

'I did want to escape,' I said, 'but not from you. I might have invited you, only it would have seemed impossible.'

'So impossible that I just took a day off and came, without a word to anyone.'

That was a warning. I ought to have told him I would not have him on a secret expedition. I might have been resolute enough for that beforehand, but the train was sliding out through the suburbs. The day had begun. He was there, holding my hand, and the prospect of a few hours to ourselves was too captivating.

'You look a little disapproving.'

'I only disapprove of myself. I'm so delighted. It's the nicest thing you could have done. Why don't you take your coat off? Then you won't be tempted to jump out at the first stop.'

He settled himself in his corner and looked me up and down.

'This is the first time we have travelled anywhere together,' I said.

‘I know. You must tell how you like it done. Should we read papers for the first half-hour?’

‘No thank you. I can read any time. Talk to me.’

‘Tell me first whether I must come straight back, or whether I can wait till the afternoon train.’

‘Oh, stay. Then we may have time for a walk. We’re going to find the most wonderful weather. Look at it.’

We were rushing through a blue and silver landscape. The hoar frost, melting slowly in the bright, cold sunshine, glittered on the faded grass; and the bare trees shone with moisture.

The brilliant day might have been made for us, so well it matched my feelings. I felt gay, and confident and light-hearted, as if nothing could deeply trouble me again.

We walked up from the station by the footpaths. There was no wind and, although our breath turned misty in the motionless air, the cold was not bitter. It was pleasant to pause for a moment or two on the bridge.

‘It’s a pity,’ I said, ‘that we’re never able to spend much of the winter here. It’s lovely, isn’t it? And you begin to see a few signs of spring so much sooner than you ever expect. All sorts of things are beginning to grow already. . . .’

My voice died. There was a long silence. The water hissed and gurgled under the bridge. There was no other sound. I stared across the fields, smiling to myself, breathing the clean, chill air with rapture.

‘My darling,’ said Stephen. Ah, I had been waiting for that. And yet . . . and yet . . . there was a strained, rough, desperate note in his voice that filled me with foreboding, even while it melted my heart in a blind and reckless tenderness. A long kiss, fruit of privation and bold, secret dreams, the crown and blessing of our escape together, transported us into a world outside time and

events. And yet it must have been then that we finally despaired of living in any other world but the one we know, where love must carry its own burden of grief.

'What are we going to do?' he said.

I had no courage to answer. The river rushed under us, with a noise like confused voices, threatening, drowning my thoughts. Under a dazzling, indifferent sky, I clutched his hand, trembling. With his other hand, he lifted up my chin, and I looked at him in silence.

'You see,' he said, 'I love you.'

'Yes.' I could only say one word. He knew how much I meant by it, for he smiled. Then he began rubbing my chilled fingers.

'That's all very well,' he said lightly, 'but I shouldn't allow you to perish of cold.'

We walked very briskly to the house. A fire had been lit in the kitchen, and eggs, bread, butter and milk were set out on the big, bare table. In this warm and cheerful place I could forget that he had asked me a question. I only remembered that I loved him.

'It is so,' I said. 'I could easily tell you too often, even bore you a little.'

'No.'

Our lunch was delicious, but neither of us ate much. As I was finishing my mug of milk, a feeling of absolute terror came over me, and I drank very slowly.

'You may as well put it down,' said Stephen, 'it's empty.'

I put it down, and waited for him to speak.

'Well?' he said.

'There is no answer to that question.'

'Unless you feel you could leave Gilbert. I want to marry you. I don't think there would be any great difficulty on my side. But you . . . I can't tell. I am groping in

the dark. But it doesn't seem possible to go on as we are.'

It had become impossible. What was I to say? I put my elbows on the table and rested my face in my hands. I must say no. But how was I to condemn myself to desolation and exile without sobbing aloud. I heard him scrape back his chair, and move restlessly about the room. I tried to speak, hut the words would not come out. A few warm tears crept between my fingers.

Stephen touched my hair, and said very gently, 'Is it the prospect of marrying me that makes you cry?'

'It's because I wish I could.'

He sighed. 'Does it all seem too difficult?'

'Not so much difficult. Simply . . . impossible.'

He sat down again beside me. I wiped my tears, like a street urchin, with the back of my hand, and raised my head.

'Why is it impossible?' he persisted.

'For no logical reason. I have never been happy with Gilbert, but I couldn't leave him. I should feel wicked. I promised I would live with him for life.'

I turned my eyes away from Stephen's troubled face. It was a reproach to me, for I had used him badly. And yet it was because he had made me love him.

'Perhaps,' he said, 'you are fonder of Gilbert than you realize.'

'It's not that. The illusion was that I did once think I was fond of him. I didn't know . . . what it could be like.'

'But you still won't marry me?'

I shook my head.

'I was beginning to hope,' he said. It sounded as if he were talking to himself. Our kitchen is haunted by a faint, wayward echo, and his voice lingered, like words half-heard in a dream. He was looking away from me into the

shadows that were gathering round us as the short daylight faded. I have never felt so near him; it was as if I was touching the formless stuff of thought, or overhearing the silent beating of a heart. He could have had whatever he wanted, except the one decision he had asked for.

He made no move to touch me. Forced to a decision, I had said no; but it was not a positive choice, I was simply incapable of saying yes. As, momentarily, my choice took shape and substance in my mind, it became inescapable. No refuge, but a great rock across my path, with a long shadow of regret and bitterness and guilt.

'I have been wicked and cruel,' I said, beating my fists on the table. He looked at me with surprise, doubtfully.

There is no need to blame yourself,' he said.

'I do, I do,' I cried, weeping. He did then stroke my shoulder, a little timidly, as I lay with my head on my arms.

'I never meant to make you unhappy,' he said.

'But it is only,' I said, gulping the words out like a child, 'because I have been so happy.'

He came and knelt beside me and held me in his arms till I stopped crying. Then he gently disengaged himself.

'You know, I must catch my train.'

I took him a little way along the road. I felt very calm and sad and empty. I wished there was more to say, anything to shield me from the recognition that I had taken an irreversible course. I do not know whether it was cruel or kind of him to make matter-of-fact conversation about Colin's party, and to ask me about the jobs I still had in front of me. That made it possible for me to walk down the road like an ordinary person, whose thoughts are decently hidden; but it was also a proof that we had no more hopes.

We said goodbye at the corner. I turned and walked

away without looking back. One can stand on the quay and wave as a great liner sets out for the Antipodes, but that is not so final.

I hardly know how I got through the rest of the day. I saw everybody, gave them warm messages from Gilbert, shook their hands, and heard the news of their wives and children. I think they were pleased to see me, and that cheered me a little; but I still felt I was talking and smiling like an automaton, with no heart or spirit left in me. Old Morse left me with his customary valediction — 'God bless you'. I wish I knew how to receive a divine blessing.

I had arranged to dine with Conrad. He came over and fetched me, and persuaded me to take my things and sleep there, rather than in my own empty and melancholy house. Later on, as we sank into our big chairs in front of a huge log fire, I tried to tell him how glad I was to be there in warmth and company. Indeed, I felt it, as my pretty speech ran off my tongue, and Conrad looked flattered.

'I have managed to make myself comfortable,' he said. He looked the picture of solid contentment, a kind, simple-minded man, ageing a little early, and perhaps enjoying it. I wondered if I would catch him up in another ten or twenty years; and appear, at least, reconciled with myself and my life.

'I shall miss you over Christmas,' he said. 'You must tell Lindsay I've been exercising Betsy, when I had the time, but she ought to come down herself. What's keeping you all in London? A God-forsaken place for spending Christmas, I should have thought.'

'Oh, it is. But there are all sorts of things. Gilbert's overwhelmed with work. You've no idea what a tyranny politics are.'

‘I’m sorry for Gilbert.’

‘Why? He chose it himself.’

‘That’s not quite it,’ said Conrad slowly. ‘Things have a way of growing up round you. I just happened to fall on the right patch. Perhaps I don’t put it very well, but you’ll see what I mean.’

I laughed. ‘Gilbert doesn’t fall anywhere. He carves out niches. It’s an entirely different way of living.’

Conrad shook his head. ‘You’re too clever for me,’ he said. He was evidently pursuing some elusive train of thought. He distrusts words, and has a habit of feeling for them with a sort of tense caution, as if he were putting his weight on a rickety plank. He frowned, and bit his lip, then shrugged his shoulders, as if he had decided to be very daring.

‘All the same, I’m sorry for him.’

My conscience was not clear. More defensively, I asked again ‘Why?’

‘He has had to fight. Nothing has ever come easily.’

‘Only that? But he loves fighting.’

‘I don’t know.’ Conrad lifted his great weight out of the chair, and threw a new log on the fire. He straightened his back slowly, and did not immediately turn round. I knew it was no use my speaking. Inch by inch he works his way to the end of the plank.

‘It may have been bad luck for poor old Gilbert to marry someone who is much too good for him.’

I thought I was beyond feeling anything; but that made me angry.

‘I never thought of myself in that way.’

Conrad blushed with confusion and embarrassment, as if his bridge had broken and landed him in a muddy ditch.

‘My dear girl, I wasn’t attacking you. Perhaps I’m quite wrong. Probably I am. I notice the wrong things,

and of course I express myself badly. But it has sometimes seemed to me as if Gilbert . . .'

'Gilbert does very much what he likes.'

'I just don't know ...' he struggled, looking at me very anxiously. 'Perhaps I'd better not say anything.'

'Oh, say it. I would like to hear anything that I didn't know about Gilbert.'

'I sometimes think,' said Conrad, shifting his eyes like a nervous schoolboy, embarking on the language that he must have used when he was a little child in an Eton collar, 'I sometimes think Gilbert must sometimes have a bit of trouble about keeping his end up.'

'What utter nonsense.'

Conrad was not deflected. 'You know, most people are a little frightened of you.'

'I don't believe it. If I have ever frightened you, I apologize, here and now. . . .'

Conrad looked faintly surprised. 'Oh, you have never frightened me, because I don't really expect to make a great impression, on you or anyone. I never do, and I'm accustomed to plodding along quietly. But people who want to shine ... they get frightened more easily.'

'Why do you stand up for him? He has never been particularly nice to you.'

'I don't like to see you looking tired and miserable. We are friends surely. We ought to be able to say anything that ... may come in.'

I sighed, and closed my eyes. Conrad tilted the shade of the lamp to throw a shadow on my aching eyelids. It is impossible to be offended by him, or to reject his clumsy and uncalculating tenderness. But I could make nothing of it.

'It's nice of you to say what you think, Conrad, but I haven't an idea how it applies. I'm too tired to work it

out. I don't even know if I understand what you mean.'

Our inconclusive conversation went no further. It was not necessary to tell him that I had spent the day with Stephen; he would hear, no doubt, soon enough from the stationmaster, or by some devious route of village gossip. I could not help it if he drew the wrong conclusions — or the right ones.

I went up to bed early, but slept only fitfully. I had cherished a foolish hope of dreaming about Stephen, but the only dream I remember was of some unknown man, who was talking very loudly and rapidly to a group of people hidden by the slope of a hill. I could not hear what he said, but for some reason expected him to turn round and repeat it to me. The next thing I knew I was somewhere else, but I was not made welcome. I understood I should have waited for the end of the speech because, after all, the man might have been Gilbert.

I travelled back to London in the morning. I felt very ill and wretched, incompetent for the life I was returning to. Everyone — Conrad, the postman, the women in the village — would think I had done right; I was staying with my husband. But that was not simply a matter of letting things run on as before; it had become a new enterprise. I did not rebel against my own choice, wishing it undone, but I doubted if I had the strength of spirit to pursue it with any dignity.

I tried not to think of Stephen, but it was useless. In my ravaged imagination, he was still my love and my consolation. But now I was in trouble, and alone. He too; there was no consolation we could give each other. I mourned for him and for myself.

How like Conrad to pick on this moment to remind me that I had not done well by Gilbert. There was justice in the reproach, but Conrad's painstaking logic had been

built on a false set of facts. If I had injured Gilbert, I had now set myself to make amends.

But how was I to do it? My life with him in the past seemed so fiat and stale. I tried to picture myself resuming it, and easily found images of our ordinary, day-to-day life that would re-appear, I knew, again and again. Gilbert would lose his papers, and I would find them. He would admire my appearance, if I was to take my place in public at his side; but in private he would usually have other things to think about. He would make use of me, and forget me, and then suddenly and surprisingly, when I was least prepared, he would confidently take me in his arms.

I have never known him. Perhaps Conrad was not after all so mistaken. As I sat motionless in the crowded train, I began to feel a little less despairing. There might be nothing I could do for Gilbert, but at least I could look at him with fresh eyes and a more open heart.

Chapter 7

I HARDLY needed to prepare myself. I had been away little more than twenty-four hours, but a great deal had gone on. My eyes were opened by force.

Yet the day began well. I had been dreading the moment when I crossed my own threshold. That ordeal was smoothed out by Lindsay, who had the charming thought of meeting me at the station. How did the party go off? Wonderful, superb. Baba had done some impersonations, and did I know that Colin had a talent for singing American folk songs? Adrian had been wearing an embroidered waistcoat, did I think we could persuade Gilbert to get one?

'Stephen says it's impossible after you're forty, but before that most people can't afford any such nonsense. Michael tried it on, and looks quite dazzling, and luckily Adrian says he can borrow it.'

She was still talking as we walked into the flat. So that was over. I took off my gloves and smoothed my hair a little, peering at the mirror in the dark hall-way. Behind me, I heard Nanny's slippered tread and, as I fixed a straying hairpin, I watched her bent figure slowly moving up to us.

I already felt something faintly sinister. It is natural for her to greet me briskly after an absence, and to rattle

off odds and ends of news even before I am settled enough to listen. Lately, she has used silence as a threat, and it was that silence I felt closing upon me. I was faintly annoyed with Lindsay for not warning me that she was in one of her moods.

'May I have a word with you?' she said, with a formality that sits on her strangely.

'Of course. What is it?'

'I would prefer to speak to you alone.'

'Come into my bedroom then. Lindsay, I'm sorry. Would you feel like making some coffee? I'll come and have it with you in a minute.'

Nanny stood in front of me with her hands folded. I tried to make her sit down, but she had evidently planned the interview in some set form. I was half expecting some nonsense, half genuinely anxious.

'I felt I should speak out,' she said ominously, 'but I don't care for it.'

'Well, whatever it is, perhaps we can clear it up between us. I'm sorry you've been worrying.'

'It's you I think of. I've known you since you were born, and I thank God your poor father and mother are safe and quiet in their graves. This isn't a house for a young girl to be growing up; and it's for me to speak to you, since there's no one else.'

I kept my head. 'Tell me exactly what you mean.'

'It's not right,' she said reproachfully, 'that the master of the house should slink back at six in the morning.'

I laughed out loud with relief. 'My dear, dear Nanny, why must you think the worst? There will be a perfectly reasonable explanation, and I hope you'll be ashamed of yourself when we hear it. Probably he was kept late somewhere, and couldn't face the journey home. We've often put people up here when they've stayed talking

until after the buses stopped. Why, only last night I went over and slept at Conrad's because I wasn't in the mood to be by myself. Why shouldn't I?'

Nanny closed her lips, and looked bitterly offended. I said nothing, waiting for her to go away. But she lingered, and finally, in a peevish, quavering voice, added fuel to my irritation.

'This free and easy life isn't what you ought to have. It's not right, darting about here and there. It wasn't at all wise to go off on your own.'

'Don't be ridiculous. As if one night. . .'

As soon as I lost my temper, her rigid and portentous mien broke. Her natural self again, she murmured one or two endearments, and came across the room towards me. I shrank back.

'No, I'm very much annoyed with you. It's insupportable that you, of all people, should make trouble. Ask Lindsay to bring our coffee in here, will you?'

I was trembling with rage, all of it turning on her, for I believed what I said. Lindsay, coming in with the coffee tray, asked what was the matter.

'Nothing. Just one of her imaginary afflictions. I really don't know what I shall do about her; but for heaven's sake let's think of something else. . . .'

We started doing up our presents. I was giving Gilbert a handsome leather wallet, which Lindsay, I was happy to find, approved of. She was running her fingers over it, with an expression of ecstacy, when we heard him coming in.

'Oh, quick, where shall I put it?'

'Give it to me.' We were sitting on the floor, surrounded by dazzling wrapping paper, and tinsel string. I pushed the wallet under them against the crook of my knee. When Gilbert, laden with parcels, opened the door we were both giggling a little. What a charming and suitable

picture it must have been. Gilbert, too, looked at us across his armful of parcels, with the healthy, genial, true-to-the-occasion expression of any husband and father in any shiny advertisement.

That is how I see it now. At the moment, I felt pleased with him. I had feared to find him in a grim, unnerving mood, and here was the expansive, easy personality that I like best. He dropped his parcels and bent down to give me a hug.

'Welcome home.'

'Father,' said Lindsay. 'Your energy is unbelievable. Do you know, he came to Claudia's with me, and then went on somewhere else. And look at him. What time did you get in?'

'Didn't you hear me?'

'Not a squeak.'

Gilbert was smiling to himself. I expected some story of misfortune turned, as he was in a lighthearted mood, into a ridiculous comedy, with a car in it that wouldn't start, or a train that left him standing on the platform. Nothing of the sort.

'Then I suppose I was sleeping like a baby,' he said cheerfully, 'when you staggered to your bed, young woman.'

'Gilbert....'

'Yes, my dear.' A pair of handsome eyes looked kindly down at me.

'What's the matter, Mother?'

I had started to speak without knowing what I was going to say. I was stunned, paralysed. Better to say nothing at all; or something, anything, to drive the moment past. I heard myself laughing.

'It's so silly. I'm sitting on your present, Gilbert, and can't get up till you go away. And I must collect some more things from the cupboard.'

It was not till they had both left me that I was able to take a curious look at what chance had shown me. The fact, which might have been trifling, had become formidable since it had been worth his while to lie about it.

If he and I had been alone together, I might have acted under some impulse which told me what to do. As it was I was in a confusion of emotions, and of blank disgust, like someone who has been presented with a symbolic painting, and turns it this way and that, not knowing which way up it is supposed to hang. I was outraged; although I remembered to tell myself that I could hardly blame him. But blame had nothing to do with it, I felt as if he had tried to kill me. And all the while he contrived to be so bland and kind. I walked up and down my room, hugging my elbows, hating him. 'Wicked and cruel,' I murmured to myself, 'wicked and cruel.'

It crossed my mind that I now had a way of escape. That meant less than nothing, I had no energy to think of it. I had no heart to be dragged into a world of bluff and strategy, move and counter-move. I was occupied with my hatred. It seemed the whole purpose and meaning of my life.

When I grew at last a little calmer, I took myself to task. I had not expected my return to be easy, and this was part of it; not necessarily a disaster, but a new turn whose force I could not yet judge. For all I knew, Gilbert had a habit of enjoying casual encounters; I had never watched or suspected him. I told myself it could not be anything serious, hating Gilbert all the more for betraying me to no great purpose.

Yet I really knew nothing. What had happened might be unimportant, but there was the more searching question — Why? I searched my memory for hints and clues, and found none. Gilbert's smiling face, like a mask,

hung before my mind's eye. Only a revolution, a cataclysm, would reveal what went on behind.

Of course, no major revelation occurred. We listened to carols on the radio, and gave each other expensive and well-chosen presents, and Gilbert, invited by Lindsay, gave me a smacking kiss under the mistletoe. Nanny asks me no questions, but seems, now she has made me miserable, to offer me some sort of silent sympathy. It is an impertinence, and I take no notice. I am not going to whisper about Gilbert's misdeeds behind his back.

For a few days, I keep my seething thoughts to myself, trying to get my bearings, trying to act as if it was really what Christmas ought to be. Then, when the holiday was over, when the posts were regular again, and there were continuous telephone calls for Gilbert, and he came through the house like a whirlwind on his way in and out, leaving messages, snatching meals — when I saw an endless string of harassing, meaningless days in front of me, I lost courage. I felt I had to know something about where I stood.

It was very late one night when he and I were alone. I had been writing at my desk, and he was by the fire. I turned my chair round, without getting up.

'Gilbert, may I ask you something?'

'Yes, what is it?' He reluctantly put down his book, keeping his finger in the place.

'Would you by any chance like me to divorce you?'

He looked stupidly startled. 'Whatever gave you that idea? The answer of course is no.'

'Can you tell me who she is?'

'You wouldn't recognize the name.'

'Oh, my dear, what am I to think?'

I had asked the wrong questions first. This was the appeal that had been trembling on my lips for hours, while

I waited an opportunity, but he had had time now to give himself up to his daemon, to the closed and calculating spirit that has persistently defied me. His face was wooden.

'I don't care to be cross-examined. I am not asking you for anything. Whatever you may have found out, it might be wiser to let it alone.'

'You are talking as if I had done wrong in finding out.'

'Don't let's embark on a scene,' said Gilbert fretfully.

'I am quite calm!'

Neither of us had moved an inch. He regained his composure, and even gave a tentative glance at the book in his hand.

My nerves shivered. I wanted to implore him to find some gesture, to say some word, which would deflect the fury I felt rising up in me. If only I could understand something. If only there was something I could hold on to, I should not be merely a helpless victim.

'Gilbert, I don't ask you questions for pleasure. I want to understand. Can't you explain a little?'

'You are making things very difficult,' he said.

We still had not moved. I was clutching the back of my chair as I went on talking.

'But please say something. This is frightful. Do you . . . do you love her?'

'For Christ's sake leave me alone.'

'I do hate you, Gilbert.'

'Be careful what you say.'

'I have always been too careful. Can't you listen to me for just a minute? Don't you want to know what I feel? Have we got to keep everything five miles underground all our lives? Please listen ... say something to me ... tell me something . . . *and don't keep your finger in your book*.'

I must have been screeching like a fishwife. He looked a little harassed, very cold, and waited with resignation for me to finish what I had to say. In the end, I found myself listening while he expressed, in the double-edged fashion that comes natural to him, his regret.

'I only wanted to save you from distressing yourself unnecessarily. It's difficult for both of us, but we won't make it easier by tears or recriminations. We must see how things go. I don't' — he did not look at me — 'hate you. In fact, I'm fond of you, I always have been. But if you want to tear everything to pieces, I can't stop you. I'll do what I can, but I've endless worries of my own,' he ran his hand, the unoccupied hand, over his hair, 'and I cannot stand continual disturbances. Can't we have a little peace, and then, perhaps....'

We were still in the same places, one each side of the room. He opened his book. I had never felt more tired in my life. I lent on the back of the chair, incapable of breaking a sort of numb rigor which his quiet, false voice had cast upon me. He glanced at me once or twice, but evidently thought it safer to go on reading.

I dragged myself to bed. I wept a little, for myself and for Stephen, but I think it was a passion of hatred for Gilbert that kept me awake.

Chapter 8

AN interminable night, a formless, dreary day. Gilbert evidently put himself out to be considerate. To hell with it. I remember vaguely that I had some grandiose scheme for reforming our lives. How stupid. As if anything is possible except going from bad to worse. Perhaps Stephen and I were lucky to keep to the straight path (although we did it of course for ridiculous reasons). Poor Stephen, he had a very narrow escape — several times, at that. How people would laugh at us. Gilbert too, possibly. That I don't know. Laugh and laugh and laugh. Or perhaps not. Gilbert has a way of saying 'I don't see the point of it' which can blast anything. Well, Gilbert, a word in your ear, to be quite candid I don't altogether see the point of it myself. You played a very neat trick on us my boy, you couldn't have done it better. There was I thinking high-minded thoughts about you, or at least there were some of them high-minded, and the others that didn't look so good we needn't mention, not just now; and all the while there you were with your floosie or your soul-mate, or whatever her unrecognizable name may be, full of the tenderest thoughts about not causing me the faintest, lightest flicker of distress, in between that is hugging or bouncing or tickling or biting the dear girl's shoulder, or whatever you fancy (yes, I know all about

that) and whatever she puts you up to, which might be anything.

It's nice of you, really nice of you, to open the door for me, and send me to bed early, and get down on your knees when my pencil rolled under the side-board. Thank God you didn't give me any flowers. That would have been too much. Just give me a little time to master the rules of this game, and then maybe I shall do all right. Say nothing; ask no questions; and go my own way.

You are a fool, Gilbert; had it really not occurred to you that other men fall in love with me? There has been nothing in it for me (except once) so I have kept quiet; but I would never have the nerve to say it was because I wanted to spare you distress, etc. etc. I am sorry to say you would recognize most of the names, but they haven't meant much to me, apart from my dear Stephen, my love and my darling, whom I treated infamously, all on your account.

You see, he loves me. Do you recognize that word? Do you know vaguely what it would feel like? No, it's all right, I shan't ask you, that isn't the game we're playing. Not this year. This year, next year, sometime, never.

I'm sorry, Gilbert. I can't wait all that time, by myself, without any love. You see, he loves me.

Hours and hours went by while I talked silently to myself, and to the immobile, obstinate image of Gilbert. The words came from nowhere, with a life of their own, monotonously repeating themselves, dragging me along, submerging me. It was only when I shivered, and realized that I had been icy cold for a long time that, with a sort of wonder, I remembered I still occupied my own body. When I walked across the room, and held my shaking wrists under the hot tap, I could easily have imagined that it was someone else doing it.

I took an old greatcoat off the peg in the hall; and let myself quietly out of the front door. The stairs were deserted, but I fancied that Lindsay or Gilbert might be coming home at any moment, so I went round to the service stairs at the back of the block. I had nothing to conceal — except that I had no idea where I was going, or what I was going to do. This must be someone else, standing in the creaking lift, with a couple of badly emptied garbage pails.

I walked across the park. Even in this weather, there are couples huddled like single beings on the benches and against the trees. Foreigners always think that so extraordinary; it is not like what they have been led to expect of the English. They read a little Shakespeare, and a little Byron, and are told that all Englishwomen are cold. That is part of their education. A Pole once explained to me with satisfaction that he had proved there was not a word of truth in it. 'And,' he added, with surprise and delight, 'they have such *long legs*.'

Someone followed me. My own long legs were of some service, for I was unwilling to stand my ground and to say, in whatever idiom seemed suitable, 'Sir, you are mistaken; I am not a whore.' I escaped into the crowds round Marble Arch.

I had no money in my pocket, and went on walking. Up Baker Street, and round the outer circle of Regent's Park. It dawned on me that the spirit which had taken me in charge had some object in view. A preposterous object, since I had no idea who I should find in the house by the canal. Still, I allowed myself to be led.

The house was in total darkness. In a sense, that was a relief; it seemed to settle something. But I walked to the end of the road, and cut through a little alley, so that I could walk back along the towpath.

People drown themselves sometimes. I wondered if my other self had that intention. I stood above the oily water, and reminded myself of the familiar impulse to hurl oneself down. It was there, but not quite strong enough. I indulged it (as you indulge a feeling of nausea when you want to be sick and get it over) but to no effect. Clearly, I was condemned to feeling that my life was ended, but not to end it. At least, not on a friend's doorstep.

I was not quite sure, from the outside, where Claudia's studio was. In the broken, irregular row of huts and sheds there were two or three more solid buildings. As, in one of them, a door began to open, I started walking briskly.

Trusting to my wits to explain my presence, I was braced to recognize any of Stephen's household. When I saw it was none of them, I turned my head, prepared to skim past this stranger pausing in the narrow doorway.

But I had seen a shape no one could fail to recognize anywhere. This was Baba. I did not intend to stop, but I suppose the discovery that I did know him made me hesitate, and he called out to me. He seemed to think it the most natural thing in the world that I should be hurrying along the towpath, dressed (and this must have struck him as really extraordinary) as if I was just popping out to feed the chickens.

'I have been waiting hours for Stephen,' he said. 'I was just going out for a drink. But I expect you'd sooner come in.'

I felt I was being gathered into the studio.

'I wanted to see him,' I said, 'just one of those sudden impulses.'

'You shall. You shall,' said Baba. He more or less led

me to a chair, and pushed me gently into it. 'And in the meantime I will see that you are warm and quiet, and that you are suitably entertained.'

'You had much better go and get your drink. Entertaining me won't be any fun at all. I'm in a hideous mood.'

I must have been looking very strange, almost insane, but Baba did not torment me with questions, or looks of anxious concern, or doubtful silences.

'You forget,' he said reprovingly, 'that I am a professional entertainer.'

He picked up four oranges from a bowl of beautiful Spanish lustre, and began to juggle with them. 'This is how I earned my first week's wages, and I can still do it. But I make a more comfortable living on conventional lines. Throw me another, will you? I'd like to see how far I've fallen out of practice.'

He caught the filth orange very neatly, and it was absorbed in the wheeling fountain.

'I can listen too,' said Baba. He let one orange drop at his feet, and kept the rest in the air. 'So long as I stick to the simpler routines.'

'Have you ever been married?'

'Yes and no. There was a girl I lived with once, as if.'

'You mean you could slip out of it if it didn't seem to work?'

'No, my dear, it was binding. But she slipped out all right. She died,'

'Oh, I'm sorry. I had no idea.'

'It was a long time ago. Only nothing else ever comes up to it. I can talk about her quite easily now. Look, I don't even drop an orange.'

He was walking round the vast room, adroitly weaving between chairs and tables, delicately flicking his wrists

(such fine wrists on his great arms) and watching his trick with a half smile.

'Perhaps you were lucky.'

'I was.'

'I seem to do nothing but quarrel with Gilbert.'

'You are both,' something went out of line and he took a quick step backwards, 'very proud.'

'Am I?'

'Oh, of course. I'm not saying it's a vice; but it's a disability. So you quarrel with your husband, do you?'

'Lately, yes.'

'And what about Stephen?'

'What do you know?'

'Nothing. Nothing at all. But I am very observant and very sentimental. I believe my friend Stephen is fond of you.'

I could not shift my eyes from his juggling. Something to watch, the fluid, symmetrical arcs, repeated on the walls in shadows of varying size and definition as he moved here and there, brought me an unexpected relief. I felt I was being brought, literally, to myself under the mesmeric influence of his half-attention, and his delicate, impersonal curiosity.

'I am in love with Stephen,' I said dreamily.

One, two, three, four. The fountain sank back on its source in his broad white hands. He came and sat down opposite me.

'Then it might be possible to act decently and in order.'

He took a knife out of his pocket, and began to slit the rind of one orange across and across; then drew it back in the divine form of a twelve-petal lotus. Then he broke the flesh into segments and gave me half.

'It is to eat,' he said sternly.

I obeyed him indifferently. But the living sweetness of

the fruit on my tongue gave me a shiver of delight, as if I had been existing in a world without scent or taste.

'Tell me, Baba, do you think there is some hope? I would like to live with Stephen for the rest of my life.'

He gazed at his lotus, carved off a fine sliver from a jagged edge of white peel; and replied equivocally.

'I love you both; and, above all, I wish you well.'

It was very soon after that the telephone rang. Baba, answering, accepted very graciously Stephen's apologies. No, he had not been bored, but it would be nice to see him in, what, quarter of an hour? He put his hand over the receiver, and asked me if I wanted to say anything.

'No . . . yes, perhaps just one word . . . Stephen, I'm here, may I wait for you? . . . I wanted to tell you . . . I think I've changed my mind.'

Baba made some motions towards departure. I asked him to stay. He had saved me from a mood of wild and arbitrary impulse, and I liked to think that Stephen and I could deal with our affairs quietly, at leisure. Baba, propped precariously against the edge of the table, began a series of reminiscences from his early days on the music halls; and made me laugh.

We were laughing so much we did not hear the house door open. I looked up, wiping hysterical tears from my eyes, and saw Stephen. I held out both my hands to him.

'My dear,' he said. I have never seen him looking so radiantly happy. I must have looked happy too. He told Baba he must have entertained me very well, and stood looking at me, smiling, lightly pressing my fingers.

Suitably, I hope,' said Baba, making a ridiculous flourish with his great black hat. 'And now, alas, I must go.'

We neither of us said anything. Baba retreated towards the canal door. At that moment, there was a violent knock-

ing on it. I snatched back my hands from Stephen's startled grip. Baba stopped in his tracks, and gave us a doubtful glance.

'Wait,' he said, recovering. 'I will see who it is.'

He opened the door, and without a word drew back to allow the visitors to come in. Colin and Lindsay, flushed, wind-blown and startlingly young and handsome, edged past him, laughing and jostling against each other.

'Why, Mother,' said Lindsay, 'how splendid to find representatives of both families. We can make a formal announcement. Colin and I have just got engaged.'

Behind them, Baba made a gesture or horror. Only Stephen and I saw it. It expressed something in ourselves that must be buried for ever. Our future was obliterated. We had struck the one impassible barrier and, as we stood with the light on our faces, our children looked at us expectantly.

We were given a little breathing space. Baba, with the door half-open, his hat rakishly pushed back on his forehead, gave a queer, strangled cough. Colin and Lindsay whipped round. For a split second, Stephen and I allowed our eyes to meet. The grace we had cherished —the tough and subtle power of communication — performed its final, self-destructive act. We both knew this was a barrier with no way round.

'Bless you, my children,' said Baba, and then added, so quietly that the words were hardly audible 'all of you.'

Part Four

Chapter I

I WAS ill for a while. But, first, came a short, terrible period, when I hardly knew where I was or what I had to do. Claudia rang me up, delighted, and I think I matched her enthusiasm, without revealing that I had any other feelings; the first gust of Gilbert's amazement burst on me and left me standing; and then I was knocked down, ridiculously, by some virulent form of influenza.

It was a relief to be occupied with a high fever. Nanny came into her own. With a vague air of triumph, but with great tenderness of hand and speech, she cared for me and comforted me. I had terrible dreams, not so much of people and events as of obscure terrors, loneliness and space. She shook my pillows, sponged my face, and gave me a hand to hold.

I am recovering, very slowly. A total, enveloping weakness keeps me immobile, but at least also stills the pain. Lindsay trails her happiness in and out of my bedroom like a cloud of spring flowers. Gilbert seems remorseful and uneasy. But I am grateful to him for being concerned about me, and touched by the efforts he makes to think of cheerful and soothing subjects for conversations, which usually leave him quite tongue-tied. He tries to sit still, and when the volume of his voice rises, he sometimes stops in the middle of a sentence, looking shamefaced. I would

like to tell him he can be natural with me, but I never know if he will believe I am speaking the truth.

I like Colin more and more. He reminds me in odd ways of Stephen, but strangely enough not painfully. Once having given up the struggle, I am possessed by a fluid and neutral disposition capable of absorbing, even with pleasure, all sorts of unexpected impressions.

I hardly know if I envy Lindsay. Certainly not with bitterness. If she were any less happy and confident, perhaps I should have found cause for worry or criticism, commemorating under a thin disguise, the fact that I had suffered an injury. The injury was done, and I can still, in a devitalized fashion, feel it; but she exists apart. There is an air of innocent good fortune over the two of them. One could not wish anything had happened otherwise, any more than one could imagine the Ode to a Nightingale written in a different metre.

Claudia came to visit me. She met by chance my sister Chloe, who was in London for a few days before the beginning of term. I was feeling particularly shaky and lethargic, and they chatted across my bed, without paying me very much attention. Chloe was delighted to add to her private list of married women who have made some notable professional success, and ruthlessly drew Claudia out, so as to have a well-documented account to quote to her sixth form.

'I've only managed to have two lives,' said Claudia, 'by skimping a bit on both. Still, I have had an interesting time.'

'And with a lot to show for it,' said Chloe. Claudia smiled.

'I can hardly look at any of my old paintings. I've been experimenting for the past few months. In another year or two . . . I don't know. . . .'

Chloe regarded her with great approval, thinking perhaps of her own treasured pupils whose reports credit them with having 'made good progress', and hoping that some of them at least will still be capable of progress in twenty years from now. I am very fond of this handsome, large-boned sister of mine, so conscientious and so optimistic. She began explaining to Claudia that I had always dissipated my talents. . . .

'Yes, but what are they?' I inquired.

Chloe was prepared of course with a list of occupations at which I had, spasmodically, made a certain success. I remembered rainy afternoons in the nursery when she had beseeched us to *settle*, and the rest of us, possessed by an irresistible, indescribable longing, like thirst, for fighting or mooning around dodged out of her way.

I took up my knitting. Claudia laughed. 'That's not what I mean,' said Chloe, and then laughed too.

I have little reason to look down on Claudia. I have been experimenting, too, in another medium, for the last few months; and the thought of another year or two fills me with despondency. Let me only take it day by day, or minute by minute. I allowed my work to drop, and closed my eyes. Claudia got up to go. Chloe was full of remorse for having tired me.

She is never tired herself. She cannot endure leaving undone any job that needs doing, or for that matter leaving any subject unfinished. In conversation with Gilbert, she is formidable. She scorns to say yes out of indolence, but once convinced, she expresses her agreement in the vigorous formula — 'I accept that'. She has an unerring eye for weak links. Her brisk and pleasant voice interrupts him — 'I must take you up on one point, Gilbert'. He seems rather to like it; possibly the indolent murmurs of good listeners are less flattering than the

whole hearted attention of someone who is prepared to weigh each word with exactitude.

It is rude of me to yawn; and to smile a little when Chloe, in a majestic pause, searches for the careful expression of a candid judgment, or when Gilbert, wrongly fancying that he has floored her this time, lets his attention wander. But I am not feeling strong enough to involve myself; and neither of them seem to notice what I do.

I sometimes look at Gilbert and speculate about what is going on. Has he given up his mistress? I hardly care. Is he wretched on his own account or on mine? I don't know. If I am quiet and cautious and expect nothing, I do get a few pleasant surprises. He is amazingly good about reminding me to take my pills.

Stephen sent me a formal, uninteresting note; and some snowdrops. They are nice flowers, and his handwriting is pleasant. It was tactful of him to do just this, neither more nor less; and to tell me that I need not answer.

There is no answer. Let me alone, all of you.

Chapter 2

My godfather Amyas brought me a bowl of crocuses, grown by himself; and better still the balm of his company, and the reassurance of his old, wise face. I am glad I have not done anything to make him unhappy. He wants to know all I can tell him about Lindsay and Colin; and that does me good. Describing their happiness, I begin to see the depths of horror which I only just escaped by a few minutes — the cloud of guilt which might have haunted us for ever, threatening their future and giving my fellow-feeling for their happiness an air of perversity. The regret I have is easier to endure.

I came slowly back to life. The sensation of being dragged through a thick-set hedge, with no protection but my own obstinate detachment, wore off. I got up and looked about me.

Any gap closes over very quickly. Meals had been ordered, cooked and eaten; the flat had been cleaned; Gilbert had lost, and ultimately found, the usual number of objects; Lindsay was conscientiously pursuing her training; my committee work had been done capably by others. Take it slowly, everybody said, there is really no hurry.

They did not quite admit that they got on very well

without me. But it was obvious there was nothing waiting for me. So I looked at myself.

I did it in the easiest way, that is literally. Lying in bed, I had seen in my hand-mirror somebody who still, in spite of everything, looked chubby and a little childish, even rather comic. Clothes have a realism of their own, and revealed another character.

I studied my neck. I thought it jutted out of my collar very oddly, like a stalk that has been slightly crushed and refuses to sit in a vase. My face was much thinner . . . Oh, I was a dismal sight altogether, staring at myself with startled and melancholy eyes.

There was nothing much else to do, nothing that interested me. I took my hands to the light, and tried to decide if the veins had always run so vividly on the surface, making hump-backed bridges over the sharp bones.

It's terrible, I said to myself; but I was just using words. The appalling thing was that I did not really feel shocked or horrified. Nanny recommended fresh air and exercise to 'bring back my roses', but it was too much of a bore.

I was doing nothing at all when Lindsay came back from a Sunday in the country with Colin.

'You took better, Mother. Are you? I want to speak to you seriously. Do you think we could have the wedding in June?'

'So soon?'

'Yes, I know we haven't been engaged long, but. . .' She smiled and shrugged her shoulders, and switched to practical matters. 'Colin has a chance of getting a flat, and the only real reason for waiting is if you haven't got anywhere to live. The flat is perfect for us. When can you come and see it? Two rooms, and a bath in the kitchen, but I don't see why not, it might be rather convenient to watch your cooking while lying in the bath. The fire-

places are beastly, but haven't we got a quite respectable stove at home somewhere?'

She rattled on, occasionally pausing to make sure I was still listening. I forced myself into an appearance of interest. Then gradually, almost against my will, my thoughts began to go falteringly round those two little rooms, and the unusual (but indeed why not?) offices.

'I should think you ought to be able to make them quite comfortable,' I said, 'so long as they're properly heated. I think the stove is somewhere in the attic. I'll look for it next time I'm down there.'

I was surprised at myself. Even my voice sounded capable, and almost aggressive. For a moment I hoped that Lindsay would let me off, remind me that I was still rather a weakling, revive my dear lethargy by some show of concern. Not at all. She went on to tell me, gaily and heartlessly, that she was determined to scrounge as much as she could, they were going to be so poor.

It was that, not any strength of will on my part, which dried up the feeble tears of self-pity that came so easily. I would have been ashamed of them. I told her we must write some lists, lists of presents she might hope to get, and of clothes.

'Clothes? But all the other things are more important. I have got some clothes. Let's do all the other things first.'

She and Colin are both absorbed and bewitched by their practical arrangements. Last time he was here I found them discussing plate racks with the greatest animation. What was the best design? Was wood unhygienic? And did metal chip the plates? They looked up at me when I came into the room with the same dazed eyes.

I made Baba laugh when I described this scene to him. We were in Claudia's studio, and I had taken refuge with

him in a corner after a difficult, halting encounter (the first since Christmas) with Stephen. We had all come over with Colin, and as he unlocked the front door, and stood back to allow me in, I heard the piano. I must have remembered the first time I heard Stephen play, and a quivering net-work of nerves came suddenly to life. And yet there was healing in the thought that he was not, as I had been, shaken altogether out of himself. I felt that if I could listen quietly for a moment or two I might get back . . . get back somewhere . . . find something I had lost.

But Gilbert was talking in full voice. The music stopped. Stephen came out and welcomed us. He asked me how I was.

Impossible to answer. Mercifully, he was leading us out to the studio, and conversation scattered and broke along a single file. He turned and held out his hand to me when we got to the wooden staircase, but I pretended I did not need it. That was idiotic. My knees still shook, going up or down, and it was the most natural gesture in the world.

Everyone was easy and gracious, except me. Claudia rose out of her chair and kissed me with affection. Then she took Lindsay's hand and, holding it, turned smiling to Gilbert.

'You are resigned?' she said.

I heard Gilbert laugh, and embark on some elegant answer. Stephen, at my elbow, told me he was finding me the most restful chair. At that moment, I saw Baba smiling at me from across the room, and I went over to join him. I plunged into my story, my voice gradually steadying.

'You should have seen them,' I said, 'they were both quite enthralled.'

'I know the expression,' said Baba. Miraculously it appeared for an instant on his ageing, indiarubber face. 'They are quite besotted. Look at them, they are asking Stephen for some technical advice.'

They were sitting one each side of him, leaning forward and gazing at his face, as if expecting some oracle. But they were giving him very little time to talk. The problem, whatever it was, needed great explanation by both of them, with lavish gestures, as if over an aerial diagram.

'Baba, how is he?'

'My dear, I know him very well, and I see him quite often — more often lately — but I don't see inside his mind. I wish I could do something for you, but . . .' he shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

'I don't know what to do for myself. I can't even talk to him.'

'That won't do,' said Baba very briskly. He looked across the room, where the party seemed to be reforming in one group. He beckoned to Stephen.

'Can we persuade you to play to us?'

Stephen looked at me quickly, with surprise, inquiry, anxiety, I could not tell.

'Please,' I said.

So the three of us withdrew to the house. Baba and I lay back in huge armchairs, while Stephen, very erect at the piano, played us some remote, classical music that I did not recognize. Among these crystalline forms I could breathe again freely. I thought of cool air, sweet running water, bright drops of rain in sunshine. My eyes closed.

There was a pause. 'Go on,' I murmured.

'I thought you might be both asleep,' said Stephen, gently over an undertone of laughter. I looked at Baba, who remained unmoved.

'He is asleep,' I said, 'but play for me.'

Stephen played more softly, a tender, plaintive, monotonous little tune — perhaps a folk song.

'You mustn't be unhappy,' he said, playing even more softly, so that his touch only just fell over into sound.

'And you?'

'That is what I tell myself. And, after a while, we shall both find that we have not really lost everything.'

'Ah, but I lack courage.'

'Not really, my dear. If you are not too impatient, you will find your courage takes hold of you again.'

I tried to look into some distant future. He went on playing.

'Our children are very happy,' he said.

'I love them both. But when Lindsay is gone . . . there will be such a blank.'

'We will be friends still, surely.'

'I suppose it must be possible. But I seem to be . . . unnerved.'

'You have been ill.'

'Well, I have been able to hide.'

'We both have been in hiding, all our lives. But isn't that what we did for each other? We broke the habit of hiding.'

'Was that it?' I was beginning to smile.

'Partly. And I am very grateful for that, and for everything. There is no question of anything being forgotten or obliterated, even if we can never speak of it again.'

'Thank you, Stephen.'

'And now we shall all have to wake up.' He broke into the *Soldiers' Chorus*, loudly, with flourishes. Baba twitched, yawned and stretched; and then, in a rolling bass, sang.

Chapter 3

GILBERT remains inaccessible. He treats me with a sort of punctilious deference which means nothing. That is literal and exact. I am not wounded or disheartened, but puzzled, being confronted by a manner which quite simply has no meaning.

He appeared lately for the Crown in a particularly repellent case of robbery with violence. In the old days, the whole household would have rocked, as if it had been hit by a hurricane. But this occasion passed off very calmly. There was no need to close the portholes and to lash the furniture. Instead of violent bad temper followed by a wild, hilarious reaction, we only saw pre-occupation and, after the conviction, languor.

'I must be getting old,' he said.

'Father, what nonsense,' said Lindsay, perching on the arm of his chair. He looked up at her smiling, and she shook her head, making big eyes at him.

'You are the youngest of all of us,' said Lindsay. 'Look at the way your hair curls in damp weather, like a baby's.'

Lately, they have floated into a sort of airy flirtation. She teases him, instead of quarrelling; and, instead of arguing, is coaxing or very confidently firm. He is quite charmed. His horror at the idea of her marrying anyone has been outflanked; and he is very amiable, in an odd,

jocose fashion, to Colin. 'You will have to look after her,' he said once. 'She is too much for me.' Colin grinned, and looked happily at Lindsay. She, hearing the pride in Gilbert's voice, and feeling Colin's charmed gaze upon her, glowed.

She is in great beauty. In her self-chosen, student's uniform of a seaman's jersey and a rough skirt, her beauty is not disguised, but becomes even rather startling, because it appears to be so wholly without self-consciousness. Perhaps that is what is meant when minor poets compare their mistresses, rather too glibly, to a flower. The charms of scent and colour are not so rare; but it is quite extraordinary to see a lovely young woman who has no more vanity than a cowslip.

Of course, she has vanity, but she puts it off and on. Really vain women can become dedicated to their beauty, enslaved to the duty of presenting it, in the most fitting setting, to the world. Admiration confirms, only, the transaction. But if Lindsay sees she is admired, she looks as if the gift had been made to her from the eye of the beholder.

I complained to Gilbert that my efforts to buy her some sort of a trousseau had been quite unsuccessful. A day or two later he told me the whole question was settled; Lindsay had agreed that it was high time to start looking about.

'That's a load off my mind, Gilbert; but how sudden.'

'Ah. I brought a little pressure to bear.'

He had given her a handsome cheque, on conditions — that the money was only for clothes. She was extravagantly delighted, and I felt a little reproachful.

'But Lindsay, you knew we wanted to buy you what you need; it was you dodged discussing it.'

'Ah, but it's such a relief to be given money on condi-

tions. I don't have to think how much I ought to spend, I just know I've got to spend all of it. If I make some easy things myself, I can get a suit from your tailor, and, oh, Mother, who . . . who shall make my wedding dress?'

She was a little gruff and off-hand at her first fitting, but once she had seen, appearing through chalk-lines and tack-threads, the most elegant suit she had ever possessed, she was prepared to stand very patiently, while the tailor and I studied her from every angle.

'I am simply a pincushion,' she said. Then, when we were satisfied at last, she turned to the glass, gave herself a long, serious and critical look, and finally broke into a pleased smile. 'Really, I am not too bad,' she said.

The tailor's long, sallow face, tense with concern for his craft, relaxed. An expression of great tenderness insinuated itself into his habitual subtle, nervous, Jewish melancholy.

'It is a great pleasure,' he said to me, rubbing his wrists, 'to make clothes for your very beautiful and distinguished daughter,'

Chapter 4

We did not aim to buy a great deal; and we have not yet got very far with it. But the flat is too small, and there are so few cupboards, that we hardly know where to put anything. A moment came when I had to make a thorough clearance of old clothes, and papers and forgotten junk. In the course of it, I found an ordinary, black umbrella, which nobody claimed.

'Throw it away,' said Lindsay, 'I don't want it, Nanny has three already, and it's not grand enough for you. You can't possibly think back over all the visitors we've had in the last two years.'

I looked it over again. There could hardly be a more anonymous, unrevealing object.

'Unless . . .' Lindsay was shouting to me through the open door of her bedroom, 'it's Evelyn's.'

'You know, I think it is. But why on earth hasn't she come and collected it?'

'She's a rat,' said Lindsay cheerfully. 'She said she'd tell me all about her new job. But to tell you the truth, what with one thing or another, I'd rather forgotten her.'

'Well, she's certainly forgotten us. I sent her a Christmas present — a scarf or something — and I don't believe she ever answered. Unless it got buried when I was ill.'

'Well, now you can send her coals of fire in umbrella form.'

Easy enough to say, but an umbrella with a big crook handle is an impossible thing to tie up in a parcel. I made a half-hearted attempt, and then decided it would be very much simpler to take it round next time I had the car out.

So on Saturday I found myself chasing round the grey, gaunt streets to the south side of Olympia, searching for an address that had been at some stage or other firmly stamped on my memory, and for a house I had never seen. It took me some time. If I appealed to a responsible looking person, he was a stranger, or else much too eager to make doubtful guesses for the sake of cheering me up; and the children playing on the pavement appeared to have no experience beyond their own gutters. However, I found the road at last — a long curve of high roofs, peeling plaster and porticoes.

Number seventeen — what an enormous house. Poor Evelyn. Had she told me once that they let off the basement and the attic? Perhaps, in between, there was a cosier space where the wispy, frightened mother could concentrate some comfort for her three girls.

I was not sure if the bell had sounded or not; so I rang again. Out of the corner of my eye, I might have seen a net curtain Sifted; but before I turned my head, the door opened suddenly. I saw the square, pleasant face of one or other of the sisters.

'Yes?' she said.

It was a shock to realize that I had changed so much she did not recognize me. As I began to introduce myself, another shock hit me. Recognition dawned slowly and with it an expression so unexpected and so equivocal that I could not even identify it, beyond knowing that it

was, at all events, not a welcome. My voice died in my throat. She, too, was speechless. With a vague murmur she pushed the door to between us until it was within an inch of closing. Then I heard her run across the hall.

I was mystified. She must of course be the younger one, Aline, whose identity with Thelma (produced by some mesmeric family resemblance) had always been that of a shadow. Yes, it must be Aline, and yet I had not remembered that even Mine was so cruelly shy.

A vindictive March wind beat in up the five steps and between the painted pillars, grimed to the colour of granite. The door swung back a little, revealing a mottled linoleum floor, an empty hat-rack, a grey, rainy picture in a varnished frame, a dark staircase up and down, and an inexplicable ruby gleam on the curve of a banister the colour of dried blood. I heard some shufflings in the distance. I was tempted to hang the umbrella on the hat-stand's nearest antler and vanish, but that would have meant one step over the threshold, and it was already very obvious that I had not been invited in.

At last Thelma emerged from the nearest room. She took pains to close the door behind her, and I had time to notice that she was at least half a head taller than Aline, and (as she walked across the hall towards me) considerably more definite. She cast what was probably an accidental glance at the swinging front door; but I felt I was being rebuked for having pushed it open.

'My mother asked me to find out,' she said, 'what it was you wanted.'

'I had hoped to see Evelyn.'

'I'm sorry' — but she sounded only angry and obstinate — 'Evelyn is not living here.'

'Well, then, I'd better write to her. Can you give me her address?'

'No, I'm afraid not. She left some weeks ago.'

Thelma was holding the door, and had gradually edged it to, leaving space only for her own broad shoulders. It was obviously necessary to keep up some flow of conversation if only to prevent the door being shut in my face. But what was Ito say? Thelma was behaving like a landlady whose lodger has absconded with three months rent owing, and I was almost driven to explaining, very patiently, that Evelyn was her sister and, I had always thought, my friend. I had said a few stumbling words, when Thelma turned her head over her shoulder and shouted back into the house, 'It's all right, Mum.' Her voice sounded much more natural. Emboldened, I asked if I could see her mother.

'Tell her it's not necessary,' cried a shrill, disembodied voice.

'It's not necessary,' said Thelma obediently.

I tried looking at her, as I hoped, reproachfully, without speaking; but it was useless.

'No, really,' she said, pushing the door further and, I think, putting her foot behind it, 'we haven't anything to say, my mother no more than me.'

I accepted my dismissal, feeling that I might at any moment become wholly involved in this frightful nightmare. The umbrella was still in my hands; it seemed quite useless to leave it. Besides, I felt it had perhaps some obscure value as a hostage.

I drove slowly up the road, and then turned and drove back past the house again. The most terrible, incredible fancies took hold of my mind. Were they keeping Evelyn imprisoned on the second floor, like Rochester's wife? Or had they sold her to a brothel in the Argentine? Or killed her?

They were insane, childish ideas, and I told myself so;

but I could find no rational explanation for what had happened. There was no clue to follow, no facts. Even the words, blunt as they were, seemed elusive. They had nothing to do with what I knew of these people's natures. But what was quite unmistakable was the extraordinary impression of horror and bitterness that was left with me.

At the corner, I saw to my surprise Aline, who had evidently thrown on a coat and head-scarf, and come out immediately after me. She was looking anxiously around the five cross-roads, and it did occur to me that she might have something she wanted to say. But I had had enough. I put my foot on the accelerator.

At that moment, Aline stepped out on to the road and held up her hand. By braking very sharply, and running up on the pavement, I did avoid knocking her down; but I was shaken and angry. I leaned out and shouted at her.

'My dear girl, do you want to get killed?'

'No,' she said, like a well-trained child determined to answer any question, reasonable or unreasonable. 'But I had to see you. They had a terrible quarrel with Evelyn, they won't tell me what it was about, but Evelyn said she wasn't going to stand it, and went away. They were all terribly angry, but they won't tell me.'

It was pitiful to see this grown woman, her stupid, innocent face drawn with worry, making with occasional anxious glances towards the house, a childish, incoherent appeal.

'What can I do?' I said.

'Oh,' Aline suddenly became bright and practical, 'of course I brought you her address. Nobody knows I've got it, but I copied it out in case.'

I smoothed the torn half-envelope between my fingers.

'But perhaps Evelyn . . . I don't know what to think . . .

perhaps she doesn't want to see me any more than Thelma does, or your mother.'

'But she will I'm sure,' said Aline. 'She was so fond of you, and I think she must be lonely, now that they've quarrelled so terribly. She hasn't been back.'

The nightmare was beginning to lift. Aline had an almost friendly air as she said goodbye to me. I told her cheerfully that, very likely, the quarrel would be settled quite quickly, as soon as one side or the other made the first move.

'Anyway, my dear, I will go and see her.'

I don't know what I thought. It was, perhaps, a little odd that I put the umbrella in a particularly dark corner behind the clock case and, at lunch, said nothing at all about my distressing morning. Afterwards, I slipped out again by myself, to pursue the trail south of the river.

The tide was at its lowest ebb. Sea-gulls, uniform as cut-outs from the same die, were standing about, inert, on the greasy mud banks. The sluggish stream carried no traffic, except for a pair of swans, their brightness smeared with the local colours of air-borne and water-borne industrial effluents. Graceful still, they moved languorously across the bows of a moored timber barge.

On the roads, the tides were stronger. Week-end traffic was pouring out to the south, pressing up on itself, and blocked by a tangled skein of transverse movements in the big shopping centres. At last I drew clearer, on a broad road with tram lines in the middle, and square, grey houses set back on each side. They must have housed once solid middle-class families, and even now, though the surfaces were visibly rotting, they still gave an impression of some structure somewhere that had been made to last. But the families had gone. House-agents, undertakers — purveyors of temporary shells for the living

and the dead — commissioners for oaths, locksmiths — merchants in security which still remains evasive — hairdressers, laundries, jobbing tailors specialists in wear and tear; all these had moved in, and set up their signs. The earth of the front gardens was pounded to the condition of a floor; only here and there a blackish privet, whose almost mineral endurance survives extraordinary physical or chemical onslaught, held up a battered crown. In one garden, there was the biggest collection of old baths I have ever seen; in another, nothing but doors.

A great pink block of flats broke across the long series; then a row of new shops, black glass and chromium, polished apples, rainbow toys, frilly blouses.

I took a side-road where irregular stretches of dwelling houses ran up against smallish blocks of flats, built for a clean fit into those gaps which some speculator had contrived to break open. It must have been done some time ago, for the flats themselves were old-fashioned, with the staircase rupturing the facade on each floor; and one could guess that the next move would not be to complete the row on that pattern, but to start again from the ground.

I found the block I was looking for in an angle on the near side of a railway bridge, where the road took a swerveing dip. On the ground floor, flats A and B lay on my left and my right. H, which I wanted, must be on the fourth floor. A gritty, concrete staircase, and a metal hand-rail, led me up to it.

On the second floor, I was level with the trains. A discreet, green snake, the material skin of an electric nerve, shot past. Beyond it, a solitary engine heaved up gasping exhalations of liver-coloured smoke. The bridge, and the outside rail I was leaning on, and the whole fabric of the building, shook.

I reached the top floor. A narrower staircase went on presumably to the roof. Here was H. Above the bell, a neatly lettered card gave a single, bleak piece of information — THOMPSON. I did not know who Thompson could be. Certainly not Evelyn.

At that moment, I heard her voice calling from above.

'Is that you, Reg? Could you come?'

I went up the final flight, and came out on to the roof. Because of a long line of washing stretched from corner to corner, I did not at first see Evelyn. She called out.

'Get hold of the line will you? I daren't move — or the whole lot's going to drop in the puddles.'

I dodged between a pyjama jacket and a ballooning pillow-case; and reached up to keep the line in the air. It was about to slip off the tip of a long, pronged pole, which Evelyn was holding with both hands.

'The damned thing,' she said; and then saw me. 'Oh, it's you.'

But the wind was tugging our precarious structure. Between us, we hooked the line securely over the prong; then Evelyn drove up the pole until it was wedged between the solid floor and the tautened wind-beatened line; and then we were both free to look squarely at each other.

'I thought it was my husband,' she said, with an embarrassed half-laugh.

'But I didn't even know you were married,' I said, hesitating over the ordinary forms of congratulations. She shrugged her shoulders.

'Yes, it's a good thing.' She was, very evidently, pregnant. With an awkward movement, she picked up her big washing basket, and wordlessly led me downstairs. At the door of the flat, she took a key out of the pocket of her overall and, when she had turned the lock, abruptly asked me in. I was feeling a little dizzy, from stretching

I suppose, and she gave me a glass of water. She stood over me while I drank it, watching or waiting.

'I'm afraid I'm rather shaky,' I said. 'I've been ill. That's really why I haven't...'

'But how did you find me?' she said, frowning.

'Was it wrong?'

'It's just,' she said, speaking out of a sluggish stare, 'altogether extraordinary.'

'I saw Thelma. She and your mother seem quite unforgiving. It was terrible. But Aline told me where to find you.'

At that, Evelyn broke into hysterical laughter. She leant back against the wall and laughed like one demented.

'Aline. Poor, simple, little Aline; the baby of the family who's never told, and never understands anything. Of course, she told you.'

'She told me you had quarrelled with your family; and she thought you would be pleased to see me.'

Evelyn pushed her hair back with her forearm.

'I can't believe it,' she said, 'I can't believe it. Haven't you guessed yet that this is Gilbert's baby?'

The glass dropped out of my hand. I think I fainted. When I opened my eyes, my feet were on a stool, and Evelyn was sitting beside me. At least, I had to suppose it was Evelyn; but certainly it was not the girl I had known. I had never seen this girl untidy, never heard her laugh out loud, never felt the rough edge of an active and suffering nature.

'Well, there's nothing for it . . .' she said. 'You must hate me.'

I had certainly hated Gilbert's unidentified mistress, whose name (he took pains to tell me, since he is not a lawyer for nothing) I did not know. It is not so easy to hate someone, against the grain of habitual liking and

respect, who has been treated with brutality and carries (this must be the clue to her changed character) the marks of it. I shook my head.

'I don't know what you must have thought of me . . . when I pushed my way in.'

'I thought you were coming to patronize me. But it's no good; I don't understand any of you. I was so bewitched, mesmerized by your whole family, and then Gilbert ... and now I'm married to Reg. He's so good, and so nice (you must have met him) and he's always wanted to marry me and he didn't change.'

'It's all too appalling. Your family throwing you out. . .'

She again gave her strange, raucous laugh, but briefly.

'That's not quite fair. I threw myself out, because they nagged me. They had some silly ideas.'

'They may have been right. Perhaps Gilbert should have asked me . . .' She stopped me with a gesture of horror.

'No,' she said evenly, 'there was never any question of that. I could never have been . . . such a suitable wife. I always knew that. I didn't expect anything. Only I always knew what to do when he was worried, and strained, and forlorn, and that made me very fond of him.'

'But he isn't a child. Good heavens, except that he's irresponsible — towards both of us.'

'He did do his best to look after me,' said Evelyn mildly, but she tossed her head, and added in a tone of great bitterness, 'he suggested paying for an abortion.'

I think I groaned. She looked reflectively round the bare furnishings of the tiny room.

'I would rather be as I am,' she said. 'Reg and I shall be all right, you know. We like each other, and know each other very well. And the baby will have a home, and a

real father. Reg is a person you can trust. You will just have to leave us to it.'

That was my dismissal. As we said goodbye at the door, Reg came slowly up the staircase towards us, carrying a load of household shopping. His tilted face was very pale, and his bony shoulders jutted under a loose, creased jacket.

'You know Reg, don't you?' said Evelyn.

He hesitated on the landing. Evelyn looked at him with a certain deference. He did not shake hands with me, but went over and laid his free arm across her shoulders. The shopping dangled awkwardly.

'I am looking after my family,' he said.

That is so. There he is, a poor young man, with no great pretensions, nothing very remarkable in brains or looks or health, and he has quietly salvaged all the wreckage that Gilbert and I inconsequently left lying in our wake.

Chapter 5

I A M frightened of looking at Gilbert. We are both weaklings, only capable of carrying the burden of our knowledge so long as the weight is not, to the faintest degree, shifted. It is impossible to speak. I shrink from recognizing in him the man who betrayed me, and lied to me, who betrayed Evelyn, and abandoned her, and who carried it all off with the greatest possible nonchalance.

Yet perhaps not. Evelyn, who must have loved him, saw pathos where I have seen complacency. And what good did it do her? Oh, leave it alone. There is no way of easing this almost intolerable load; it can only be endured silently and without question.

Lindsay's wedding dress will be a miracle of loveliness. Gilbert, who attended the last fitting with us, is stunned with admiration; and Lindsay preened herself in front of him. I dare not imagine the contortions of his mind as he leans his firm chin on his long fingers, and smiles.

I have suddenly remembered that I left Evelyn's umbrella on the roof-top. I propped it against a chimney-stack to free my hands. I wonder if anyone will ever work out how it got there.

Part Five

Chapter I

How different I feel waking up in the country! Clean air, clean light, and sounds dropping through air and light purely — the aching, unfinished lullaby of the wood-pigeons rocking in the high beeches, the vague murmurs of a warm wind, footsteps on yielding gravel, an undaunted cock-crow, a distant clip-clop of hooves.

I woke a little too early on the day of Lindsay's wedding. Through my sleep, I stumbled through trails of disconnected duties, always too late, always too clumsy. And waking was refreshment; the faint light under my lazy eyelids conveyed a dulcet assurance that I had still more time than I needed.

Nanny came to call me. A fine day, a beautiful day, she said. Gilbert reluctantly stirred, imperilling my cup of tea. Lindsay, in a dressing-gown, her face larded with cream as if she expected to be put in store for the winter, came in and sat down on the edge of our bed.

'I'm not really nervous,' she said. 'I mean, marrying Colin is easy, but getting married is horribly tense. And do you know, marriage was only invented by Pope Innocent the Third, at least, for these barbarous bits of Europe. Before that, it just went by who you lived with.'

‘Where on earth did you pick that up?’ said Gilbert, raising a tousled head and reaching for his tea.

“Michael read it in a book. All the same, I’m sure he’ll be the most realiable best man; and Father, I can see you giving me away with such an air.’

‘Well, we’ve all got to go through with it,’ said Gilbert, enormously gratified.

‘What a pair of heartless wretches you are,’ I said, ‘not a thought to spare for the poor bridegroom.’

Her great dark eyes became reproachful and concerned. ‘It’s awful, Mother; he’s terrified, he says, the darling. And I can’t convince him that if he drops the ring, or gets lost among the responses, I shall only like him more.’

Gilbert snorted. ‘Well, I hope Michael keeps him in line. There’s no difficulty about the responses. You’re given them at dictation speed and they’re all quite short.’

‘Yes, I’ve read them,’ said Lindsay easily; and then added with arrogant finality, ‘but they are of great consequence.’

‘Do go back to bed, Lindsay,’ I said, ‘it’s a long morning and we can’t have you dropping with exhaustion. Nanny is determined to bring you your breakfast.’

‘I know,’ said Lindsay, yawning and rubbing the back of her neck. ‘It’s embarrassing. I thought I’d like to have a last ride on Betsy, before she goes to that *good home* Conrad found for her. All those beastly children.’ She looked at me sideways, very beguiling.

‘My darling, if that’s what you’d like best, then do it. Only you must start getting ready about eleven; and there will be lunch on a tray for you at about half-past twelve, before you put on your dress.’

She was gone before I finished. Gilbert heaved himself out of bed, muttering.

‘She’ll fall and break her leg, I suppose, I never heard

such nonsense. And then where will we be? Or her spine.'

I put my fingers over my ears. 'Stop, I can't bear it.' He looked very much astonished, and lumbered over, with his dressing-gown half on and the rest trailing, and kissed me very affectionately. Poor Gilbert, I don't know what to make of him; but it is nice that he enjoys a great occasion, and throws himself into it.

Lindsay did not break anything. She returned a little pensive. 'It is the end,' she said, 'of my old life.' I begged her to keep Gilbert amused; while I surveyed the food, and the presents, and all the arrangements, upstairs and down.

I found everything running smoothly in the background. Nanny was bullying the caterer's man, and had somehow induced him to treat her with great respect and caution; Lindsay's packing was almost complete; a couple of bedrooms were ready for our guests' visitations.

In the drawing-room, where the presents were laid out, I found Gilbert and Lindsay huddled in a spare corner, playing cards. As I surveyed the big table, their mysterious dialogue floated past me.

'Point of five.'

'How many?'

'Forty-four.'

'Not good.'

Really, that extraordinary piece of silver from John was too hideous. I reflected whether I could in any way shield it. But, alas, the only object large enough was the sewing machine from Chloe, and that would look impossibly obvious.

'A tierce major.'

'Good.'

Michael's charming piece of Scandinavian glass did

break up the silver vulgarity; but at some cost to itself. Michael, however, was not likely to be offended.

'A trio.'

'Aha, Father, not good. I've a quatorze, and a trio as well.'

'Wretched girl. All the aces.'

'Yes, here they come.'

Five salt-cellars, three salad servers, two tea-sets — at the two extremes of good and bad taste — a miscellany of vases, bowls and jugs. I tried to re-arrange them so that counting would be difficult, and the most striking contrasts widely separated.

'Twenty-seven, thirty-seven.'

'This is the last hand. You haven't a hope of crossing the rubicon.'

The pots and pans were no problem — one can never have too many of them. I was looking at them with pleasure when Lindsay, after a dramatic triumph, came over and leaned against my shoulder.

'Don't they look lovely, Mother. They're all so new. I've never seen so many new things all together, and I never will again. If we don't need all those saucepans we can hang them on the wall and look at our faces. People have been nice. And you know, Uncle John's present will be the most wonderful Christmas decoration.'

We went upstairs together. Nanny was waiting to turn on Lindsay's bath and to brush her hair. I dressed quickly, a little nervous about myself and not anxious to brood and linger.

But my dressmaker had done wonders. I had to admit that here was a very presentable version of the bride's mother. The bride's father — one cannot call him by any more familiar name, for he looked so dazzling — joined me in the middle of my hurried and scrappy lunch. We

talked about the weather, congratulating ourselves on a great personal success with it. I left him with *The Times*, and raced upstairs to put the finishing touches to the bride.

She had not eaten much, and looked slightly woebegone.

'I want to marry Colin, and I know it will be the most staggering success. But it's so solemn, I feel I might burst. And it's too late to have a good cry, because my face is half-done.'

'Darling, do you really feel like crying?'

'Only half-and-half. I don't know what I feel like.'

'Shall I cry instead?' Indeed, I was feeling very near it.

Lindsay made a gesture of flinging her arms round me, and stopped in mid-air.

'No, you certainly mustn't cry. You're looking much too perfect. Too perfect even to hug.'

Nanny, who was holding the long, rich dress of incandescent white ready to slip over Lindsay's shoulders, began to sniff audibly.

'Oh, you are a treasure,' said Lindsay. 'Now we can all comfort you.'

We laid the dress on the bed, and simply clung to each other for a moment or two. From Lindsay's bare shoulders and shining hair came a scent of jasmin; and from Nanny, in her best black silk and jet beads, the delicious, simple and refreshing smell of nursery soap. We all comforted each other.

There was a commotion downstairs. Conrad — who had coped with a vast party for lunch — was delivering the bridesmaids, my sister Kathy's twins. I found Gilbert with them in the hall, offering them a walk round the garden; but they were anxious about their dresses and preferred to stand where they were, hand in hand.

‘Mother says we are not to run, or to touch anything,’ said Sarah (the elder by six minutes).

‘But we may afterwards,’ said Rachel.

Lindsay floated downstairs. They both let out a gasp of admiration. Gilbert looked at his watch.

Chapter 2

I HAVE never seen our village church so full; or, at least, not since my own wedding. But it was a homely gathering, not an indifferent crowd. The postmistress, in a flowery hat; old Morse, in his perennial Sunday suit, greeted me in the porch; and we went in together.

Conrad, very fatherly as an usher, had seen to it that I was not alone in my front seat. Amyas was waiting for me. He patted my hand, and congratulated me on my appearance. Kathy, behind us, leaned over to ask if the bridesmaids had arrived in good order.

'Perfect,' I whispered. 'They are both looking ravishingly pretty. And entirely different, which makes it all the more captivating.'

Her merry brown eyes twinkled. She bunched herself comfortably back in the corner of the pew, and began to push off her gloves.

'I must,' she said, looking appealingly at Chloe, who sat beside her, very formal and erect. Chloe smiled. She would be the last person to disapprove, although, of course, for her part she kept her gloves on.

Michael, impeccable in dress and bearing, conducted Colin to the chancel steps. As always, Michael moved as if his next position in space were waiting for him; and Colin in a looser, less assured fashion, as if he were guided

by some fine balance of probabilities. Lindsay is quite right; there might be something a little sinister about too competent a bridegroom — but how reassuring it is to see a really competent best man.

We were all waiting for the bride, with such intensity that it almost turned into a doubt of her coming. Amyas, with a detached air, was reading the Commination Service; someone coughed, probably my brother John as a protest against inaction. Baba, across the aisle, was on his knees.

My eyes roved a little further. There was Claudia, presented to me for a moment by the sweeping brim of a hat; and, beside her, Stephen. But the moment had come; after a windy pause, the little organ gave out with splendid solemnity the noble chords we had chosen to welcome the bride. 'Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring' — the words echoed in my mind as I turned my head.

I had known Lindsay would be lovely. What touched my heart yet more deeply was her extraordinary air of serenity. Her hand lay very lightly on Gilbert's arm, and she held her head high. On Gilbert's face I saw self-conscious gravity, and a more natural pride. They both looked very slightly larger than life-size. The bridesmaids, following, maintained their non-identity. Sarah, her wide blue eyes expressionless with concentration, her fair skin flushed, moved in a trance; but Rachel, unable to resist a surreptitious sideways glance, gave me an encouraging smile.

'The Lord is my shepherd', we all sang together, sharing a vision of green pastures and quiet waters. Over my shoulder, Kathy's lavish contralto rejoiced in this heavenly paradise of earthly grass and streams; and Amyas at my side whispered of peace and rest. Then, in a hushed silence, the service began.

What a strange ceremony it is. Majestically solemn, and at the same time conversational. The participants, under their personal names, in the presence of family and friends, speak to each other. They were both quite audible; and I suddenly felt I might cry as they made, with quiet and whole-hearted confidence, these promises that can become in the event so hard to keep.

My throat ached, but mercifully there were no tears. I was surprised that the service was so short. In a very few minutes we were all in the vestry; the register was signed; the best man had kissed the bridesmaids with scrupulous elegance and impartiality; and Stephen offered me his arm for the procession down the aisle.

I suppose it might have been an embarrassing moment; but, in fact, it was not. I remembered I had been wildly in love with him, but I felt quite detached, as if I were accepting some formal gesture of politeness from a total stranger. I had, of course, a great many other things to think about as, to the triumphant measure of the 'Trumpet Voluntary', we paced through the church and out into the bright sunshine.

Chapter 3

We received our guests on the lawn. The warm scent of wallflowers, the sultry murmur of bees, lapped us round as we exchanged little phrases, with our handshakes and smiles and kisses. Yes, I am pleased, I am delighted. Yes, it all went off splendidly, Lindsay is so happy, Colin is charming and intelligent, and oh, yes, they are both so very much in love. Then I was free to wander here and there, and join the shifting groups.

Kathy's unerring eyes and kind heart had led her inevitably to the one stubborn element which, of its own social chemistry, did not mix. My brother ,John's family, wife, son and daughter, had been rescued, I saw with relief, from the isolation in which he had indifferently left them. Kathy was chattering hectically, and there were mild signs of animation on the three wooden faces. John himself was describing to Amyas the condition of the world, as seen from Capetown. As I passed them, John turned to me, and Amyas silently withdrew.

'Well,' said John with satisfaction, 'it's lucky this business trip fitted in with a family occasion. We've been able to kill two birds with one stone.'

While I absorbed this cheerful thought, lie ran his tongue thoughtfully round a gold filling in a front tooth.

'Three birds really. Eric comes to Harrow in September, and we wanted him to see a bit of the place first. Besides, the girls have been pestering me — they don't seem to understand that I come over to London to work.'

'I hope they're enjoying it.'

'So-so. But London isn't what it was; and I haven't the time to take them around. Sylvia misses her young men, and Pegs is disappointed with the shops.'

He eased his collar, looking faintly mournful.

'But my dear,' I said, 'you can't expect to treat them as if they are just three extra pieces of expensive pigskin luggage.'

Naturally he was huffed. I ought never to have said it. But John and I seem fated to exchange purposeless insults. At any rate, I was released. I sipped a little champagne in the congenial company of Conrad and Baba; and then moved on.

Chloe was delighted to meet Claudia again.

'I do hope,' she was saying, 'that you will encourage Lindsay to keep up her painting.'

Claudia laughed a little ruefully. 'I should be the last person to advise anybody,' she said. 'Lindsay will go on painting if she feels she has to; and if not, not.' Her dark, vivid face, delightfully framed in a great disc of soft gold like a halo, turned towards me. 'That's all one can say, isn't it? In the old days, possibly, genius was stifled by neglect; but now it's more likely to be blasted by a perfect fog of encouragement.'

We both of us realty know that Lindsay is not a dedicated spirit. And if not, not. Chloe, who respects more moderate ambitions, said something about painting for pleasure.

'I know nothing about that,' said Claudia arrogantly.

Kathy, by this time, had manoeuvred Sylvia into

Michael's charge, and was listening to Pegs who, revived by her interest, was enlarging on the unutterable horrors and discomforts of air travel.

'It must be terrible,' said Kathy, quite seriously. She is genuinely sorry for Pegs, who wears her wealth, like her corsets, rather stiffly. I ask them if they were getting enough food and drink.

'Oh, yes,' said Kathy, 'and I *am* so enjoying myself.'

I reproached her with having left a busy husband at home. Wouldn't it have been an agreeable change for him?

'My dear, he longed to come. Of course' — she giggled, and gave me a teasing glance — 'he said you were bound to make it into a pagan festival, but he would come if it had been in the least possible. It would have been nice for him, too, all these gay faces, and pretty dresses.' She looked round the throng, enviously. Though she lost, years ago, the desire to possess fine clothes, she still feels deprived because she has so few opportunities to look at them.

'How is Gilbert?' she said. 'I suppose he must be missing the war terribly. He was one of the people it really seemed to suit.'

Pegs looked very shocked. She does not know that we all count on Kathy saying just what comes into her head; and that she is right, more often than not. Eric, who had been standing in silence at his mother's side, deflected our attention.

'Those little girls have drunk a whole glass of champagne, each,' he said.

'Good heavens,' said Kathy. The bridesmaids, who had been inclined to regard Michael as their personal possession, must have felt themselves cut out by Sylvia. They had transferred to Baba and, sitting one on each knee, were happily drowning their pique.

'It's too late now,' said Kathy cheerfully. 'Come along, Eric, you only had a taste, let's find ourselves some more.'

Reminded of my duty, I led Pegs over to Claudia. 'My sister-in-law,' I said, 'just over on a visit from South Africa.'

'And I'm almost on the point of flying to South America,' said Claudia. 'Isn't that exciting? It was only arranged yesterday. Stephen has a chance of some fantastically large orders, and he wants me to go with him. Think of it, a new continent.'

Lindsay and Colin swept up to us, arm in arm.

'We want to cut the cake,' said Lindsay, 'but people keep drifting away to look at the presents, and Conrad has taken Amyas to inspect something or other in the kitchen garden.'

I called to Gilbert to pursue the botanists, and myself went into the house. Kathy was alone in the dining-room, poking among the presents like a squirrel, and exasperated because some of the cards were not legibly written.

'Lindsay is lucky,' she said, surveying the display, and then added, 'Colin seems such a nice young man. But of course, I should be far more likely to fall madly in love with his father.'

I squeezed her arm. 'I can't imagine your doing anything so irregular.'

'Dear me, no.' She broke into schoolroom giggles. 'How surprised everyone would be. But, he is really. . .'

She was still searching for a word as we went back across the lawn. Stephen and Claudia were standing side by side.

'An altogether delightful couple,' said Kathy.

Looking at Stephen (who I now learned was leaving so soon for another continent) I tested the quality of my

feeling for him. My detachment was not what I had thought. Yet it was not an illusion; but only a fine, tough skin serving a necessary purpose. Love, incapable of dying, is at least capable of endless transformation. As in those dreams which seem colourless because the characters are ticketed with the wrong names, I had been able to act free-heartedly and without anxiety; but it is the suspendsion of forces, the hidden essence within the true identification, that makes the dream worth dreaming.

I saw Baba, for whom I have now such loving gratitude, standing by himself; but I did not go over to him. He is the one person who, knowing and caring so much, might lift my grief from its sea-bed, where already the forces of time and change have begun to wear it away.

Regretting Baba, I sought the aseptic company of Pegs. There is no risk of her making me cry.

Lindsay cut the cake; our glasses were re-filled, and we waited for the toast to the bride and bridegroom.

'Everyone knows,' said Michael, 'that the duties of a best man are extremely arduous; and this is the worst of them.' He looked most dispirited. We laughed. He went on more briskly. 'But in one way I'm being let off lightly. I have got something to say. Lindsay and Colin are both my friends and so . . .' He looked slowly round the crescent of faces . . . 'I know their faults.' Laughter. 'In spite of that' (more laughter) 'I believe that they are both very fortunate. The fact that they have both, privately, told me so is, as Colin might say, supporting evidence; and although Lindsay actually did say, in an unguarded moment, that she thought she might die of happiness, it looks to me as if she had given up that idea. So I can wish them happiness, knowing that they are happy, and so, ladies and gentlemen, let us toast the bride and bridegroom, Colin and Lindsay. . . .'

We drank. 'He ought to be the next one,' said Pegs. Claudia smiled satirically; I remembered Baba telling me that Michael and Adrian are now quite inseparable.

Colin replied, shyly and briefly. Gilbert was at the top of his form, but went on a little too long. Rachel wandered off, and looked longingly round the trees for any that could, some other time, he climbed. Nanny collected her, and held her firmly by the hand for the last few minutes.

Then everything was over. Lindsay whispered to me that she was going to change, and would I come? I was following her back to the house when I passed Stephen. He detached himself from Gilbert and walked a few steps with me.

'So you are both going away?' I said.

'Very soon,' he told me.

'Claudia seems very pleased.'

'Yes, I'm glad she wants to come. It would have been lonely for her here on her own, and I think she's looking forward to it.'

'Well, bon voyage.'

'Bless you, my dear.'

A few minutes later, I was saying goodbye to Lindsay and Colin. Oh, bless you, my darlings. Lindsay drew herself out of my embrace, and held out her hand to Gilbert.

'You mustn't mope, either of you. Keep an eye on him, won't you, Mother?'

Chapter 4

My own relations stayed overnight. As the long shadows moved out across the lawn and in the cooler air the scent of wallflower gave way to the balmy, lingering, drifting scent from more distant hayfields, I was drawn into a leisurely walk up and down the lawn with my brother and my two sisters.

'It must be years since I've been here,' said John. 'The house looks smaller than I remember.'

'Ah, but that always happens,' said Kathy. 'We've grown bigger. Still, there are not many houses now where we could all stay.'

I said, 'I hope Sarah and Rachel don't mind having mattresses on the floor.'

'But they adore it. They want to do it at home.'

'I see you have cut some of the beeches,' said Chloe.

'Alas, they are all due for it. But I am still hoping one or two will last my lifetime.'

'Don't sound so sad,' said Kathy. 'Oh, look, there's that demon Rachel, not asleep.'

At a top window, Rachel leaned dangerously out and called a shrill good night. We waved and blew kisses, and Kathy made a playful threatening gesture. Then Sarah appeared momentarily at Rachel's shoulder, and they both withdrew.

‘I wonder if they will remember,’ said Chloe, ‘looking out on the night of the wedding, and watching us trail up and down.’

‘One remembers such odd things,’ said Kathy. ‘Can you remember the time when Great-Aunt Anne spent a whole day sitting under the beeches studying Greek philosophy?’

‘Was that what it was?’ said John. ‘I know I had to carry her lunch out.’

‘She came and gave us a sort of lecture after we were in bed. Everything flows, she said, earth, air, fire, water, you and me. And she taught us two Greek words — panta rei. Now why on earth should I remember those?’

‘παν α ρε !’ said Chloe indignantly (and one immediately heard the Greek letters). ‘That affected old harridan gave herself the most shocking airs.’

‘I only remember her pushing us all around,’ said John.

‘All the same,’ I said, ‘I liked her.’

‘So did Vivian,’ said John looking puzzled, ‘but I never saw it myself.’

‘Poor Vivian,’ said Kathy, ‘he ought to be here. And yet I can’t imagine him middle-aged, can you? If I think of him walking over the grass to join us, I see a lad of nineteen.’

Chloe shivered. John said that it was unnecessary to be morbid, and that he at least felt in the prime of life; particularly since he had found a new treatment for his fibrositis.

As we wandered in, he gave Chloe a detailed medical account of himself. Kathy put her arm round me, and we walked together in comfortable silence. In the drawing-room Pegs and Gilbert appeared to have reached the end of all conversation. He got on to his feet, a little bent and stiff with weariness, the wing of grey hair on his

temple gleaming in the lamplight. Kathy is right again; we are all middle-aged.

There was some desultory talk, until Nanny came stumping in to remind me that it was bedtime.

'Now that the fuss is over,' she said, 'I must see you settle down into regular habits.'

She takes for granted that the trouble, whatever it was, between me and Gilbert has died down; but she still thinks we are naughty to keep such late hours. I hardly know if I am being driven back to the cradle, or on to the coffin; yet it is done in kindness. I explained to Pegs, who looked somewhat astonished, that in this country a good servant is always a tyrant.

Chapter 5

THAT night, for the first time in my life, I refused Gilbert, without troubling to invent an acceptable reason. I think he was wounded, but he turned over and went instantly to sleep; and it was I who lay wakeful.

There is no greater loneliness. Lying immobile, like a worn image on a tomb, my skull ached with loneliness, burdened with stale images of regret and despair. I had kept myself busy for weeks with preparations for this one day, and now that it was over, occupation, hope and all zest for the future were gone. Nothing, it seemed, was left but the estrangement between us. We had been careful to preserve the forms and manners of our marriage, but they did not bridge this wide and hollow space which had opened beneath them. In fact, it might well be that this immaculate surface had made the depths even more hopelessly inaccessible.

I could see no way of reconciliation. We had both been careful to sustain a courtesy that was sometimes almost affectionate; but it had not altered the stubborn resentment that lay at my heart. What more could I do? What else could I expect of him? We had done everything we could, and to no purpose, for I could not forget that he had acted contemptibly; and it was at the moment

when he was most charming, most ready to please me, that I felt most vividly a sense of outrage.

Even that, as the blank hours went by, turned shrivelled and desiccated. The savage impulse that had made me draw away from him was spent, leaving no mark, like water on desert sand. I had no energy to feel; I could only think, laboriously examining my predicament, committed for a lifetime to a man I could not love.

A silent night is full of noises, creaking and rustling and whispering in the obscure margin between sense and imagination. As my thoughts contracted to one single focus, the sounds of the night encroached, bearing down on me like a formless and incomprehensible threat. I longed to be able to wake Gilbert, to beseech him to keep them away; but I could not, because I knew he would murmur, 'Oh, nonsense, it's nothing,' and sleep easily again, leaving me.

So at last I was driven to break my bodily torpor. I got up very quietly, took my dressing-gown, and made my way downstairs, where I could switch on all the lights, and give myself the illusion of ordinary life by finding something to eat and drink.

Under the door to Kathy's room — the little room on the half-landing there was a thread of light. I knocked, and went in, She lifted her eyes, bemused, from a book.

'Is it very late?' she said.

'Nearly three. Can't you get to sleep either?'

She stretched and yawned, uncurling from a prehistoric, pre-natal attitude among the tumbled pillows.

'I was giving myself a treat,' she said. 'I can never read in bed at home because Thomas hates it. Poor darling, he's always so tired, and pines to go to sleep. So now I'm indulging myself, just for once.'

'I was going to indulge myself with a cup of tea. Shall I bring you one?'

But Kathy, like the twins, was charmed by the thought of making this night exceptional. With a coat over her nightdress (she always travels austerely) she came down with me to the kitchen.

'You are lucky,' she said, 'having such beautiful clothes, even at night, *and* an Aga cooker.'

'Am I lucky? I've been feeling that my life is ended.'

I made it sound flippant; but Kathy stared at me.

'Tea always helps when you can't sleep,' she said, after a moment's hesitation, 'and look, the kettle's boiling already.'

I was already beginning to feel better. A plate of left-over cucumber sandwiches, cups of tea, and Kathy in a greatcoat, gave the party the ridiculous air of a midnight feast. I wanted to giggle, but Kathy was still looking solemn.

'You were bound to get a reaction,' she said.

'Oh, if it were only that . . .' With a wild vacillation of mood, I swung back into wretchedness. I remembered sitting at this same table with Stephen, on that day when I had turned to a life without hope and promise.

'Darling, what is it?' said Kathy. 'Are you cross with Gilbert? Is he very irritating?'

I burst out laughing; and then, in a cold, flat voice, I began to tell her about Gilbert. I told her everything he had done, and then tried to convey to her the airy and callous self-assurance with which he forced upon me the miserable compromise of keeping up appearances. When I came to a stop, I looked at Kathy, expecting, I suppose, sympathy (for I had been made unhappy) or shocked surprise (for her standards arc stricter than mine); but she made no immediate response. She stared at her

empty cup, with a familiar expression of obstinate bewilderment, as if she were contemplating some puzzle she could not even attempt.

'Well?' I said.

She turned her eyes to me, almost sheepishly. 'There's something funny about that story.'

'Funny? It's appalling.'

'Yes. I didn't mean it was amusing. But I can't believe Gilbert is as bad as all that.'

'Oh, no doubt, there are a lot of excuses; and of course I blame myself too. Didn't I say so?'

There was a vague silence. I had not said so.

'It must have been a terrible blow,' said Kathy, 'when you have always been so much in love with him.'

'That's too simple. I think I was already pretty disillusioned; and then this was the last straw. No, it must be years since I was in love with Gilbert, but we got along. It wasn't ever easy, but it was quite tolerable — until it all turned into make-believe.'

Kathy was still looking at me, as if she expected to find in my face some clue to the puzzle. I began to wish I had kept to my principle of confiding in nobody. I had felt so safe with her, because she is fond of me, and not censorious, and almost without curiosity; but I had forgotten the compelling pull of her doubtful silences. Against my will, I went on talking.

'I have tried to do the right thing, Kathy. I've arranged everything to suit Gilbert. I live in London, instead of here. I spend much more of my time with his friends, and not with mine. I haven't made any sort of row about all this. I don't know what I've done wrong. And then you look at me as if I were a lunatic or a criminal. Why don't you say something?'

'I don't know what to say.'

'Then perhaps we'd better go back to bed.'

She took the cups and rinsed them under the tap. I went and warmed my hands on the rail of the stove. While she had her back turned to me, I made a last attempt to shake her into animation.

'It might have been better if I had left him. I very nearly did, you know. I might have married someone else.'

'Why didn't you?'

'Good heavens, you, of all people. . . .'

She came over and took a cloth from above the stove, and stood beside me wiping a cup. Her face, foreshortened, was like a peasant's, obstinate and stupid, and yet it is because she thinks she is stupid that she forbears moral judgment, while she tries relentlessly to understand.

'You know that wasn't what I mean,' she said. 'You must have had some reasons for staying with Gilbert, and I wondered what they were.'

'Oh, circumstances . . . all sorts of things.'

She went on unthinkingly wiping the cup until I took it away from her and hung it on the dresser. It was not possible to tell her of that last evening in Claudia's studio; nor did I wish to remember it. Instead, I thought again of how I had sat here with Stephen, and had told him I must stay with Gilbert. I felt I had given Kathy the wrong answer.

'I may have had some reasons, but I seem to have forgotten them. Not religious, not particularly moral, but reasons of some sort. Perhaps I didn't want to take my hand from the plough. I don't know. The whole thing is a mystery.'

'But you can't go on punishing Gilbert for ever.'

'He's come off very lightly. No fuss or bother — that's all he ever asks.'

'I'm sorry,' said Kathy. 'I wish Thomas were here, he always knows the right thing to say; and I don't. But I am sorry.'

'I suppose it's all my fault,' I said pettishly. 'Come on, let's go to bed.'

Kathy suddenly looked hopelessly distressed, as if she had absorbed, belatedly, the whole wretched truth. Beyond comfort myself, I had a pang of shame because I had used her, and so uselessly, to unload my own troubles; and I wanted to comfort her.

'Don't worry. Nobody can do anything. I shall live.'

Cold comfort that was. I had forgotten how easily Kathy cried, and I suddenly realized that she was very near it. I tried to save us both.

'It's a help to be able to talk,' I said. 'There isn't anyone now I can talk to about anything that matters. But you mustn't be miserable about me, darling. I can look after myself.'

Then the storm broke. She clutched me by the shoulders, with the tears streaming out of her eyes.

'No, no, no,' she wailed, 'you *mustn't* think you can always work everything out by yourself. You never give anyone a chance. You rush in and get there first. And because I don't pour out sympathy, you think I don't love you, and treat me like a casual acquaintance, and say it's nice to talk to me, as if we'd had half an hour together in a train. . . .'

'Darling, I never meant. . . .'

'Oh, yes,' said Kathy, more calmly, but yet more dolefully, 'I'm sure you meant to behave beautifully. You always do. But,' she suddenly looked fierce, *'that isn't enough.'*

'What more can I do?'

'It would be better if you did less. Nobody wants you to

be perfect. Why should you be? It must be terrible for Gilbert to live with someone who looks down on him, and it's terrible for you. It's made you so cold and bright and hard.'

'I was a different person with Stephen. That was why I loved him.'

She did not notice that I had let slip a name. She seemed quite indifferent to the remote figure of my lover. With an impatient gesture, she let her hands drop.

'But you *are* a different person. I think of you as gay and spontaneous and warm-hearted. But when I see you with Gilbert it might just as well be a stage performance.'

'You don't understand. That's what he wants.'

'I daresay he thinks he does; and you've always spoilt him. That was unkind of you, and so stupid. What was the point of it?'

'I hate arguments. I'd always sooner give in. I'm lazy and timid I suppose you would say.'

'Oh, I've no patience with you. Do stop acting like someone who knows how to take criticism. I'm not trying to make a list of all your faults. I've no doubt you know them all much better than I do. You don't even mind admitting to them — and then keep them all hanging round your neck like millstones.'

'My dear, you had much better give me up. It's I who have to carry the millstones. We're only making each other angry.'

'I'm not angry,' said Kathy, and stamped with rage, 'but I hate to see you wasted; and all for some mistaken idea that I can't make you understand because I'm too stupid to explain it properly.'

'Don't let's have a scene,' I said.

'I don't *allow* you to say that,' Kathy shouted through her tears. `You hate Gilbert for saying it; and now you

want to push me into hating you. Damn you. Curse you. You are *not to do it.*'

I caught my breath, and my scalp tingled with horror.

She looked like a witch, raging and gesticulating in front of me. I cried too, out of abject terror first, knowing myself impaled on some terrible truth. In her random fashion, she had created a picture I recognized. She watched me from a distance, implacable.

And then I cried with relief. Some inward pressure had relaxed, and I cried easily and gently; and reached out, then, for the kind hand of my loving, furious sister. Her tears dropped on my cheek; tears of contrition, shaming me, and tears of sorrowing love, drawing me back within the community of humble and striving spirits; my own tears.

When we drew apart, Kathy gave me an uncertain smile. 'My tongue always runs away with me,' she said, 'you shouldn't pay any attention.'

'I'm glad I have one friend in the world,' I said.

'Oh, you arc so silly,' said Kathy, the words stumbling on a snatch of laughter like a child's. 'You can always have as many friends as you choose.'

Chapter 6

GILBERT and I drove back to London on the following evening. I have never felt less capable of being alone with him, for I was quite helpless with exhaustion, and with doubt. I asked him to drive, and he told me I had better stretch out in the back and try and get some sleep. That was his only reference to the fact I had been away from him throughout the early hours of the morning.

It was a relief to be taken in hand and told what to do. I was bruised and battered, and frightened of saying or doing anything; and in a swaying half-sleep I could let go completely. Occasionally, I opened my eyes, and was surprised to see how far we had come. Once Gilbert braked rather sharply, and I braced myself to hear a spurt of complaints; but he only murmured an apology.

'You drive much better than I do, my dear,' I said. 'I'm enjoying doing nothing. You didn't really wake me up.'

'Try and go to sleep again,' he said firmly. Shifting myself from one corner to the other, I momentarily caught sight of one section of his face in the driving mirror — a ruddy cheek and one dark, expressionless eye. I felt myself smiling, and then saw his one eyebrow lift a little, in a way that meant he was smiling back at me.

'Good night,' he said.

I shut my eyes again, and drifted. With my muscles lax, my head nodding, and Gilbert's capable hands directing our journey, my troubles slid off me. I was almost prepared to believe that nothing was impossibly difficult, not by reason of knowledge that could be put in words, but by some immediate, indefinable intimation as when, watching the lights and shadows on the choppy surface of a river, you know that the tide is turning.

We had a quick, rather silent, supper, in a local restaurant. I could see that Gilbert was as tired as I was, and we did not wait for coffee, but hurried back to the flat. An enormous pile of letters had arrived for him and, sighing, he took them to the sitting-room, while I went to tidy. When I came back to him the letters were still unopened. He was hunched in his chair, doing nothing at all. I don't think I have ever seen anyone look so wretched.

'What's the matter, Gilbert?'

He looked at me vaguely, and hesitated before he answered. 'It feels so empty.'

'Yes, we are going to miss her.'

I went over and sat on the window seat. Outside, the slanting sunlight gave form and colour to the drab huddle of chimneys and roof-tops, and flashed like fire in a single distant window; but the room was shadowy and sad, coldly tidy as if no one lived in it; and Gilbert sat with his pile of letters on his knees, and his hand over his eyes, as if he could not bear to look.

'I'm afraid I'm not being very good company,' I said.

'That's not it. You've been sweet. Better than I deserve.'

'Gilbert, do you miss Evelyn very much?'

I still don't know why I said it. Perhaps because he was so sunk in gloom, that it seemed nothing else would

reach him. If he was surprised, I am certain it was because he felt I was reading his thoughts.

'So you knew?'

'Not at the beginning; afterwards.'

He looked at me uncertainly. All I could see in his face was a deep unhappiness. Silence, like a demand for explanations, hung between us, and I was answering only his grief and perplexity, when I put another question.

'Do you want to talk about her?'

He could not prevent himself. Speaking to his own clenched hands, which still gripped the disregarded letters, he said, 'If only I knew what had happened to her.'

'I think she is all right.'

'Have you seen her?'

It was not surprise, or curiosity about what I had done, that made him lift his head and spread his hands so that the letters slipped to the floor. I think it was relief. He waited with eagerness to hear what I had to say.

'I went to see her, by accident, without knowing anything. I didn't know about the baby, or that she had become Mrs. Thompson.'

Gilbert drew in his breath sharply. I went on, 'I suppose it was the best she could do. He has always been devoted to her, and they both want the baby to have the right sort of home.'

'She never told me that,' said Gilbert slowly. 'She just disappeared — it might have been off the face of the earth. And I looked for her; but I had left it too long. You see, she told me I wasn't to get in touch with her until she wrote to me. And every day I expected . . .

'Oh, Gilbert, I'm sorry. I never knew.'

'That was while you were ill,' he said, explaining it. He could not tell that I was speaking of my own regret, because I had misjudged him, thinking him heartless.

‘Evelyn was always too good,’ I said. ‘She must have dreaded making worse trouble between you and me.’

He bent down to collect his papers, and then leaned back, automatically stacking and re-stacking them, while he uncovered the desolate misery he had endured in those bitter days at the close of a harsh winter.

‘I made her very angry,’ he said. ‘It was stupid of me; and cruel. You see, I didn’t see how . . .’ he gazed at me dumbly. ‘The baby . . . he said. ‘You see. . .’

‘Yes.’

He sighed. Perhaps he knew he did not need to tell me that he had assumed, too lightly, that the baby was not to be allowed to live. Or perhaps he could not say it.

‘It was days before I realized,’ he went on, ‘that she meant to go away for good. And then I wrote to her; and she never answered. And when I went round to her lodgings she had gone without leaving an address. Then I had to see her family . . . it was no good.’

‘Did she ever think you might marry her?’

‘No. She always assumed that was impossible.’

‘And you?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said, ‘I don’t know.’

He hardly seemed to understand what he was saying. Those three words, potent as a full admission, overwhelmed me. What a terrible injury I had done us in assuming so readily that Gilbert was not serious in anything he did. The discovery that he had been serious — and the blow to my pride the more crushing — made him seem also far more human and more lovable; and his broken speech, so unlike him, made me ache with pity. I was assailed by a terrible sense of loss. I was trembling, and nearly in tears, as he went on speaking.

‘I can’t explain what I felt about her. I know I’ve always been a disappointment to you. But it was months

before I realized what it could mean to be with someone who accepted me so naturally. I felt . . .' he stumbled over the unaccustomed effort of bringing his hidden thoughts into the open '. . . I felt I had never been loved before.'

'This is cruel,' I said. I stared out across the roofs, grey now under a blue-grey distant sky. A lean cat, image of self-dependence, made a fluid leap on to a wall, and crouched, surveying a new territory. Gilbert's voice, with a ring of sad disappointment, went on.

'I hoped you might be able to understand.'

I did understand. I might have said the same words myself. Indeed, there was a moment when I longed to make him stop and listen to the secrets that lay so heavily on me. But I had no heart to relieve my own unhappy conscience by dealing him blow for blow at a time when I felt he needed me for some purpose of great consequence. Through the humility of my utter helplessness shot a ray of pride, because I had at least been called; but not yet chosen.

All my thoughts lay passive, while I waited for some impulse to gather which would tell what I had to do.

There was a long, unhappy silence. I felt him at my back, still sitting immobile and despondent.

I went across the room to him, knowing that I was risking everything, since I felt incapable of suffering any rebuff, I held out my hand. He reached up and took it, and laid it against his cheek.

'You are very kind to me,' he said.

'Darling, I want to be.'

'You looked so sweet', he said, 'curled up in the back of the car.'

'I must have been very crumpled.'

'Oh, it's rather nice when you're untidy. It's so rare,

It must have been then I began to think I might tell you. . . . '

Faintly I reproached him. 'Didn't you know?'

'I have never felt quite sure about you. But then suddenly you made everything seem simple. . . .'

It was very easy then to slip down on to the rug at his feet and lean against his knees. I felt his hand come to rest gently, almost timidly, on my head.

'I think you can feel safe with me,' I said.

He stroked my hair. Discovering that there was still a possibility of tenderness between us, I recognized also that it was quite familiar. I had loved him, and I could love him.

'You used to like my hair, do you remember, when it was long?'

'It's the same yellow hair. I still expect it to shine in the dark.'