Roses are Red

Mary Crawford

ROSES ARE RED

by the same author

LAUGH OR CRY

ROSES ARE RED

a novel by

MARY CRAWFORD

JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE
LONDON

ROSES ARE RED

CHAPTER I

ALICIA BERTRAM in repose – Alicia Maynecompton, all by herself, fell into the attitude that had held her audiences spellbound, first professionally and then privately, for twenty-odd years. Her charming head leaned slightly sideways; her long hand, the left hand, the hand with two noble rings on it, drooped; and her eyes, a gay but shallow blue, focused beyond time and space in a romantic, touching, and wholly imperceptive gaze. 'I have gift for repose,' she liked saying; and certainly, she had a gift. But it was not the gift of blessing the beholder with peace. It was an immobility so striking, so tense and expectant, that it could catch the eyes and harass the senses of a roomful of animated people, whose clumsier gestures immediately appeared less eloquent.

All by herself, Alicia sighed audibly and, still sightless, reached out for the cold cream. Among her many gifts, no place had been found for a sense of the ridiculous, and it did not occur to her that there was something slightly silly about repeating a well-practised pose to the empty air. Nor did she reflect, as imagination conjured up her chosen audience, that she was unsuitably dressed for it.

She was stark naked – except for the rings. Her cherished flesh, like her uncultivated mind, showed few signs of ageing. In the tepid summer air, the skin on the curve of her thigh still had a bloom on it, and her small breasts, touched by a shaft of sunshine, had not lost their air of promise. She could still love herself, not quite with the carefree passion of her youth, but with a love more besotted, because it was threatened by a gathering anxiety. One day,

she would look her age; but it had not happened yet.

Luxuriously massaging her neck and jaw, she contemplated the conversations, and the silences, she planned to enjoy with her old friend Lucius.

Sir Charles Maynecompton was on the roof. In the little study by the back door, where he struggled through the business of the estate, his papers lay in confusion. Small sums, in large figures, remained incompleted on the backs of old envelopes. Margaret, with a certain tenderness, collected them and put them in a tray, neatly clipped together. Then she assembled the disordered files on their allotted shelf, first making sure that the top pages at least were still in the right place. She looked rather unhappy. However conscientiously she stowed her own worries away during working hours, *his* worries still popped up and never failed to distress her. It seemed such a shame that anyone so kind, so selfless and so innocent should have to be perpetually worried about money.

Like many secretaries, Margaret felt for her employer a maternal solicitude that was close to condescension. His insignificant appearance, though endearing, did not promote confidence; his fanatical interest in bird-watching was definitely quaint; and the knowledge and judgment which had earned him the respect of the local farmers were concealed from town-bred people by an absurdly diffident manner, and a deep dislike for all forms of paper-work. He was at his best out of doors, where Margaret very rarely saw him.

Bernard Maynecompton, the indifferent heir, loitered halfway down the drive. Vindictively, he kicked a yellow pebble on to the verge. He felt cross with it, and there was even a kind of pleasure in the thought that it might jam the lawn-mower. His handsome, intelligent face was clouded with worry and he moved with a schoolboy slouch unsuited to his adult pretensions but wretchedly expressive of his

mood. He was thinking about money too. He glanced at his mother's window, where a frivolous curtain of sprigged net had looped itself over the casement. The question was, would she sign the cheque?

His father caught a moment of pure delight as he raked the landscape with field glasses for signs of the autumn migration. It was short-lived. The day was sultry, visibility poor, and no birds were stirring. He put the glasses, dangerously, on the parapet, and surveyed the nearer scene. At the sight of Bernard, so dejected, his conscience smote him, and he was entrapped in a familiar, stale cross-question of his own motives. Was he treating Bernard badly in refusing him a stage training? And was it because he had always been secretly jealous of Alicia's career that brilliant career she had finally sacrificed, as he was not allowed to forget, for the sake of husband and children.

This visit from Lucius was unsettling. Charles had not been told if there was any ulterior purpose in it; and he wavered between doubt and hope. Alicia had not shown him the letter, she had only read out some bits of wayward gossip. 'And I haven't seen him for a century,' she said, 'We must get him down for the week-end.' His heart sinking, Charles had asked if Lucius (whom he vaguely remembered as a dangerous fellow in some undefined way) had said anything else. 'Jokes and nonsense,' she replied, with an alarming air of candour, 'but I'd adore to rake over some of the old memories.'

Charles shrank from recalling that moment. His own uneasiness shocked him. He still rejoiced in the incredible honour of being her husband. Besides, he loved her.

Maybelle, ex-dresser, housekeeper, tyrant and dogsbody, strode into the bedroom and pulled the curtain into place. Her melancholy hatchet face was reproachful, but not surprised.

‘Get some clothes on, do,’ she said, handing them. ‘He’ll be here any minute.’

‘Do you think he will find me changed?’ said Alicia.

‘I dare say he won’t notice any difference,’ said Maybelle, ‘if you put on that new belt.’

Two big tears, instantly, stood in Alicia’s eyes, as if they had been waiting for a call. ‘Why are you so cross?’ she said plaintively.

‘You particularly asked,’ said Maybelle, ‘*not* to do the flowers, because you fancied doing them yourself. And now we’re all short for time.’

The tears wavered. Alicia, unwilling to endanger her face, tilted back her head, but she did not pick up the tiny lace handkerchief that lay almost under her hand. It was a sort of challenge. Maybelle, too, was interested in the preservation of that face, and it was she who broke first. She caught hold of the handkerchief and wiped Alicia’s eyes with exasperated affection.

‘Thank you,’ said Alicia. ‘Could Margaret do the flowers, do you think?’

‘I suppose so,’ said Maybelle. ‘I’ll tell her.’

Bernard, catching sight of Margaret darting across the lawn with a big flat basket, felt a faint stir of hope. Looking considerably brisker, he followed her into the walled garden, and found her working methodically along a splendid row of dahlias. Treading carefully on the saucers of moss which had invaded the gravel path, he approached unheard; and flung his arms round her. She let out a shrivelled yelp; and dropped the basket.

‘It’s only me,’ said Bernard. ‘Please kiss me. I need cheering up.’

‘Oh, Bernard, why?’

‘Everyone’s being beastly to me. You as well.’

‘But, darling, you asked me what I thought. So I told you.’ Bernard sighed. Margaret looked wildly round, but

whether for an observant gardener, or a way of escape, or for a good fairy who would pick the dahlias in no time at all, it would be hard to say.

'Could you do the other half of the row?' she begged. 'There's the most hideous rush on, and nobody seems capable of rallying round.'

But Bernard, at the first note of a counter-appeal, made a strategic withdrawal. Firmly not turning his head, he marched off through the gate. Margaret looked after him, but only for a moment. The dahlias waited. She fought down her dread of earwigs and went on with the job.

A grown-up son? thought Lucius Angmering as he drove through Towcester. It's quite unbelievable. And a daughter of some sort.

With excessive brilliance, he negotiated an awkward corner, and smiled warmly at the oncoming driver he had brought almost to a standstill. Children are the devil, he thought. They just gave her that extra excuse to pack up and retire when she got a little bit scared. And of course she chose the worst possible moment. A fine actress, but lamentably stupid.

He hoped to find her in an impressionable frame of mind, with no ideas of her own. *Then*, he was convinced, he could stage a come-back for her quite satisfactorily. And he knew he was the only person who could do it. No one else had ever found the knack of keeping her in order.

Alicia took off all the eye-shadow she had just put on. She felt she might do best to appear as a countrywoman. That would establish that she wanted nothing from him, and improve her bargaining power. Maybelle was called back to search out a simple little summer dress — the choice was between Worth and Molyneux.

'Or I might borrow one of Sally's,' said Alicia doubtfully. Maybelle could not take this suggestion seriously and paid it

no particular attention. It merely reminded her to ask when Sally was expected back.

'That I don't know,' said Alicia coldly. 'I implored her to catch an early train, as we're having a lunch-party. But now that she insists on making all her own arrangements, without reference to our convenience . . .'

'It's surprising how they grow up,' said Maybelle, 'but you'll see, Mr. Angmering will take your mind off. He always amused you in the old days, and so did that Mr. Transom. Did you get any news of him?'

'He's written another play,' said Alicia guardedly. Maybelle's boot-button eyes brightened.

'And is that . . .'Alicia jumped up and put a hand across her mouth. 'Don't say it, Maybelle darling; the fates are watching.'

Lucius had stopped off for a drink. In the pleasant country pub all conversation had ceased on his entrance. A little disappointed, he sat by himself, keeping himself in countenance by re-reading David Transom's last letter:

Roxane won't touch it. My spies report there's a Hollywood contract in the offing and that unspeakable Influence of hers – the charlatan who claims he can control mind through matter – doesn't want it bitched up (probably he's getting a commission). Anyway, Roxane studies her tea-leaves, and says it's not her sort of play – and of course she is rather young for it. If you seriously think it's worth having a look at Alicia, go ahead. Only look carefully. She always was a bit of an illusionist, and I can't believe she has emerged unscathed after shutting herself up with a bumble bee and giving herself a little treat every Sunday morning by competing with the choir at matins. Of course, I adored the old Alicia – and she could have brought it off. But *où sont les neiges d' antan?* (Forgive the hackneyed quotation, but my new typewriter

has accents and I need practice.) Snow isn't the word for her, I realise, but a fire melts away too. So for heaven's sake, don't commit yourself. This is my best play. I'd do anything for Alicia, as you know, but unless she's the right person, I'm not interested Not remotely. So see what you think. I shall have to leave it to you at this stage, because I daren't talk to her myself.

Lucius, looking up from the page, found his eye caught by the local darts champion, a blacksmith by trade. An impression of husky shoulders, half-fascinating, half-repellent, unnerved him, and he left in haste, muttering an uneasy 'Good day.'

'Well, it's a nice machine he's got,' said the blacksmith, looking out of the window, 'if he's got nothing else.'

As he let in the clutch, Lucius heard a burst of laughter. Extraordinary people, he thought. He wondered whether Alicia had become contaminated by rustic society; and whether she had lost her figure.

In a grey-green linen (by Worth) Alicia surreptitiously peeped round the door of the drawing-room. The portrait of herself as Juliet (by de Laszlo) over the mantelpiece cheered her; but Bernard (her own work), with his head in his hands and obviously awaiting interruption, was discouraging. He was likely to tease her for the decision she wanted to postpone, and it was far wiser, for the moment, to avoid seeing him alone. She vanished silently across the coot hall and out into the racking sunshine on the front steps. It was a broad and shallow flight of ancient grey stone. Charming, thought Alicia, standing with one hand lightly touching a huge lichened knob, but probably best in Technicolor.

The hose had been left out overnight. It suggested to her that there would be something rather enchanting about grey stone, green linen, and fatting water. With some

difficulty, she turned the cock and the hose writhed like a snake. Laughing delightedly, she caught the nozzle and ran back to the top step, where she stood for a while, aiming the jet at a clump of fuchsias in the middle distance.

Charles was a little bothered by the sound of water; but he tried to forget it. He had seen, through his glasses, the Vicar's marmalade cat, crouching as if to strike by a small rhododendron in the Vicarage front garden. 'Get out of that,' he said threateningly, speaking to the near image in the lens. Oddly enough, the real cat gave a nervous glance over its shoulder and streaked off into the road.

Charles was beginning to think he might have a louder voice or a more forceful personality than he imagined. But no, of course not. A squat blue mushroom, the Vicar's daughter Joan as a Girl Guide, emerged wheeling a bicycle. Poor, wretched girl, thought Charles. His magic power, evidently, still functioned. Joan took one look at her back tyre, fumbled in her saddle-bag, and laboriously turned her bicycle upside down. Charles, who did not think it suitable that young women should mend their own punctures, had the sensation of offering help, but this time there was no reaction. Joan went on hauling at her tyre with two levers and something that looked ominously like a chisel.

He supposed he should take her some proper implements; but it was impossible to neglect any longer that noise which might be coming from a burst pipe. He looked over the parapet, and saw that Alicia, having dealt with the fuchsias, was flooding the fine tilth of a bed of young plants, in full sunlight, and occasionally shooting a graceful stream of water through the open window of a shed which housed most of his best tools. He hurried to rescue them by the shortest route, through the attics and down the back stairs.

Alicia had wet her dress. In order to get a jet on the more distant targets she had put her thumb over the outlet, and noticed too late that the water then ran back. Charles, finding her gone, rolled up the hose. He heard her calling from the landing, 'But, Maybelle, surely Sally has something pretty and simple?'

He regarded the east front rather mournfully. The steps, certainly, were extremely handsome, but his grandfather had here refaced the old stone house wall with a strange, yellowish cement mixture of his own invention. Charles very much disliked it; and bore a further grudge because it had prevented the National Trust taking over the house, which, much as he loved it, was his biggest burden.

He wandered round to the south terrace, where one could see the building at its best – a sober, dignified feature of a well-farmed, well-wooded countryside. There, through the french window to the drawing-room (his grandfather's only visible touch from this angle) he caught sight of Bernard, and considered making yet one more attempt to reach an understanding. But Bernard, who had heard him coming and did not want to be lectured, seemed absorbed in a book. Charles did not like to interrupt.

Margaret regretted her own lack of imagination. She knew she was incapable of arranging flowers in the pantry, because she could never picture how they would look out of it. So she collected the drawing-room vases, a suitable sheaf of flowers, a newspaper and a pair of scissors, and prepared to work on the site.

It was painful to find Bernard already there. She felt sore, and had nothing to say to him, so she kept quiet; but she did not for a moment believe he was really reading, and his silence made her nervous. They both concentrated with unnatural calm on their apparent occupations, while the tension mounted. Finally, Bernard banged his book shut, and threw it down on the sofa.

'You know, Margaret, you bully me.'

'All I meant,' said Margaret, 'was to give you some friendly advice.'

Bernard explained to her patiently that conscious good intentions are not necessarily a proof of pure motives. In the field of intellectual argument he recovered his self-possession. He felt sure of his subject because he had read the books so very lately, and a few telling phrases on self-deception sprang readily to his lips. Couldn't she see, he asked, that what she really wanted was to push him around, but that it was naturally more pleasant for her to believe she did it for his own good? Margaret replied firmly that she was not going to be drawn into a quarrel. Bernard objected to her assumption that decisions (such as quarrelling or not quarrelling, to take a very topical example) rested with her. 'After all,' he said, 'it's my life.'

Margaret unwillingly reminded him that she was supposed to have some interest in his decisions. Bernard said that was what made her so prejudiced. Then there was a lacerated silence.

Margaret still had something to do and went on doing it. Bernard fidgeted, and looked this way and that way, and finally burst out again:

'With the whole of my future at stake, do you have to keep on at those damned dahlias?'

'It's what I'm paid for.'

'I thought you were supposed to be Father's secretary.' Margaret shrugged her shoulders. It was not necessary to tell Bernard that everyone always found themselves doing jobs for Alicia.

'It's high time Sally came back,' said Bernard.

An old gentleman in the train, learning that Sally had set out before, and without, breakfast, offered her a beef sandwich.

'If you care for mustard, that is,' he warned her. 'I'm a tiger for mustard.'

'So am I,' said Sally, fascinated by his mouse's moustaches and his general air of seedy benevolence, 'and missing breakfast makes me feel awful; but my mother wanted me to get back as soon as I could.'

I'm sure she did,' said the old gentleman. The devitalised shadow of a leer flitted over his lined face, which seemed also to have been peppered with grape-shot. A limp young woman in the far corner, limply clinging to a robust and dirty baby, chimed in.

'Bert wants to give you half his orange.'

'Oh, I couldn't,' said Sally; 'not possibly.'

But Bert was holding out the remains of his orange, with a gap-toothed grin richly smeared with juice and chocolate. Like her father, Sally had quick sympathies, particularly for the unfortunate or the unattractive; and she could not bring herself to refuse a gift from someone so eager, and so very dirty.

'He remembers all you did for him at the junction,' said Bert's mother, modestly glancing at the old gentleman who was not noticeably embarrassed, 'while I was getting our tickets put right.'

'Children do usually like me for some reason,' said Sally. 'Actually, I've been looking after some. That's my job.'

'I'd never have thought you'd have been out at work,' said the woman. It was clearly intended as a compliment, but it made Sally feel shy.

'It was my first job,' she said.

Alicia had unwound the hose across the lawn. Green was a pleasing background for Sally's grey-and-primrose gingham. Across the valley, she saw the smoke of the local train, which still had to make a loop of several miles before it got to the halt. She rather hoped Sally was not on it, now that her dress was in use; it would be such a pity if the artless

impression were disturbed by some inept comment. Alicia was beginning to feel delightfully girlish. Gracefully, she smelt one or two of the roses, hardly noticing that they were almost unscented, and so, flitting from flower to flower, gradually worked round to the terrace. Raised voices from the drawing-room made her pause to listen. Bernard was speaking:

'But of course you arrange flowers beautifully. You do everything well. I'm the one that's unsuccessful.'

'Nonsense, Bernard,' said Margaret. 'You know everyone expects great things of you.'

'I have always shown promise,' said Bernard sententiously. 'That's what they always said in my school reports. Science, the humanities, rugger – Maynecompton is most promising. It went on for years. And the same thing happens at Oxford. My tutor tells me I remind him of a herbaceous border – in the very early spring.'

'That's rather nice,' said Alicia to herself. 'Bernard is amusing. I might enjoy working with him some time or other.' She cast her thoughts several years ahead, and smiled. Bernard dropped out of her fantasy without a ripple, but she did very well by herself.

The arguing voices became something of an interruption, and she turned away. She decided that the young were a little too serious for her present mood. Besides, she thought she heard a car.

Joan had finished her puncture. She wanted to go over to the Manor, but only if she could be quite sure Sally was back. The others frightened her, Alicia particularly, because she had a habit of saying things that were impossible to answer. At least, impossible for Joan, because she was never certain she had grasped the point. It was particularly difficult to pin Alicia down to a definite arrangement, and Joan very much doubted if she could bring it off without Sally's support. Her father had refused to help. He

understood better than Joan that Alicia's love of shining, even in a humble sphere, generally brought her out for any village occasion, however often she forgot the date and however much she groaned in private; and he naively assumed that Joan enjoyed visiting the Manor as much as he did himself. Once, he had regretted that Sir Charles had not married someone more of his own sort, but he had been forced to admit that most of his parishioners, apart from a small group of elderly men, were proud to have a touch of cosmopolitan glamour about the big house, and could be spurred on by her patronage to take a keener interest in community activities. To him, Alicia had become yet one more proof that grace can flow from very unexpected vessels.

Joan had no such conviction. She delayed her departure as long as she could, oiling her bicycle, testing her brakes, and coaxing the ginger cat out of a tree. Finally, when time was running short, she noticed to her disgust that the trefoil badge had fallen out of her tie. She had no idea where she had seen it last, and started a search over a devious route. 'Lost something?' said her mother from the landing, as Joan scrutinised each tread of the stairs.

'My badge.'

'Are you going over to the Manor in those clothes? You know Lady Maynecompton . . .'

'Probably I'll telephone,' said Joan. She pursued her search. She resented being reminded that she had no nice clothes. That was really why she put on her uniform in the morning when there was a Guide meeting in the afternoon.

Charles trailed back to his study, through the back door. The room looked tidier, but it was disappointing to find that Margaret had hidden everything, and then disappeared. Naturally, he attributed her disappearance to Alicia. All he could lay his hands on was the plans and

estimates for the new cow-houses, which he could not possibly afford; and the inspector — a very decent fellow in himself — was making a fuss. Perhaps the best thing to do would be to write him a sensible, candid letter.

He wished Margaret would come back, but did not eally expect it. He quite understood that Alicia would feel xceptionally busy that morning.

CHAPTER II

LUCIUS was quite shocked to see such a really ugly house. He reminded himself that wasn't the sort of thing Alicia ever noticed. Whatever her mysterious reasons for marrying the bumble bee, architecture wouldn't have mattered – either way.

As he drew up, he caught sight of her, diligently hosing a fifty-year-old hornbeam. His first impression was that she had grown not older, but younger. Walking across the gravel to the lawn, he decided she would never do for David's play. That loose hair-style was becoming, but hardly impressive.

Gaily, she held out a wet hand; then, with a tender glance at his pristine tropical suiting, offered a dry cheek.

'Wonderful,' he said. 'You do seem to have dug yourself in completely.'

She looked at him with suspicion. It was so long since she had played to a sophisticated audience, that she had overshot the target. Smiling, she raised the hose, and with the tip of her thumb, converted the silver shower to a single vivid parabola. The water streamed back down her arms.

'It's so nice to freshen the air,' she said; 'and, living in the country, one has to do a certain amount for oneself. But I shall have to change my dress. get them to show you your room.'

'After all,' said Bernard, 'I have the stage in my blood.' Margaret regarded the portrait of Juliet, so fervent, so naive. 'I suppose she was a wonderful actress.'

'Alas, I was too young to judge, but everybody says so. I keep on meeting people who still think of her as

the wonder of the century. Our last great tragedienne.'

'Sir Charles says she once moved him to tears.'

'That would take some doing.'

'He must have been desperately in Love with her.'

'Everybody was. But what on earth made her retire? With the whole world at her feet, a brilliant future before her, money, position, influence, with an unexacting husband and children kept behind bars on the top floor, why wasn't she satisfied?'

'She does enjoy being the lady of the manor.'

'Bernard snorted. 'It's not a good enough part. She's buried alive here; and so am I.'

'You're not here very much.'

'My dear, a provincial city is a pretty poor alternative.' Margaret sighed. 'Is Lady Maynecompton really encouraging you to leave Oxford?'

'I wish I knew,' said Bernard. 'She's my only hope. It isn't a bit of use talking to Father. He takes the conventional view.'

As Margaret digested this back-handed challenge, delivered with a crooked smile that left no doubt of its intention, Alicia led in her distinguished visitor.

'My son Bernard,' she said briefly. 'Margaret, would you show Mr. Angmering where he is?'

Ten minutes, Alicia had said, so Lucius gave her twenty. He had another look at the play. Of course, it was not in fact David's best, but it was proper David should think so, as he had only lately finished it. And it was certainly very good. That agile, contriving mind could still keep its material under full control and, held by a talent so reassuring, no audience was likely to be unduly disturbed by the fact that the material itself was regrettably thin. Besides, to a large extent, depth was a question of acting. Alicia, he had every reason to know, had been one of those reliable actresses who can pull out far more than was ever put in.

Bless her. What a pity she had made herself over into a country squire's wife!

Bernard, however, was by no means a country bumpkin. Lucius recalled an interesting face, not unlike Alicia's as a girl, a face to charm and tease. Conscious of a certain curiosity about Bernard, he checked his straying thoughts. He would need all his wits about him to cope with Alicia.

The telephone rang and rang. Charles looked distastefully at the rubbed black candlestick in the study. Alicia reached out towards the ivory instrument in her bedroom; and then let it ring. The Molyneux matt silk, the purple of a black tulip, needed a detailed make-up; and she was very much enjoying herself. Damn his impudence, she thought.

The telephone went on ringing. Margaret, at the top of the stairs, tried to shift Bernard's hand off her arm. 'I must go and answer it,' she said.

'No. Listen. I've got to persuade you that Oxford's no more use to me. I shall never really understand politics; economics are a broken reed; and philosophy . . .'

'But you were always so keen on philosophy,' said Margaret, raising her voice. Downstairs, Maybelle was yelling at the telephone. Except with Alicia, she was always very deaf.

'If you could only put off the drama school,' said Margaret, 'until after you've taken your degree, you would at least have something to fall back on.'

'I may not need it,' said Bernard. Margaret understood she had not been nice enough.

'You did give a wonderful performance as Jacques,' she said. Bernard rewarded her with his warm and brilliant smile.

Joan, struggling with Maybelle on the telephone, thought about Bernard, so handsome, so far above her in every way, and the one man between sixteen and sixty that she ever

saw. If only she had a decent dress it wouldn't be so bad; or a different face, with some sort of definite shape to it; or really long legs.

'What?' screamed Maybelle. 'What?'

'It's for the Girl Guides,' shouted Joan. Alicia, who, with her face nicely finished, had not been able to resist listening in, dropped the receiver with a shudder. Even thinking of that terrible uniform gave her a pain, and not just in a way of speaking; it was an actual nagging pain in the pit of her stomach. Smoothing her dress down in front of the glass, and very pleased with it, she forgot the pain immediately. Molyneux always did well by her. She remembered hearing a rumour that the London house was closing, and decided it would be prudent to stock up at the first opportunity.

One couldn't possibly blame Alicia for being so expensive, Charles reflected, but it was very awkward. Her large dress allowance always melted away while she still had, in her own phrase, no clothes. In the early days of their marriage he had not been worried for money, and felt no desire or need to encourage her in more moderate habits. On the contrary, he had liked spending money on her; and now he felt guilty because so little of his money was left.

The scheme for turning the estate into a limited company looked really promising and not unduly complicated. His own disinclination to work out the details had held up the arrangements to begin with, but his bailiff and his secretary had finally coaxed him into action, only to impale him on Alicia's violent, unreasoning prejudice.

She refused to listen to his explanations; yet he could not bring himself to make the decision over her head. It would be nice, he thought, to have a good long talk with Sally.

'Goodbye, Bert,' said Sally. 'See you some time. Enjoy yourself.'

Bert's mother sighed. With another on the way, she saw little prospect of enjoyment.

'Cheer up,' said Sally. 'I'm sure we've got piles of baby clothes hidden away somewhere. There were two of us, and nothing is ever thrown out. And I've got your address.'

Bert's mother mumbled some perfunctory thanks. Her scepticism was obvious. She had always lived in a world where no one ever came quite up to scratch.

Sally had a great deal of natural optimism. She leaned dangerously out of the window, searching the approaching platform. She had made up her mind that Alicia was going to come and meet her at the station.

Margaret had at last got round to tidying up the stalks in the drawing-room. Bernard pursued her still and, feeling she was in a rather better temper, was determined to bring everything right out in the open.

'You see, my dear,' he said, perfectly kindly, 'I really do understand why security has such a fascination for you. One only has to look at your family background.'

Margaret, with a clearer picture of his family's financial situation, and also rather offended that her account of a suburban childhood should be used against her, remarked that there was something to be said for middle-class virtues. Bernard, with a debater's coolness, went on with his speech:

'No doubt. But the corresponding vice is this phobia about insecurity. It's natural enough if people are so stupid as to try to live on their incomes. I have always felt reasonably safe, because we live on overdrafts.'

'It's all so wonderfully peaceful and settled,' said Alicia, stroking the air above the border. Lucius was beginning to be far better pleased with her. This was how he preferred her, like a sackful of monkeys, but impeccably well-groomed.

'What's it like in the winter?' he enquired.

'Christmas is always terribly touching,' said Alicia. 'You

ought to come down and see it. Now that we're reunited.' 'After far too long,' said Lucius sincerely. It seemed to him that his life lately had been slightly empty.

Joan stood in the hall, holding the telephone. 'Haven't they answered?' said her mother, passing with a tray of things for lunch.

'I talked to Maybelle, but I don't think she understood a word I said. I think she's gone to fetch someone.'

'It seems a long time. Why don't you ring off, and start again.'

'They might think it funny,' said Joan.

'I don't want to be stuffy about your best epigrams,' said Margaret, 'but . . .'

'Oh, I'm not blaming you,' said Bernard generously. 'I only wish you could realise that it all goes back to some very early experience which, to put it quite brutally, has nothing to do with me.'

Margaret's ample store of patience was already overdrawn. This was the final insult. She took up her jug of water and dashed it in Bernard's face.

Maybelle found them standing like statues, Margaret clutching the jug, and Bernard mildly dripping. 'I'm surprised at you, Bernard,' she said, drawing her own conclusions. She wiped his shirt-collar, and the knees of his trousers with her handkerchief, and remarked over her shoulder to Margaret: 'There can't have been as much water in it as you thought.'

'What a pair of witches you are!' said Bernard. 'No, Margaret, I implore you not to say you're sorry; it would spoil the effect. What do you think, Maybelle? Should I go and curl up in the airing cupboard?'

'You'll do,' said Maybelle, giving him a final pat. 'That was the Vicarage phoning. There's a Girl Guide rally next week and they want her ladyship.'

‘She’s under the copper beech,’ said Bernard.

‘And she told me,’ said Margaret, ‘that nothing would induce her to go; but then she started writing a speech. Oh, dear.’ Confusion surrounded her; everything she did was wrong; Maybelle was impertinent and Bernard quite unimpressionable.

‘I’ll say you’re all playing tennis,’ said Maybelle.

‘I didn’t really expect to be met,’ said Sally to the elderly, devoted porter who was obviously so shocked at having to provide an unaided welcome. ‘I had such a rush, I didn’t have time to send a telegram. I only just caught the train. Mother must have known I’d try, but she couldn’t possibly know I’d succeeded.’

‘I’ll ring up for a taxi,’ said the porter, ‘unless you fancy a lift.’

He looked doubtfully at a cart, piled dangerously with mangolds, that was drawing out of the station yard.

‘Oh, a lift,’ said Sally. ‘It’s far quicker. Hi, wait!’

‘One has one’s duties,’ said Alicia, ‘to one’s children, to one’s tenants, and even, I sometimes think, to the land itself.’

‘It’s quite wonderful of you,’ said Lucius, `to keep them up for so long.’

‘I’m a very simple woman really,’ said Alicia. In the purple shadow she looked noble and tragic. ‘Tell me again about David’s play,’ she said.

Lucius took a well-bound typescript from under his arm. He was not at all sure, now, whether he should enlarge on its faults or its virtues; but he was anxious to get their business settled as soon as possible.

‘I’ll show you your first entrance. Could we sit down?’

‘Do you mind sitting on the grass?’

‘Yes!

Bernard and Margaret were in each other’s arms. For the first time that day they both felt wonderfully happy.

'We are a pair of sillies,' said Margaret.

'But you know I love you,' said Bernard.

'Do you? Do you really?'

'You're the only person I've ever felt safe with. That's why I mind so terribly when you're not nice to me.'

'I know I'd be much nicer, Bernard, if we were able to announce our engagement.'

'Soon, darling. I'm just waiting for a good opportunity to tell Mother. You do see that it's better if I get the cheque first.'

Margaret kissed him again. It made her feel she could agree to anything.

'It's interesting,' said Alicia; 'quite interesting.'

They had settled on the rustic bench near the bridge over the ha-ha. Lucius shifted his weight between a couple of hard, round logs.

'I'm not sure that it's altogether you,' he said.

'When I'm working,' Alicia explained, 'I don't seem to have any personality of my own. Even now, I could easily feel I was you, if I hunched my shoulders, and sat crooked, and frowned at the sun.'

Lucius ironed himself out. Alicia lightly patted his knee. 'Thank you. That makes me feel much more comfortable. It's a burden, you know, leading other people's lives. I often wish I had been born without imagination. Oh, God, here's that dreary girl. Look, come this way; and walk slowly. We mustn't look as if we were trying to avoid her.'

A shadow fell on the window. Bernard and Margaret sprang apart.

'Hullo all,' said Joan. 'I wasn't sure if Maybelle grasped what I was saying, so I thought I'd better drop over with a note for Lady Maynecompton.'

'I'll see she gets it,' said Margaret.

Joan looked at Bernard with exaggerated and painful

shyness; and then spoke with exaggerated confidence. 'I *am* pleased you've taken up tennis again. Why don't you all come over to-morrow. You haven't been once this holidays. Or should I say vac?'

'Personally, I prefer vacation,' said Bernard. Joan blushed with shame. Mentally, she reduced her standing in Bernard's estimation; that meant a minus sign in her diary. There were very few plusses scattered among the morse and semaphore and the diagrams of simple knots.

'I don't know what arrangements have been made,' said Margaret.

'Mother,' said Bernard, 'has an old friend down from the theatre, and we may be wanted as a Greek chorus.'

'Is she anywhere about?' said Joan. 'Then we could kill two birds with one stone. I mean, the tennis and the Guides. And you could help me persuade her to speak at the rally. It doesn't matter what she says; it's her name that's the draw.'

'They were on the lawn,' said Bernard.

'Not when I came past,' said Joan.

'A nice lot of vegetables,' observed Lucius.

'No,' said Alicia; 'they're all horrible. You ought to have come in the asparagus season. We do grow rather good asparagus. But at least oysters are in at last, and we're having some to-night. Do you remember having oysters and Chablis to celebrate David's third divorce? Oh, how I love them.'

'His fourth marriage doesn't seem very happy,' said Lucius.

'How sad,' murmured Alicia. But, since it is a virtue in a man to be available, she was not altogether displeased. 'And have you been married ever,' she said, 'since I last saw you?'

'How could I?' said Lucius. The implication, so manifestly false yet with a spice of truth in it, made them both giggle.

'Can't you read standing up?' said Alicia, 'or walking?'

Joan hung about. Margaret was unwilling to leave her alone with Bernard, for she was likely to enrage him, and then he would almost certainly make her cry. Besides, Margaret herself did not want to waste these precious moments when Bernard really seemed fond of her; and she was free of that wretched sensation that her deepest feelings were being scrubbed with a stiff nail-brush. It was Sally who rescued them from a charged silence. She swept through the door and slumped a large suitcase in the middle of the room.

'Darlings, it's such heaven to see you. Let me present . . . the working girl.' She made a gesture of introduction; stepped to one side; clicked her heels; and bowed. Then she felt in an inner pocket, pulled out a bundle of crumpled notes, and spread them out in a fan. 'Look. Ten pounds. Where's Mother?'

'With Mr. Angmering, of course; probably discussing the pre-atomic theatre.'

'Yes, but where? I can't wait . . .'

'You'd better,' said Bernard. 'We were all given to understand we were rather in the way.'

'Damn. I wanted to throw my first wages on to her lap.'

'Then talk to Mr. Angmering first. You'll undoubtedly need a producer for that scene. Lady Maynecompton is discovered alone, seated. Enter Sally Maynecompton. Lady M. expresses delight and amazement, but remains seated, spreading her skirts. Sally Mayne . . .'

'Shut up,' said Sally. 'You're just jealous.'

With the air of one who scorns to reply, Bernard helped Margaret to collect her things, and followed her from the room. In the pantry he drew her into a sentimental pose in front of the glass.

'We are a handsome pair,' he said with satisfaction.

Charles had grown tired of hiding in the study and was dodging about in the fields. He had an uneasy feeling

that he ought to be doing something; but without Margaret, he was at a loss in his own department; and Alicia had asked no more of him than to shake her guest by the hand, and go away.

He supposed she must have been feeling dull lately, and blamed himself for not having suggested a trip somewhere, or more visitors. Because he so disliked both, he could not excuse himself as merely thoughtless. It seemed to him that the old-fashioned word 'selfish' fitted better.

He puzzled over the question of mutual happiness. Perhaps he had been at fault in assuming his own happiness was a measure of hers. And yet it was difficult to see how happiness of that order, persisting through every sort of superficial tribulation, could exist independently.

'Have we got to stay here much longer?' said Lucius. 'Joan's such a pest,' said Alicia, 'and she always lingers. How terrible it must be to be unattractive!'

'I should rather like to sit down.'

'Poor Lucius. We should have brought shooting sticks. Would you like to creep round the yard, and up the back staircase to the roof? You can see for miles.'

'Sitting?' said Lucius. His feet were aching with the heat, and he was beginning to feel irritable. All the same, the once-familiar touch of this wayward and ferocious will gave him confidence. Alicia had undoubtedly remained herself.

'I usually sit on the parapet,' she said, 'and dangle my legs over.'

'You see,' said Joan, relaxed and voluble now that she was alone with Sally. 'Bernard once told me I had too many inhibitions. Well, of course, I don't know, *technically*, exactly what he means, but it's obviously a bad thing. My inhibitions do put me at a horrible disadvantage. Only whenever I try to be uninhibited, that doesn't work either.'

'It's just a phase,' said Sally. She had been using this

motto lately, with some success, on an over-anxious mother. 'You'll grow out of it.'

'Do you really think so? I doubt it. You're six months younger than me, but you never worry at all about what people think. You always manage to look natural. And I think it must be your character – or else because you're much better dressed.'

'You worry about yourself too much,' said Sally.

'Yes, but Bernard says . . .'

'And about Bernard. Are you still in love with him?'

'I suppose so.'

'You must be mad.'

Charles, from the poorly drained four-acre on the north slope, saw a spectacle that froze his blood. Alicia and her guest appeared about to throw themselves down from the roof. Trembling, he set off at a stumbling run towards the house. But when he paused for breath, he realised that his eyes had deceived him. They were sitting quietly, with their heads nearly touching, looking at some sort of book. He studied them through his glasses, and saw their lips moving. They seemed to be reading aloud, in turn.

'What an extraordinary place to choose,' he thought. It was quite clear he had never understood his wife. He assumed it was because she was much ton good for him.

Lucius watched Alicia while she read, asking himself, as he had often done before, what made this particular face so lovely. He was, in a cautious way, a connoisseur of beauty, and he recognised two types; the still, classical style which demands admiration from any angle and in almost any light, and the style which, in itself confused or dull or even grotesque, can momentarily be visited by a beauty of astonishing purity and depth. Alicia's face was in neither of these categories; she contrived to make the best of all worlds.

He closed his eyes and listened to her voice. It was a little deeper than he remembered, but just as expressive and flexible, with tones in it that, like music, directly influenced the senses, short-cutting the clumsier symbolism of words.

Lucius had quite stopped worrying about the seat of his trousers. There's no one quite like her, he decided. He didn't suppose there would be any trouble with David. Alicia, having reached her final exit, looked up.

'I like this,' she said very seriously. They had skimmed through most of the heroine's more notable scenes.

'Of course, you must read it all before you decide,' said Lucius. He had the sensation of having a little in hand. Alicia preferred to frighten him.

'Just look about you,' she said, 'at all I enjoy here. It's mine.'

'As far as the eye can reach?'

'Not quite, but a good way.' Neither of them mentioned Charles, who was just crossing the ha-ha. His field-glasses dangled; his walk was rather like a turkey's; and his clothes were simply old, without any affectation of the country gentleman.

'I mean a great deal to my children, you know,' she said. 'Of course,' replied Lucius piously. Now that he had made his own decision, he felt perfectly easy. Alicia swung her legs round and got up. 'Brush me, would you,' she said.

Margaret had at last got back to the study; but Bernard, in an affectionate frame of mind, had followed.

'As soon as Mother,' he said, 'has forked out the allowance for my drama school, I'll tell her we're going to get married. She'll give us her blessing, and we'll *get* married. Lots of students are given parts, you know, while they're training. We ought to be fairly comfortable; and divinely happy.'

'Oh, I do long for it.'

'Do you really love me?'

‘Of course. That’s why I throw jugs of water over you. But I apologise.’

‘Kiss me and make it better.’

‘Darling, you are sweet.’

‘There’s no future in Bernard,’ said Sally. ‘He never thinks of anyone except himself. You’d much better give up thinking about him, and come and share a flat in London with me.’

‘You haven’t got a flat in London.’

‘It’s what I’m aiming at. I’m going to train for a job in a nursery school. Then I shall get a job and a flat, and you can come and live in it.’

‘Could I really?’

‘Why not? I’ll have to share my flat with someone, and you and I always got on quite well at school. We can be inhibited or uninhibited just whichever we feel, and you can put Bernard right out of your mind. You can’t spend your whole life moping around like a sick kitten.’

‘Would you say he’d noticed?’

‘I shouldn’t think so. He never notices anything that matters. He lives in a dream.’

‘If a miracle did happen, I suppose you wouldn’t approve?’ ‘It would be all right for me. But you’re far too good for him.’

‘That doesn’t help me much.’

‘These are the old nurseries,’ said Alicia. ‘Don’t you love rocking horses? The ones that are never used are particularly poignant.’

How she does run on, thought Lucius. He was looking forward now to getting everything settled, and relaxing; but he was familiar with Alicia’s phasing, and knew he would never get a straight answer if he invited it too soon. Let her tease. She might even be right in thinking she was the one woman he had ever loved.

‘One of the nurses I had got in such a state,’ she said, giggling, ‘because Sally and Bernard had pulled out the tail, and kept on putting marbles and things down the hole. She said it was disgusting. Don’t you think that’s funny?’

‘Children are disgusting,’ said Lucius, ‘or so I’m told.’

‘Oh, I swear they thought nothing of it. I told the nurse that to the pure all things are pure. She was rather impertinent, I remember, and I had to get rid of her. I didn’t feel I could cope with a college-trained nanny who corrupted my children’s morals. They were so sweet.’

Lucius gave a restrained nod and a half-smile. He well remembered her sporadic appearances as a young mother; and they had bored him. He was above all interested in his work, and although there had been certain extensions (cautious on both sides) to their professional interest in each other, he had seen no reason to allow it to embrace her children. The evidence of the illustrated papers – that their undoubted beauty did not reach that tactless pitch which might have been a challenge to their mother — rather amused him.

‘They are still very young,’ said Alicia, ‘very dependent. For all that Sally pretends she can make a career out of baby-minding, she is still quite a baby herself. And then Bernard — a good-looking boy, don’t you think?’

‘Very,’ said Lucius.

‘Of course,’ said Alicia, ‘he pines to go on the stage. Would you advise me to encourage him?’

‘I only saw him for about ten seconds,’ Lucius protested, his nerves shrinking. He saw himself invited to find Bernard jobs, and his experienced, uncorrupted intelligence issued a note of warning. He knew very well what a high proportion of handsome and petulant young men turn out a disappointment, and how much of his time they contrived to waste before, during and after.

‘I mean,’ said Alicia simply, ‘from my point of view. Would you talk to him?’

'I should like to,' said Lucius. It was true enough, but he feared he was being rash, and mainly for the sake of cutting short the conversation. If he had known that lunch was going to be so late, he would have got himself a sandwich.

'Hullo, Sally. Nice to see you,' said Charles. 'Good morning, Joan.'

Sally hugged him, and told him she had earned ten pounds and would soon be quite self-supporting. 'That ought to help to keep the family fortunes from rack and ruin.'

'That's not so easy,' said Charles sadly. Joan had the greatest difficulty in understanding what they were saying. To her, poverty was represented by her own home, by shabby furniture, covers that were not cleaned very often, the daily pressure of washing up, fish-pie and potatoes, beans with strings in them, old clothes which had never been fashionable, and the smell of boiling chicken food. All these things were most noticeably absent from the Maynecompton household. She summed up her incredulity.

'I can't imagine Lady Maynecompton being really poor.'

'She can't either,' said Sally.

'I've never explained things to her properly,' said Charles wretchedly.

'You can tell me everything,' said Sally, 'and I'll help you to work out some ways of economising.'

'Unless we do, we may have to change our whole way of life.'

Joan felt she ought not to be listening, but nobody noticed when she tried to say goodbye.

'Poor Father,' said Sally. But whatever we do, you can always go on watching birds. They don't have debts, or mortgages, or income tax.'

'And I don't suppose they get in a stew about love,' said Joan suddenly. Charles looked at her with interest. 'Sometimes,' he observed. 'In fact, the mating ritual of the roseate

tern is far more complicated and elegant than this stuff we see at the pictures.'

'The roseate tern,' said Joan. 'What a beautiful name! I wish I knew more about birds, but I'm short-sighted.'

'I must put some drinks out,' said Margaret.

'Better still,' said Bernard, 'we could have a private drink first, to our happiness somewhere in the future.'

'I doubt if there's time, but if I'm promised the happiness, I don't mind missing the drink.'

Sally took her luggage upstairs. Charles wondered if Joan were missing her lunch, but it seemed rude to remind her, and he dared not ask her to stay when Alicia was entertaining.

'Interest is the main thing,' he told Joan. He put his hand on her shoulder and urged her gently towards the window. 'Do you sec those nuthatches on the chestnuts?'

'No.' Charles handed her the glasses. 'Try these.' Joan patiently viewed an underwatery mist. She supposed she must be holding them wrong, but did not like to admit it.

'Attractive little birds, aren't they?' he said.

'I'm afraid it's all blurred.'

'Let's try them out on the terrace. We can keep an eye open for Alicia at the same time.' His stomach twitched and rumbled. He had an uneasy feeling that it was terribly late.

His attention was drawn back by Joan, who was clutching the glasses as if she were determined to force some secret out of them.

'Each eyepiece,' he said, rather fussed, 'focuses separately.'

Margaret and Bernard, pushing the loaded trolley between them, found the drawing-room empty. 'How very satisfactory,' said Bernard, and reached for the decanter. But their privacy lasted no longer than that, for Sally came back demanding what they had done with Joan.

‘We dropped her quietly down an oubliette,’ said Bernard, ‘and high time.’

‘Oh, Bernard, don’t be so *grand*. For all you know, there are people who find you boring.’

‘No doubt. But I have the tact to avoid them as far as possible.’

Margaret was agreeably conscious that he wanted to keep her to himself, but it was worrying, also, to see how quickly his mood of real gaiety had dispersed. Sally, who heard only the cruel edge on his voice and did not guess the nagging anxiety and confusion behind it, scowled at him and, hunching her shoulders, walked over to the window.

‘There she is. She seems to be stalking nuthatches with Father.’

‘I really ought to go, I’m afraid,’ said Joan. ‘I haven’t even got my bike. I mended one puncture this morning and now there’s another.’

‘I know,’ said Sir Charles unexpectedly. ‘I was just on the point of coming over to help you.’ He looked benignly at the nuthatches. Joan wondered if he was, as Bernard said, mad. As they walked in silence across the lawn, away from his lunch, she could not help hearing his complaining stomach and felt haunted.

‘it’s all very well to be late,’ said Maybelle, ‘but not on the day you’ve ordered a soufflé. Don’t any of you children know where she is?’

Margaret had nothing to suggest. Bernard reminded them that she loved taking conducted tours round the chain of cellars. ‘Or perhaps they are getting ready to act a charade,’ said Sally. It was the nearest she could get to expressing the strange sense of unreality that was creeping up on her.

‘There’ll be a charade all right,’ said Maybelle bitterly, ‘if she finds the food’s spoilt.’

Actually, Alicia was immediately above them. She had paused in a dark passage by a row of glass cases. 'This is the museum,' she said. 'Charles is a great collector of junk.'

'Birds' eggs, I notice,' said Lucius.

'Yes, but those are mainly old. The arrow-heads are newer, if you see what I mean. Egg-collecting has become bad form lately. But you ought to see the kite's egg.'

She opened the case, and took out a whitish egg, spotted and splurged with rust-colour, about two and a half inches long.

'What a size,' said Lucius. 'I did once have a box of those things; but they were all rather small.' Alicia folded her two hands round the egg. 'It was life,' she said solemnly.

Lucius was faintly embarrassed. She managed to combine an air of obstetric brooding, which he found ghoulish, with an affectation of philosophic insight which he thought half-baked. And yet her voice pleaded that she was not, after all, altogether stupid. He resented these demands on his judgment when he was so very hungry; and let her run on.

'You know, I often wonder about the purity of the pure-minded. That horrible nurse may have been on to something. It's really a very unjust rule, because it sounds as if some people were allowed to do and think whatever they like.'

'Perhaps,' said Lucius, 'it only applies to people who don't want to think or do very much.'

Alicia put the egg back carefully. 'It is his greatest treasure,' she said piously; then fluttered her eyelashes – 'Next to me.'

Lucius, aware of a delicate, unspecific invitation, decided it was as good a moment as any to talk business.

Charles, on his return journey, lingered to examine the broken hand-rail on the plank bridge. It was regrettable, of course, that the timber had rotted, but it was cheering to have marked down a simple, practical job that would keep him busy and take his mind off impending trouble.

Slow of thought, but with an animal susceptibility to

atmosphere, he was unsettled not only by Alicia's evasive excitement, but also by Bernard's self-protective arrogance, and even by certain hints of unrest in the dependable character of Margaret. He had no clear idea exactly what was worrying him. It was as if he were seeking some small object in a barrel of whitebait, finding his way through a roomful of feathers, or climbing a glass mountain.

Because his misgivings were so vague, he was quite unprepared to take any action. His ambition was to keep *within reach* of Alicia, to look at her sometimes and perhaps, now and then, touch her hand.

By mending the rail, he could make the time pass quicker and there would be something to show for it.

'Where's Charles?' said Alicia, vexed, since she had delayed her entrance for the full house. 'No, Maybelle, wait; don't start fussing about lunch. This is a great day for me, and you have known me longer than anyone.'

'Hullo, Mother,' said Sally in a smallish voice.

'My darling.' Sally was enveloped by those graceful arms, by that fresh, flowery scent; the perfect image of a mother, but not quite spontaneous. Sally's heart sank. It began to dawn on her that she must have done something wrong; but she could not think what.

'So the prodigal has returned,' said Alicia airily, holding her hand. 'Lucius, have you met my youngest?'

Lucius bowed, and finding Sally somewhat distrait, opened up a patter of helpful small talk about the weather. Alicia fretted. Bernard handed Lucius his sherry; and stayed with him.

'What was it you wanted to say?' said Maybelle.

'Nothing,' said Alicia peevishly. Her announcement must wait. In the meantime, she could not allow Lucius and Bernard to distract each other's attention. Sally had left them together, and their conversation was quickly developing a life of its own.

'You two must certainly have a proper talk some time,' she said, moving in between them. 'I was just saying, Bernard, that you have ambitions. And Oh, how one suffers for it. I have been aching with nostalgia for weeks, and now Lucius has made it much worse. I hardly know where we went this morning, I was so transported. . . .'

'Oh, dear,' thought Lucius. 'Oh, time, Oh, lunch.' Alicia made a grab at his wandering attention . . . 'And weren't we clever about dodging Joan?'

'She left you a note,' said Margaret. Alicia put her hand to her forehead.

'Those poor little Guides want me to make them a speech about honour. It's such a bore, but it seems a shame to grudge them a treat.'

'That's not all,' said Bernard. 'Joan wants us to play tennis to-morrow.'

'That's quite impossible. Ask her to dinner to-night.'

Sally had pursued her father to the bridge. They walked back rather more slowly than Alicia's impatience, and their own hunger, warranted.

'I do wish Mr. Angmering weren't here,' said Sally.

'So do I,' said Charles.

'Charles darling, some sherry? We have just been looking at your museum. Apparently Lucius was a fanatical collector *as* a boy.'

Lucius smiled politely. 'I had quite a spasm of envy when I saw your kite's egg.'

A nervous shiver passed over his host's face. 'Keep it under your hat, if you don't mind. Of course, I got it abroad, but nobody's to know that. In this country, the bird has been protected since the nineteenth century. I don't want to create any scandal, and a kite's egg's just the sort of thing that starts people gossiping.'

It seemed unlikely. The centre of interest had long since

shifted from him to Alicia, who was pensively regarding the dahlias. 'The first breath of autumn,' she said; 'so sad . . . so sweet.' As if a stop had been pulled out, her voice grew richer. 'After all these placid years . . . these long years when I have abandoned, oh, so willingly, the centre of the stage to others . . . when I had given up all thought of my work and found my happiness only in sharing your thoughts, your troubles, and your hopes. . . . Now my call has come. Lucius has found me a play. And I . . . I . . .'

Her lovely voice broke with emotion. Lucius, thoroughly master of himself and satisfied that the operation could not have been conducted, in these circumstances, any more economically, raised his glass.

'To your success,' he said.

'And to your happiness,' said Charles, less certainly. He braced himself to take the blow he had half expected.

CHAPTER III

LUNCH was a little strained. Sally was not happy to be called a ewe Iamb, and Bernard was startled to hear David Transom described as a herbaceous border. That was his own epithet.

Alicia was jealously watched by both her children. It was as if they feared that Lucius would whisk her away at any moment. Her husband was conscious of the same sort of anxiety, but he showed it less. For all his eccentricity, he had been brought up to a strict code of manners. In addition, it was an anxiety to which he was inured. He was always wanting to speak to Alicia and could look back on a long record of repeated failures.

After lunch he excused himself on grounds of work. Margaret was supposed to be off duty, but so much of the morning had been wasted, she stayed to help him. Bernard, also, had offended her by forgetting they had planned a bicycle ride. He did not want to miss any chance of seeing his mother (or Lucius) alone. Sally, no less anxious, but less ready to waste time, pestered Maybelle to look out some old baby clothes for the woman in the train. She mended some of the holes, and made up a big, tidy parcel.

Bernard's vigilance had very little result. Alicia, with an air of doing a favour, allowed him to carry two deck-chairs under the copper beech. There she and Lucius settled down to read the play right through. They were still so immersed in it at tea-time that they refused company. Sally brought them cups of tea and a plate of cakes.

At the tea-table in the second-best shade of the hornbeam, Bernard was slapping at the wasps with a big navy-blue book.

'I smoked out three nests,' said Charles, 'but it doesn't

seem to have made any difference.' He got up, put down his cup, and wandered off. Bernard was alone with Margaret.

'I'm sure I could persuade *him*,' he said, 'to persuade *her*. But I may not get an opportunity.'

Margaret herself was very chary about asking favours. 'I'm sure he could be a help to you,' she said, 'but aren't people always asking him for help?'

'Oh, people,' said Bernard carelessly. 'The point is, he likes me, so I'm entitled to ask.'

'How do you know he likes you?'

Bernard looked at her in surprise. 'One has an instinct,' he said. One has also, of course, a way of fluttering one's eyelashes, a startled lift of one's head, a Grecian pout, an indolent, pagan fashion of disposing of loose-jointed limbs. Margaret could never quite believe these were intentional graces, because they captivated her so, but she hated it when other eyes had the better view.

'But Mother seems determined to monopolise him,' said Bernard.

Maybe it's just as well, thought Margaret. She grew more and more convinced that Bernard ought to stay at Oxford; and more and more hesitant about saying so. She hoped that Fate, so ably impersonated by Lady Maynecompton, would decide.

Sally walked slowly back across the fawn, and joined them.

'Margaret, is Joan definitely coming to dinner?'

'Yes.'

'Then, look, why don't we all try to be nice to her for once?'

'She doesn't make things easy,' said Margaret.

'I know; but that's only because we all make her so shy. And I can see us doing it. I know she'd behave much more sensibly, Bernard, if you didn't treat her like dirt.'

'Hush. I'm reading.'

'She has got quite a lot of sense really,' said Sally.

Joan was worried about the Guides. It was a nuisance not being able to tell them whether Lady Maynecompton was coming to the rally or not. She had been forced to give them the details of the day's arrangements on a provisional basis, and it was difficult to work up much enthusiasm. She had broken off to do a little tracking (as it seemed such a suitable day for it), and then Christine, who had been sent out to deface the walls of the village with arrows in white chalk, and to tie knots in tufts of grass, had got lost.

Christine was not the youngest, but very much the smallest Guide. She lived with a grandfather who was intensely and loudly pious (with frequent attacks of equally loud profanity) and a mother whose husband had never been seen locally. Christine herself was obviously bright, but strange. She had a tiny, heart-shaped face and a slight stammer; and was usually very dirty. Joan was unwilling to deny the benefits of the Girl Guide movement to those who needed them most; but she was beginning to think that Christine was irredeemable. This was rather confirmed when she found that Christine had given up laying a trail, and had been watching their fruitless hunt around the final arrow from the roof of someone else's shed.

'It was really very unco-operative of you,' she said. 'Do come down off that roof. You'll get both of us into trouble.'

They walked back to the Drill Hall together. Joan did not want to nag, so she said nothing. Christine was obviously trying to think of distracting conversation.

'I d-did want to ask you something,' she said, in the ingratiating whine that always set Joan's nerves on edge.

'What was it?' she asked, a little sharply.

'Who was the Whore of Babylon?' said Christine.

'Was there anything else, Charles dear?' said Alicia, glancing down at the typescript.

'Not really. I only wanted to tell you I was thinking of mending the bridge.'

'What a very good idea! But I *should* try to get it done before the weather breaks.'

'How's the reading going?'

'Wonderfully. But there is rather a lot *of* it.'

Charles accepted his dismissal. Lucius and Alicia resumed their interrupted conversation.

'You have deserted us for far too Long,' he said.

'My dear, what nonsense. It's true I haven't been working, but I've made a point of being at most of the best parties. Only you were never there. It was you who deserted me. Look at all those years in America.'

Lucius did not care to look very closely. His wartime job in some form of public relations had landed him on the far side of the Atlantic; and afterwards he had stayed on Broadway. It wasn't altogether for the money – the Americans had given him every sort of support for certain of his cherished ideas that England had spurned – and he could not understand why his conscience should be uneasy.

'It seemed an opportunity,' he said.

Joan always hoped that people would come to her with their intimate troubles. They very seldom did. But she had equipped herself by running over in her mind what she should say if somebody asked her how babies were born, or whether it was right or prudent to be intimate before marriage. Her answers to these questions were lined up. One started: 'Well, you know about rabbits'; the other, since she did not want to preach, was developed from the text that men are rather different from *us*. It had only lately dawned on her that her arguments on behalf of marriage could also be applied, by an ingenious mind like Christine's, to a really reliable engagement. Indeed, that was the common practice, without any argument, throughout the countryside. Her father shook his head, but he always married them, afterwards, in church.

So for some weeks she had been seeking some simply-phrased answer to the tricky question: 'What should I allow my fiancé to *do*?' On this point, encyclopaedias were useless, and although from a sheaf of cheap women's papers she had collected a number of confident, and apparently quite sensible, answers, she could not help realising that she did not altogether understand the question. What exactly did all these young men, who were not apparently, well, like rabbits, want to do? The peculiarity of human beings clearly is that they can keep it up for ages, as one learns from those couples who disappear into their cars for the whole of the second half of a dance. But Joan had no clear idea of what went on, and why it didn't get boring. She would have liked to ask Bernard, who must know, but she believed one lost caste by talking to young men about sex; or Sally, who might know, and who might understand that her main interest in this rather horrifying subject was created by the really *good* ambition to stretch out a helping hand to other young people. But she feared even Sally might despise her for not knowing already. In any case, she would prefer to find the information in print; and she was still seeking, hoping that the appeal should not be made to her until she was ready to rise to the occasion.

And now Christine had come up with a real corker. Who, indeed, was the Whore of Babylon? The answer was beset with difficulties, the first being that although she knew Christine was wrong to pronounce 'who' as in 'Whoa-up,' she felt that any correction would indicate too great a familiarity with the word.

Joan blushed all down her spine. To be able to cope (like Sally) was her highest ideal. She was well aware that she was going to let herself down.

'I always thought,' she said, 'that it meant someone very extravagant and reckless. You know, dancing and singing and drinking and covered with big jewels that weren't hers.' A gleam in Christine's eye made her feel that the picture

was rather too attractive. She hastened to add, 'But of course you know it's really all symbolic.'

'What's that?'

'It means that she represents the forces of evil. But what on earth has made you worry about it?'

Christine scuffed her worn toe-caps in the dust. 'I d-don't know. It was j-just something somebody said. And I wondered what it d-did mean.'

Lucius had come across a fair number of highly sexed women, and he had decided several times that Alicia was not one of them. She had ail the accessories – the appearance, the manner, the perfume, the troubling gestures, and the goading, equivocal conversation. But while all the evidence was there, the essential fact was missing.

They were talking happily about old friends. Alicia crossed her legs and pulled down her skirt, not without an affectionate glance at her ankles. There was also a suggestion that the movement was inhibited, and so turned more obvious, by his presence.

'I can never understand,' she said, 'chow it is always these dull, mouse-like women who break up homes in a big way. Have you noticed? Of course I disapprove, but I wish I understood how they did it. You never see any men pursuing them, and then suddenly there's some poor wretch completely submerged in a hopeless, impossible and permanent attachment. Are they the good cooks? Or the really nice characters? Or what?'

'I don't seem to meet them much.'

'Yes, we both avoid them.' She suddenly grinned at him. He was surprised but rather pleased to find himself already slightly fascinated. He knew Acacia so well that he felt safe. After all, the only women one can trust not to eat one up alive are those who do not altogether like the taste.

Margaret had gone. Bernard and Sally eyed the cedar. They both felt they were wasting their time, and both

resented it. But it was only Sally who felt some inclination to do something different.

'Would you drive me to the village to post a parcel?'

'I'd far rather not. I may be able to talk to him while she's titivating.'

'I suppose he must be attractive,' said Sally. 'I don't see it. Do you?'

'That's a subject I hadn't considered,' said Bernard with a complacent smile. He genuinely did not care, one way or the other, about Lucius' charm. 'I feel I could get on with him,' he said.

Lucius and Alicia were moving. They made a circuit of the lawn and passed quite close. She was telling Lucius to have his bath early, because the plumbing was primitive and sometimes the water ran cold. Lucius let his vague brown eyes — the windows of a divided spirit — rest on Bernard for a moment; and Bernard smiled engagingly. He recognised a certain tribute; and naturally did not know that Lucius was, above all, susceptible to terror. He was thinking: that boy will make trouble if he can.

'Remember, children, it's a party,' said Alicia. 'Dress.'

Joan had one dress (for dances) of moiré silk; and another dress (for unspecified occasions) of black marocain. Her mother recommended the silk, because the Maynecomptons were always rather grand, but Joan, who knew she could not compete, dreaded giving the impression that she was trying to.

She put on the black dress. High-necked, with costume jewellery, and tighter at the waist, it wouldn't have been so bad. Or perhaps it should have been cut rather lower – but the fit of really low dresses is so tricky, and quite beyond a village dressmaker.

There was certainly something funny about the neck. It was betwixt and between. Her collar bones showed, but when she put on her grandmother's seed-pearls, they ducked under the material in front.

She tried tying a chiffon scarf round her neck. But it crept up at the sides and left a gap. And although it was emerald green, which is supposed to look dashing with black, it didn't. Even her mother, coming in to put the finishing touches, seemed disgusted with it.

'The other dress is so pretty,' she said.

'What are you putting on?' said Maybelle, darting into Sally's room on the way from Alicia to the kitchen.

'Oh, I suppose that white dress Mother gave me.'

'Come on, then. I've got a moment. Let me slip it over your head.'

Sally stood with the docility of a dumb animal while the soft, shimmering stuff fell round her.

'Feeling out of sorts?' said Maybelle.

'I hate it when Mother's annoyed with me. She never says anything, but she's just twice as gay, and keeps on whisking off.'

'But you're looking a dream,' said Maybelle.

'I feel like a nightmare.'

Bernard enjoyed putting on a dinner jacket. He liked being very tidy – or else very untidy. Flannels, so long as one had a brilliantly clean white shirt, were good; suits were difficult (although that might only be because he was still using, for financial reasons, his father's tailor); but this out-of-date costume, even without that final elegance in the cutting, was marvellous. He noticed that his tan was slightly richer than he thought. The word *fareuche* agreeably crossed his mind; and he noted that his hair was undoubtedly hyacinthine. He wished Margaret could see him. Or Lucius. Or both.

Margaret had no trouble over dressing. A friend had given her a black dinner gown with a heart-shaped neckline, which suited her; she had brushed her dark hair till it

shone; and made up her face admirably. She was never likely to be the cynosure of all eyes, but she was quite capable of being a real beauty for those who loved her. That was all she wanted. She went downstairs to see if there was anything to be done.

Lucius wondered if they rang a bell. Alicia had not mentioned any time, and if lunch was anything to go by, it might not have helped. He was most anxious not to get down too soon. Alicia had been most indefinite about what she wanted him to do for Bernard, and he foresaw endless possibilities of doing the wrong thing. There were several copies of *Vogue* on his bedside table, and he began looking through them. They took his mind off fairly successfully.

Charles, still in a tweed jacket, crossed the hall.

'You'll have to hurry,' said Margaret.

'You look lovely, my dear. But you ought to have a rose. Wait here *a* minute, while I find you the right one.'

'Oh, no, Sir Charles; it's sweet of you, but you really mustn't. You've still got to change.'

'Must I?'

As the golden day melted into an echoing, grey-green shadow, Joan walked up the drive. It was the longest way round, but it seemed more polite to come in by the front door. She was wearing a tweed coat over her black dress, and carrying a leather handbag. Pm all wrong, she thought.

The forbidding facade — all wrong also — gave her no comfort. It was the Maynecompton frontier. And even those Maynecomptons that she did not love, she admired.

Charles tried the bath water. It was cold, of course. But he had to admit it was perhaps a blessing in disguise, for he had very little time.

All the same, he wrote down a few notes on the birds he had seen during the day. If one leaves it even overnight, one can never be quite so confident of one's accuracy.

Alicia in midnight blue, a queen of night in the rich interior dusk, spangled with candlelight, presided over her dinner table. She sat between Bernard and Lucius, and felt agreeably stimulated by the sense that they were both a little keyed up. The rest of the company were less interesting to her. Joan was an obscure presence on Bernard's left, but at least when Charles addressed her from the other side, she answered. Margaret, beyond him, could be trusted to keep him mildly amused, and prevent Sally, who sat between her and Lucius, getting too much involved in a long, serious conversation with *him*.

'Now that you've seen the place, Lucius,' said Alicia, 'do you wonder that I've buried myself alive?'

'That means,' said Bernard, who always felt bolder in a dinner jacket, 'that she's only in London three days a fortnight.'

Lucius smiled at him. Alicia made her point more explicitly.

'I feel Lucius should know that I am making a real sacrifice.'

A quiver of uneasiness opposite revived a garbled memory of some argument Charles had produced to prove that the sacrifice might be demanded in any case. But while she did not mind dwelling on the idea of sacrifice, she was most disinclined to commit herself to giving something up.

'Charles is such a Cassandra. He contracts the most crushing sense of doom whenever a tile blows off the roof, or some pigs get under a gate and heave it off the hinges. He's terrified he won't be able to pay for mending it; and so he's continually trying to make a present of us to someone or other. Luckily, we won't do as an ancient monument. But now there's a new thing about becoming a company.

Imagine, Lucius, being managed by a lot of sordid people who own so many ordinary shares. One might just as well live in Battersea Park.'

'Surely,' said Bernard, 'it's simply a device for dodging income tax?'

'How sordid,' said Alicia.

'I should still be the managing director,' said Charles. He could not have looked less like a managing director. Alicia stared at him.

'The more I think of it,' she said, 'the more impossible it all sounds.'

Joan swallowed her oysters with difficulty. Mouthfuls of sea water, which never tastes quite inanimate, always repelled her, and oysters were the same, only worse. She tried to hide the taste under red pepper; and coughed. Charles gave her some water, and started patting her back, but by that time the cough was cured. Then she noticed that she had been using the wrong fork. She didn't quite know what to do, but hoped she might be able to change them round unobserved - so that her plate looked the same as everyone else's, and she did not find herself without the proper tools for whatever puzzling dish came next.

So, after the last oyster, she gave her fork an extra, surreptitious lick, and put it quickly back on the table. The conversation, to which she had not been attending, came to a stop at that moment, and she waited for a better opportunity of moving the other fork back. Unfortunately, the brisk little girl who sang in the choir whenever the Maynecomptons were away for the week-end, snatched her plate away. Joan was in the depths of despair – they might even *laugh about it in the kitchen.*

Sally was so terribly unhappy that she could not even enjoy her grouse. But she was beginning to think it was stupid of her to have expected anything else. Alicia had

reproached her when the job was first suggested, but then she appeared to stop bothering about it, and vanished for a week in London a few days before Sally was due to start. It had simply not occurred to Sally that she was still annoyed, and she had saved up all sorts of interesting and amusing impressions she wanted to pass on. Alicia loved boasting about her children, particularly if the account they gave of themselves had some good quotations; and Sally, who knew she was dull compared to Bernard, had imagined that this time her mother would be rather pleased with her, and even a little impressed. She had looked forward to a cosy giggle about, say, that time all the children got locked in the upstairs bathroom, and what the fireman had said when he brought the last one down the long gutter.

She had never expected to be patted on the back; but she had been pleased with herself, and now that the gossip and giggle were misfiring, she was much less pleased. And yet it did seem mean to grudge Alicia the lovely time she was obviously having; and Sally (with a job of her own now) felt that in a way she *quite understood.* Only it is grim, at seventeen and a half, to have to understand that you yourself arc of very little consequence. Yet Alicia, glancing at her, felt a wave of genuine tenderness. After all, this snub-nosed, blonde creature with the exquisite complexion was *hers.* Or was she? This was the kind of emotional dead-lock that Alicia often fell into; and from which she could usually extricate herself very neatly. She had been known, even at meals, to say, 'Darling, come and kiss me,' and the kiss itself had relieved her mind because it seemed to prove all that she needed to know. In fact, the children's ready response to antics of this order did not prove their confidence in the maternal tie – only their longing to re-create its ravelled threads.

While Lucius, in dulcet tones, gave a technical discourse on the latest production of *Hamlet,* she did not see her way to relieving her mixed feelings by direct action. She put her

hand lightly on Bernard's, and whispered, 'You must listen carefully to this, darling.'

Bernard had finally decided that Lucius was the better bet. His mother could give him money, but she was hopelessly out of touch and was not likely to find him a job. And it was well worth exploring the possibilities of cutting the training down, or even out. His performance as Jacques had really been outstanding; the *Oxford Times* had said he had the makings of a great actor. He wondered if he could find some negligent way of showing Lucius the cutting – but then remembered that the critic had put his comment in a disappointingly guarded way: 'Maynecompton is the only member of the cast who might,' etc. . . .

His mother was still patting his hand. That would never do. He wished to appear before Lucius as capable, independent, one of those characters of whom it is prophesied that they will go a long way, because they have already covered quite a bit of the distance. He turned to Joan.

'Did you have a jolly time with the Guides?' he said languidly.

Sally was pleased to sec that Bernard was making an effort. Margaret was annoyed at the slavish way Joan turned right round to him, and gazed with obvious devotion. It was the sort of thing she often wanted to do herself, but she hoped it was not always so obvious.

'Alicia is looking very beautiful,' said Charles. Margaret did not know if this comment was addressed to her. He seemed rather to be thinking aloud. Oh, this Maynecompton beauty. She felt bullied by it, as if she were listening to an admirable piece of music being played just a shade too loud.

It would be unthinkable to get up and leave the concert hall on that account. Margaret checked her impulse to find fault. She knew she ought to ask Bernard whether they

were engaged or not; but she could not face doing anything that might lose him for good.

Joan's hopes, now that Bernard had at last said something nice to her, were more modest; she wanted to keep him talking to her as long as possible. But her description of the afternoon's tracking did not go very well. She could not get on to telling him how naughty Christine had been, because he kept on asking questions. What sort of knots does one tie in blades of grass, for instance?

'Not blades,' said Joan; 'tufts. You just twist it round and pull it through, pointing in the right direction.'

'And then these arrows. Is it just arrows they make, or do they chalk up anything else?'

'Well, I don't think there's much else.' Bernard seemed disappointed. 'Except, there is a sign for "I have gone home" – a circle with a dot in it.' She sketched a figure in the air.

'I have gone home,' said Bernard 'That's interesting.'

His attention wandered to ice-cream and hot chocolate sauce.

Lucius did not care for ice-cream. In America the local plague (corresponding to hookworm in Malay and yaws in West Africa) had attacked him and he was permanently afflicted with an incipient duodenal ulcer. His profession debarred him from the light, frequent and regular meals which had been recommended to him, and he tried to make up for it at week-ends, at least as regards regularity. Any failure meant that his conscience as well as his stomach rebelled. He wished he had arranged to go back that night, to the ex-Marine who had at least learnt how to make boiled fish quite eatable, and on days of great nervous strain gave him bread and milk laced with brown sugar, in bed.

'It was with Bradley,' he said, 'that Shakespearean criticism really took a fatal turn. This idea (of course, quite foreign in the Greeks), that tragedy is always the outcome of some fault or weakness, is the typical sentimental nonsense that makes Anglo-Saxons such a menace in literature, not to mention politics. All problems can be solved, we say, if one only goes the right way about it. Naturally, that in itself is an incentive, and up till lately we have been fairly successful in controlling impossible situations (the defeat of the Armada and the withdrawal from Dunkrik are only two examples). So we all feel entitled to look down on the Hamlets of this world. I once read a school essay by a young cousin of mine, and he, roughly speaking, took the line that Hamlet *ought* to have killed his uncle straight away, and then there would have been no more trouble. Yes, you can laugh, Alicia, he was very young at the time; but the point is that he must have been put up to it by some wretched teacher with all sense of living conflict educated out of him. And that is why we fail so hopelessly with the Russians. We go on talking about reason, humanity and good sense when nothing of the sort applies.'

Bernard whistled. 'Unfortunately, we don't always act up to our principles,' said Charles.

'No, of course not. But our real failure, the only fatal hypocrisy, is the pretence, in defiance of our own knowledge, that these principles are universally shared.'

'I don't know that I quite follow you,' said Bernard. Lucius immediately felt he had been talking very great nonsense, and wished he had not drunk quite so much of the burgundy, a sunny, insinuating wine, unexpectedly potent. Sally offered him a peach, which he refused with an involuntary shudder.

'Your argument,' Bernard went on, quite deferentially, 'hardly seems logical. If we are to conclude, from our own failure to follow certain principles (whatever they may be) that those are the principles we believe in, surely we can

argue from similar failures elsewhere, that the same principles are held with loyal devotion. Indeed, *if* I may pursue your line of thought, the one phenomenon which would be really difficult to explain is an imaginary situation where some nation suddenly put into practice the principles we think we believe in. Because then, of course, we should know that their basic beliefs were so alien as to be quite beyond our understanding.'

Lucius, refusing brandy, shook his head. Margaret smiled. She enjoyed Bernard's talkative spells, particularly when they went right above her head, because then there was no temptation to pick holes.

'Won't you really have a nectarine?' said Joan, who had been holding the dish out in front of him for nearly a minute. 'They're so good.'

'The Persians,' said Alicia, 'seem to manage the Russians so much better than we do. And I'm told their erotic literature is quite extraordinary.'

Charles wished it were socially possible to retire with the men. Conversation of this intellectual yet frivolous type (which habitually went from bad to worse) ought, in his opinion, to be subject to very strict regulations, like foot-and-mouth. All the people who indulged in. it should be, perhaps not put away, but rigorously isolated. Then the thought that they might themselves prefer isolation re-awakened the nagging tenderness he felt for Alicia. He loved to see her happy; and he was prepared to endure any conversation until she chose to move.

Alicia was picking her grapes off their stalk in a very knowing fashion, her eyelids lowered, awaiting some response to her last interjection. But Bernard was determined to keep the discussion on its original high level.

'Of course,' he said, 'I couldn't take the vulgar view that material progress (so-called) has putt's in a better position to solve our problems. From that point of view, mankind

still puts up only a very puny opposition to Fate. In fact, no one since Prometheus has done as well. But surely the whole situation is going to be changed by the very significant advances in psychiatry?'

He paused. Lucius, who had accepted brandy by a mistake at the second offer, and was drinking it in small sips, appeared oblivious.

'Bernard thinks psychiatry has altered everything,' said Sally brightly.

Lucius looked up in surprise at Bernard. 'Oh, how?' he said. It was a simple question, not a challenge. Poor Lucius had completely lost the thread.

Bernard embarked on the subject which lay nearest but one to his heart. Alicia rose.

'Let's have coffee together,' she said, 'on the terrace.'

CHAPTER IV

ALICIA placed Lucius beside her. Charles drew up one .of the uncomfortable deck-chairs, and prepared to play his proper part as a host.

'Since you are interested in kites,' he said, 'I think you'd like to see a curious reference I came upon lately. It's a quotation from the records of an ancient religious foundation near Clinton Abbas, under the patronage of Saint Teresa.'

'Do let Lucius finish his coffee in peace,' said Alicia.

Charles obediently piped down. Lucius stared at his half-empty cup with misgiving. He had not intended to have coffee.

Joan, finding herself still next to Bernard (although she supposed it was only by chance) felt emboldened to try again. After all, she had not done so badly at dinner. They had had quite a talk about the Guides, before that horrible conversation about Fate. She knew she could never get used to the idea that flesh is grass (it gave her the feeling that she was going down in a fast lift) and she was glad Bernard disagreed. She had always known there was a sympathy between them really.

But did he know it himself? This was the sort of problem on which the women's papers really were helpful. 'Talk to him about his interests,' they said. 'Thins is a delicate way of showing you think a lot of him, but without making yourself cheap. Good luck to you, my dear, I feel from your nice letter that you deserve happiness.'

'Bernard,' she said, 'do you think you could give me some advice? It's about psychology.'

Bernard, with several fine, frustrated sentences ringing in his head, was all attention. 'Of course,' he said.

'You see,' said Joan, 'it's a subject I ought to know about. It comes in such a lot in the sort of things I do; but I don't even know what sort of books to read, or anything. And I was sure you would be able to tell me.'

'Well, let's see, this is rather a tall order. Perhaps we had better retire if we want to talk consecutively.'

He got up and held his hand out to pull her up from her chair. It was such an ordinary gesture to him, he only just noticed that she blushed. Obviously she had somehow managed to say the right thing for once.

But answers to correspondents still haunted her. 'A shiny nose and untidy hair are not attractive. We assume that you always start out on a date *just right;* but do remember to look in your mirror every so often. It is the girl who looks fresh and charming at the *end* of the evening who gets asked out again.'

'Excuse me,' she said.

'Where are you two going?' Sally called from the far side of the circle.

Bernard smirked. He enjoyed giving Sally the surprise of her life.

'I have challenged Joan to a game of snooker.'

He waited at the bottom of the stairs to lead Joan to the billiard-room, which he regarded as the safest place in the house. Margaret passed him, and said in a detached way: 'Arc you really going to have a game with her? She isn't at all good.'

'Darling, that was a subterfuge. She wants me to give her a reading list, and I prefer to write it out in peace. I'll be back as soon as I can, but don't count on me.'

'I was,' said Margaret. Bernard was about to kiss her, on her pale eyelids, or her fine, straight nose – he hadn't decided – but Joan came rattling down the shallow steps in heavy, rather loose shoes. Margaret, with a wounded look, watched them go into the billiard-room and shut the door.

Of course, it was nice of Bernard to bother about Joan's reading, and of course it was quite right of Sally to chivvy him for his bad manners. But Margaret had been counting on a nice evening, after a perfectly hellish day.

'Oh, well,' she thought. 'I suppose I may as well work.'

The swing seat made Lucius feel sick. The deck-chairs looked uninviting.

'I should like to look at your portrait again,' he said.

Alicia led him indoors and switched on the single strip-light.

'I was good, wasn't I?'

'Superb.'

Sally had trailed after them. She stood in the window, beyond the wedge of light, a shimmery, ghostly figure. Lucius and Alicia dropped on to the sofa, with their backs to her. She felt she ought to go, but she still wanted to stay.

'Of course,' said Bernard, leaning gracefully on a cue, 'as soon as you told me you wanted to talk about books, I realised there was some personal problem behind it.'

'Oh, Bernard, what a lot you know. I never make good guesses like that.'

'It's largely a question of training,' said Bernard generously. 'Now, it sounds to me as if Christine simply wanted to get a rise out of you; and I don't honestly think you did too badly. You didn't, anyway, dodge answering, which is the worst possible reaction in those circumstances. But of

course your real enemy isn't Christine at all, but your own feelings of guilt and muddle.'

'I know.'

'Well, that's a step in the right direction,' said Bernard. Now that he was taking an interest in Joan, he did see that she needed encouraging.

'You chose quite the worst moment,' said Lucius, 'for leaving the stage.'

'Should I have left in a blaze of triumph as Juliet?'

'Heaven forbid. But it was morbid of you'to be so overwhelmed by that single failure afterwards. You should have gone straight on to some other great part.'

'You always knew how to arrange my life. If you'd lifted a finger, I might have changed my mind. But still, I have had great happiness. Are you still there, Sally?'

Her voice was melting. Sally, ready and waiting, drifted in from the window, and leaning over the back of the sofa took her mother's outstretched hand. She felt happier immediately. Alicia, feeling her fingers trembling, held them more tightly, and the physical gesture carried her emotions with it.

'You have been a great happiness to me, Sally.'

'Oh, I'm glad,' said Sally. She had no inclination to break this lovely moment. But Alicia, more swiftly roused, more speedily exhausted, conscious that Lucius was fidgeting, and trained in passages that were neatly followed through, like a successful stroke with a golf club or a tennis racket, disengaged herself.

'What is everyone doing?'

'I think Father went back to the study. And probably Margaret is there too. And Joan and Bernard are playing snooker. And you are here.'

'No one out of doors this lovely evening?'

'It is lovely,' said Sally. 'Will you come for a walk with me, Mother?'

'My dear, Lucius and I must keep at it. There is such a lot to discuss. Why don't you go and mark for Bernard and Joan?'

'I suppose I might as well,' said Sally, in a flat voice.

'The ideal,' said Bernard, 'is a long analysis, but it is rather impractical, even for very rich people, because it takes up so much time.'

'Have you been analysed?'

'Not yet.'

'It must be lovely.'

'No; that's the last thing. It's hell, like any really great experience.'

'I only meant, it must be so wonderful to feel completely sorted out.'

Sally burst in on them. 'What on earth are you two doing?'

'Talking.' They stared at her, bemused. She shrugged her shoulders and withdrew.

'We might provide some circumstantial evidence,' said Bernard. He arranged the balls, and played a first careless stroke. 'Now you.'

'Which one must I hit?'

'This one.' He put his finger on it, and tried to mesmerise her to succeed. He was quite unsuccessful.

'It's so silly,' said Alicia. 'I've been shaking with excitement all evening. Look.' She held out her hand, which was indeed showing a light tremor.

Lucius was very tired. He leaned back, and closed his eyes. 'You know I adore you,' he murmured.

Alicia took her hand further, and picked a cigarette from a fine silver box. Lucius woke up in time to light it. He already regretted his cowardice when he saw her sweet, mischievous eyes with a smooth tiny flame dancing in each. Alicia laughed.

'It's very naughty of you to say so. Besides, that isn't

what I want. Everyone adores me. Charles, Bernard, Sally probably the entire county, except for one of the magistrates who doesn't care for my driving. I've had almost enough admiration. I only want you to revive those lovely days when we were all so light-hearted, and so clever.'

'Ands sometimes just a little bit wicked.'

'Were we?' said Alicia innocently. It was agreeable to be reminded that Lucius had remained, after her marriage, a devoted though subdued admirer; and to guess that he may have suffered more disappointment than he showed.

Besides not being able to aim straight, Joan was also quite unable to grasp the rules. 'Which one shall I hit?' she kept on saying. At first, Bernard was able to take pleasure in his own elegant strokes, but he got bored with being gaped at, and his boredom, quickly spreading to a general sensation of the pointlessness of life, put him off his stroke. He was almost relieved when Joan laid her cue on the table and said, 'I wish I knew what Christine was really getting at.'

Bernard translated his mounting impulse to hit her into words. 'I imagined,' he said coolly, 'that foul-mouthed, sanctimonious, old grandfather of hers had been chattering about my mother.'

The blow slowly took effect. Joan turned quite pale.

'But, Bernard, no one could possibly think that your mother is a . . .'

'Stop it!' shouted Bernard. He came towards her with his teeth clenched, looking like Frankenstein. She thought he might be going to strangle her, but halfway round the table he stopped. He was slightly stunned by the hideous discovery that he was going to cry.

He *would not* cry in public; and by public, he meant Joan, standing there so gormlessly, with her mouth open and her hands dangling. He *would not* cry. But it was not so much

a mental resolve as an obstinacy in his taut muscles, and the stinging flesh behind his eyes, which also cried out: *I want Margaret.*

He managed to put his cue tidily in the rack.

'Will you excuse me?' he said faintly. 'There's a message I forgot to give. I'll be back.'

He raced along the corridor, the tears only just not falling.

'Everybody seems to be occupied,' said Sally disconsolately, shifting from one foot to the other in the door of the study.

'I'll be through in about ten minutes,' said Charles. 'But, Margaret, why don't you two girls go for a walk?'

'When we've finished, Sally, I'd love to.'

Sally turned, and was hurled two or three feet by Bernard taking a fast corner. He caught hold of her unconcernedly, as if she were a drifting boat.

'Margaret, can you come out in the garden?'

'Not now,' said Margaret coldly. She was not inclined to admit in public that Bernard had more claim to her than Sally. Besides, he had treated her badly, and deserved a punishment. She forbade herself to notice that he was looking miserable.

'It was very forgiving of you to pick on a play of this particular author's,' said Alicia. 'Weren't you wildly jealous of him?'

'With some reason, surely,' said Lucius. He thought of that curious period when their own relationship had briefly reached its greatest intensity. In the middle of it, she had been laid up with an attack of laryngitis; and he had visited her. Since his fear of infection was unusually strong, he had held her feverish hand from an unusual distance, and had tried to compensate (and cheer her up a bit) with the warmth of his speech. She had answered in a poignant whisper. They had sighed and smiled together for an hour or two, at

the end of which he was fairly certain he had proposed marriage, but had no idea whether she had accepted him or not.

He was still in that condition when she took up with David Transom. Lucius was in no sense supplanted, but he found himself offered, instead of sentimental evenings *a deux*, rather gayer evenings, but hardly less sentimental, *a trois*.

Finally, he did something which still made him feel most uncomfortable: he took Alicia to task. She protested that she adored him, that David was nothing to her, and promised everything would be settled within a week. Five days later, she announced her engagement to Sir Charles.

'David always frightened me out of my wits,' she said. 'That was really why I accepted dear Charles. I wanted to keep David as a friend – and it only seemed possible if I was married to someone else. I was very young; and Charles is so very reliable.'

She sighed, rose, and moved to the window. The hushed garden breathed out fragrance in the dewy air. The great trees, immobile shadows on a faint starry sky, rustled their indistinguishable leaves.

'And the place is really so beautiful,' said Alicia.

Lucius followed her, and, a victim to all this beauty and to the astonishing vibration of jealousy she had plucked from his confused and driven spirit, took her arm. 'What a lovely night,' he said. Gently and dreamily, Alicia disengaged herself.

'A night for happiness,' she said, 'a night to bless the past . . . to open our hearts to the future.'

'Certainly not a night to be indoors.'

'The moon will be coming up soon behind the church,' said Alicia.

Bernard lay with his face buried in moss, grass and beech mast; and sobbed. He had never in his whole life

felt so lonely. He was crushed with loneliness, and the rich tears, the strangled gulps, the sweat breaking out where his cheek rubbed the ground, seemed to be forced out by a great weight, a column of heavy atmosphere, pressing on his back.

'Despair,' he cried. 'Despair.' The sense of irresistible pressure was not so intolerable as the emptiness he felt within.

'Forsaken of gods and men,' he cried. What he felt was that he himself had abandoned this empty shell, now flung like an old sack under the beech trees.

But the actual pain of his uncontrollable sobbing gradually assuaged the emptiness. With the muscles of his throat and chest aching, he was at least a sensual being. The darkness wrapped him round, the trees hung over him, and he smelt the raw, woody emanations of vegetable life. He broke off a stick that had been hooking on to his ear, and cried more quietly.

'I want . . .'he murmured. 'I want. . .

He rubbed his face in the moss, beginning to feel quite sleepy.

Sally found Maybelle in her own room, doing a bit of ironing. The unshaded bulb cast a brisk, harsh light, the damp clothes smelt warm and clean. Sally sat down in the wicker chair and studied Maybelle's elongated countenance with its cheerful air of no nonsense.

'What's the matter with everybody, Maybelle?'

'Just temperament. You've all got it.'

'Not me.'

'That's as may be.'

'Not Father.'

'Well, I dare say he's better off without it.' Maybelle sighed. Sally jumped to her feet.

'May I do some of the handkerchiefs? It's the one thing I might enjoy.'

Charles having abandoned, although not finished, his notes, looked out the book he wanted to show to Lucius. He tucked it under his arm, and went wandering out to find him. But the terrace was deserted, the drawing-room empty.

Like most genuine countrymen, Charles was by no means devoted to fresh air in all its forms. He noticed with disapproval a mist creeping up from the river, and felt a definite chill. It was one of those evenings when Alicia always went out without a jacket, and then demanded that a fire should be lit at midnight. He felt anxious about her, and went upstairs to get her a coat.

Alicia, standing just inside the churchyard near the ornatest of the Maynecompton tombs, shivered; but she was not cold, only a little depressed. She did not regret evading Lucius' affectionate hand, but she had expected to be called upon to do so again. Now the noticeable caution of his movements put her in a slight panic. It made her feel unsure of herself, and that reminded her that no contract was yet signed. As they stared at a nebulous and shrouded moon, she tortured herself with the reflection that he could still change his mind. In a few seconds, she managed to persuade herself that he might be trying to get out of the whole arrangement. His face, white and cold, told her nothing – so there was nothing to stop her indulging her invention to the top of its bent.

Alicia's emotions habitually translated themselves into physical sensations. Indeed, it was often hard to say which came first. Now, feeling as dizzy as if she were standing on the edge of a precipice, she was convinced a precipice was there. And (as she turned dizzier and dizzier) the precipice grew higher and steeper. It would be bad if Lucius lost faith in her; but it would be worse if she found *she had lost them power off acting.*

Lucius might have observed certain signs of danger, but

he was instructed to go first along the narrow path which ran between the churchyard wall and a rank patch of nettles. And, whatever he had seen, it is doubtful if he could have done anything just then. As her phantasy proliferated, she became less accessible. Set against the hideous fact, now more or less admitted, that she could no longer act if she tried, his opinions were thistledown, and his presence slightly repugnant.

'I don't want to go in yet,' she said, 'bat I am getting cold. Could you be an angel and fetch me a coat?'

Many people, Margaret amongst them, believed that Alicia behaved badly because she lacked feeling. This was not true. Her sufferings were real. She was as much a victim as anyone else.

Joan's problems were more immediate and (to her) no less serious. But whereas Alicia's mental landscape had the lavish character of the more lunatic rococo architecture, Joan's was more like a small hen-house or the sheds on an allotment. This distinction was a matter of style, not content. Alicia's preoccupations were quite as mean-spirited as Joan's, often more so, but there were more of them and her attention skipped from one to the other with a hasty opportunism that gave, at least, the illusion of free movement. Joan brooded; and her thoughts and feelings were additionally cabined by a tendency to put them into words.

Is Bernard really coming back? He may have forgotten, and if so, people may think it silly of me to be spending nearly an hour all by myself, waiting. But if he hasn't forgotten, and has just become involved in something or other, it will look silly if I stray about. And Bernard may be disappointed in me; and I may miss a chance of talking to him by myself.

The billiard-room offered no resources, apart from prac-tising billiards. She had already played enough to find that idea unappealing. She spent some time studying the

sporting prints on the walls — splendid horses, splendid hounds, and splendid people taking perilous fences with a superb air of calm. It was impossible to imagine these red coats and gleaming top hats being kept waiting. Physical dangers were their element, but they seemed to belong to a world quite free from mental embarrassment.

I suppose I upset Bernard. How awful. But he was really upset by something he said himself, and it would be terribly unfair to blame me. Bernard is so intelligent, really brilliant, I don't think he could do that. And he must have felt I was sympathetic. And oh, how he needs sympathy, with a frightening mother like that; and because it must be so tiring being so clever.

The nettles laid their savage heads on the sweet, liquid satin as it flowed past. A rash on Alicia's left wrist started stinging. Suddenly, the air was full of noises — the anonymous murmur of wind and stream, the mechanical squeak of the crickets, a door banging at a distance, wooden wheels on a rough road, and far away a single gurgling note, without direction or identity.

'It was the nightingale, and not the lark,' said Alicia out loud. The sound of her own voice horrified her. She would never play Juliet again; she was too old. And what had become of those other great parts that she should have inherited? She threw back her head. The moon, with a clear edge to it now, lit up a brilliant, scornful smile.

'Why,' she said crisply. 'One makes lovers as fast as one pleases and they live as long as one pleases, and they die as soon as one pleases; and then, if one pleases, one makes more.'

How hollow it rang! She had never been invited to play Millament. She wondered if the lead in David's play had been offered to anyone else; and why they had refused it. Had they reckoned it a trashy play? And so been unwilling to risk an ephemeral appearance, making no mark beyond

an obstinate memory in the contemptuous minds of the critics?

She thought she heard a sound that seemed to come from the sky, like a broken harp-string, dying away mournfully. If only Lucius had offered her Madame Ranevsky; *then* she could have been happy. That would have meant that everything was all right.

Charles, encumbered with Alicia's mink, and with the prospect of a long search in front of him, went back to the office to put away his book. He still hoped to be able, later on, to show it to Lucius, whom he liked much better now because of his amiable interest in kites.

There was a newspaper on his desk which reported, in half-inch type, that the Russians had walked out of yet another meeting. Tiresome people, thought Charles; and yet he felt a certain tie with the ordinary people of Russia because of a play he had once seen. Usually, he did not make much of plays, and he was quite at sea when it came to judging them, as Alicia did, on points. He liked to ask himself the simple question – 'Could I feel at home here? – and if, as so often, the answer was no, he lost interest.

It wasn't a matter of familiar language, or even of a familiar setting. He could well imagine himself, silent with dread, following Hamlet round the battlements; or in a stuffy, nineteenth-century room, perplexed by the equivocal charm of that strange, determined young woman who was crazy about climbing towers. But he could not see himself entering the more familiar setting of the average modern 'realistic' play, because the people were somehow so embarrassing.

The Cherry Orchard –that was the name of the play he liked so much, almost in spite of Alicia's lively recommendations. He could feel quite comfortable with all those people, and could talk to them quite easily. Poor things. He gave a

long sigh. He was pleased to think that he had looked after his own woods better than they did; but undoubtedly the slow-growing timber that he understood and loved did not pay. Sooner or later it would be replaced by regular blocks of conifers, and he could already hear, in imagination, the sound of an axe.

CHAPTER V

LUCIUS went to his room and gave himself a moderate dose of luminol. He was not at all certain whether it was his nerves or his stomach that were overtaxed, but he did feel very seedy and hoped that a sedative would blunt the edge of his suffering, whatever its source.

Alicia was right in thinking that he had withdrawn a little. But it was not because he had lost heart in his project. That he still believed in, and he was still prepared to put into it whatever effort was necessary. He was, however, unwilling to waste his energies on the scale that Alicia evidently expected; and he was in some doubt about how to save himself.

The problem of economising energy had only lately worried him. He supposed it was a sign of age, for it cut right across the grain of his natural disposition. He had always been unsparing of himself as a servant of other people's abilities. He had a hill-shepherd's patience, a housewife's eye for detail, and a craftsman's enthusiasm for the peculiarities of his material. But the material, being human, sometimes got a bit on top of him. He was too impressionable for his own good. And although he had been unusually successful in nursing people through emotional predicaments, he could see, looking back, that a great deal of his time had been spent in marching and counter-marching to keep them company.

So he had lately decided that it was time he employed some strategy for cutting the corners. The experience he had gained from living other people's lives should be of service, if only he could use it in a more detached manner.

This resolve had only been made lately, and Alicia was a test case.

The easing virtue of the drug invaded him. He remembered that the immediate job was to find Alicia a coat. He had no idea where to look for one, but he noted with satisfaction that he was not getting in a fuss. He combed his hair and filed his nails, slowly and carefully, to show his independence.

Alicia followed the winding path between the trees, her melancholy deepening. The great thing about plays (if they are any good) is that you can run through a gamut of emotion in two and a half hours; whereas in life a single mood is liable to hang around like the smell of a burnt saucepan simply because the plot is at a standstill. This annoyed Alicia. It made her feel she was involved in an amateurish, watered-down, pointless performance. So whenever she was not in action or planning she was very liable to think that there was something wrong with life, or with her.

She tried to imagine for herself a totally different life. Suppose, for instance, she became a nun. She clasped her hands and walked stiffly, as if encumbered by a ponderous habit and a big starched coif. For a moment or two, the idea of discipline and obedience quite charmed her, it seemed so easy. It must be wonderful to stop thinking for oneself. Even while this fancy crossed her mind, she already saw herself as the head of a great organisation, an example and inspiration to her sisters in God, and the spiritual confidante of visiting cardinals. She had promoted herself to abbess.

Many grievous human problems would be solved if there was any known device for eating one's cake and having it. Alicia loved power and influence, but she also demanded a roseate atmosphere of sympathy and approval. The idea that her satellites had a life of their own, or were

retiring behind a system of defences, was most distasteful. It showed, she felt, a lack of candour which amounted to treachery.

Paradoxically, her love of power had reduced her to a condition of ludicrous dependence. Anyone could knock down the whole house of cards simply by *not joining*. She had to have a steady stream of people who were willing to be pushed around.

Her pace quickened. 'Who am I? Where am I going?' she enquired softly of dusk and solitude. She clenched and unclenched her fists as if, like an infant, she was scooping the empty air for a solid object to cling to – or as if she were preparing to get her claws on somebody.

'You see,' said Sally, 'it's only a two-year training, and then I should be a qualified nursery school teacher. I've written, and they say I can start at the end of September.'

'Your father'll miss you,' said Maybelle. She had taken the iron from Sally and was working on the complicated frilling of a nightdress.

'I know,' said Sally; 'but he'll realise it's the right thing to do.'

'Perhaps he'll stand up for you,' said Maybelle, with rather more optimism than she really felt.

'Do you think Mother will be disgusted?'

'I shouldn't tell her for a day or two if I were you. She's very much taken up with her own affairs, and till they're settled she won't want to be bothered.'

Sally frowned, and objected. 'But it seems terribly mean to plan it all without saying so.'

'Once she gets back to London,' said Maybelle, 'she won't care what you do.'

Sally did not feel altogether encouraged. She was on the point of asking Maybelle to put in a good word for her when Maybelle collected Alicia's underclothes and went off to put them away. Sally went disconsolately downstairs.

There seemed to be no one about. She put a match to the fire in the drawing-room and crouched in front of it with the bellows. It was quite fun seeing how high the sparks would fly up the chimney.

There was a rickety bench behind the garage which was hardly used. Margaret had noticed that it was sheltered and sunny on summer evenings, and it had become a refuge when she wanted to be alone. There she could read, or sew, or think in peace.

Lately she had become even more devoted to it, because it was there that Bernard had first kissed her. So it was a good place for thinking about him.

Apart from one or two elderly men, who had only been an embarrassment, Bernard was the first person who had ever made love to her. She knew a lot of young men of her own age, but they seemed to prefer playing tennis, or going to the pictures, or, in moments of stress, confiding in her the development of a current love-affair. Because she was discreet and sympathetic, and neither vain nor envious, she was well fitted for the position of second-best friend. There was a simplicity and ease in these relationships which she did not find in her awkward, fascinating, ambiguous relationship with Bernard.

As she sat in the darkness in their own special hideaway, she let herself feel his kisses. But the reverberations of physical excitement only increased her distress of mind. She could not doubt that he loved her, and yet love, which at the beginning had made her so entirely happy, had done very much less for him. He was still difficult to talk to, still defensive, sudden and incalculable. When they were alone together after an interval Margaret often felt that they had slipped right back to the beginning.

And now he had let himself be monopolised by Joan! Margaret thought jealousy the meanest of vices, but that is no cure for it. On the contrary, shame puts a keener edge

to the pain. She had often given good advice to people in like situations – don't worry, don't take it too seriously, don't show that you mind – but she was in no mood to profit by this practical wisdom. She did not want to manage Bernard, she only wanted to have nicer feelings about him.

Her feelings remained obstinate. The best she could do was to switch some of her irritation to Bernard's mother. If only he stood up to her!

Alicia very nearly fell over him. Her first thought was that he was dead, and she imagined her heart stopped, struck by the appalling possibility that she had driven him to suicide. Momentarily, she recognised that she had not been quite kind.

But when he raised his head, the occasion for remorse vanished. His face was a white oval, on which she could project whatever expression she wished. And Bernard too, seeing only a shape against the filtered starlight, could pick on any one of the ill-sorted memories which made up, in his confused mind, the powerful, enslaving image of his mother.

Neither was prepared to speak first. Both felt that something should be made of this moment, but neither of them had anything new to offer. Alicia concluded that Bernard was sulking again and was absorbed in self-pity; while Bernard, fending off an obscure feeling of guilt and rage, assumed that she had come to chase him up.

Alicia sighed. She might have spoken, but Bernard scrambled to his feet, with his back to her, and dashed away through the trees.

'Wait,' she called after him. 'Wait.'

But she could no longer see him or hear his footsteps.

Everything was slipping away from her, bit by bit.

Lucius put his head into the drawing-room.

'Where's Mother?' said Sally.

‘She asked me to fetch her coat; but I fear I am at a loss where to find one.’

‘I’ll get it. I’ll take it out to her.’

Lucius had not realty noticed Sally before. She had struck him as just another young woman, a daughter, an agreeable piece of family furniture. But there was something very nice about her eagerness to make herself useful. ‘I’ll give you some light,’ she said.

As she switched on the lamps, Lucius observed with pleasure that she moved well. He wondered if it was shyness that kept her silent, or if she were one of those rare people who do not make conversation when they have nothing to say. He began to think she might have useful possibilities as an ally,

‘I imagine you are very fond of your mother,’ he said.

‘Of course.’

‘I don’t know what you feel,’ said Lucius, with the agreeable air of speaking to an equal, ‘but I’m sure it will be good for her to have a spell of hard work.’

‘You mean, you think she’s bored with us?’

‘My dear, of course not. But she has so much energy, and is really so wonderfully gifted, she does need an outlet.’

Sally suddenly laughed. ‘You don’t need to explain to me,’ she said. ‘I understand about all that. I suppose I’ve been behaving very stupidly and ought to apologise.’

‘Apologise?’ As so often, he seemed to be uncovering more than he intended, and he rather wished he had let it alone. Yet his voice had a tone of invitation. Sally’s response, to his relief, was perfectly cheerful and matter-of-fact.

‘Oh, yes. Didn’t you notice? I’ve been trailing around all day trying to detach her. It was terribly rude really, and I’m sorry; but I haven’t seen her for such ages, and I’ve got a whole heap of things to tell her.’

‘I ought to have realised,’ said Lucius remorsefully.

‘It doesn’t matter. And the point is that’s all there was

to it. I'm the last person to want to crab Mother's plans.'

'I'm sure you are.' Lucius found it natural to pat her hand. She was a charming girl, he thought, and likely to have a good influence on. Alicia.

'I do hope,' he went an, 'that you will also give her some positive encouragement.'

'Me?' Sally burst out laughing.

'She's very fond of you,' said Lucius austerely, 'and I don't think it's going to be easy for her to tear herself away.'

Sally looked puzzled. 'Does she say so?'

'Yes, indeed.' He went on patting her hand in an absent-minded fashion. She found it rather soothing. She decided he was really quite an old dear, a sort of honorary grandfather. She listened attentively as he embarked on a long speech about the vagaries of the creative temperament. He was pleased to think he could enlist her help. It would be a great step forward if Alicia could be persuaded to stop teasing him with these doubts and hesitations that were really utterly frivolous. He felt no compunction about it. After all, the children had to learn to stand on their own feet.

Bernard thrust his face against Margaret's shoulder. He was trembling and speechless.

'Darling, what is it? What's the matter?'

He moaned softly. She put her arm round him and held him tight. His wild hair tickled the corner of her mouth.

'You. . . .' he said at last. 'You. . . .'

She grieved to see him unhappy, and yet she was possessed, now, by a wonderful sense of certainty. Without speaking, she held him against her, and without moving her head, breathed in the woody smell that rose from his hair, and cherished the straying lock with tiny unexacting kisses.

'Love me,' he said under his breath. 'Love me.'

When Charles finally got out on to the steps, he saw Alicia almost running towards him. Her distraught air

perplexed and shocked him, and he advanced diffidently.

'Why is everyone afraid of me?' said Alicia indignantly. She was hardly addressing herself to him, and might have swept right past if he had not laid a hand on her arm. Sometimes she allowed him to comfort her.

'I brought you a coat,' he said.

'I don't need it now. I'm going in.'

'I hope you haven't got chilled.'

Alicia gave a strident, hysterical laugh. 'Chilled to the heart. Bernard hates me.'

'No.' Charles answered with passion; then made an immediate attempt to bring this painful subject to more normal terms:

'He is feeling very unsettled.'

'He's behaving impossibly.'

Charles was very bothered. For some days he had meant to raise this subject with Alicia, but had foolishly waited for a good moment. Now he realised that he could not have chosen a worse one.

'Well? Do you blame me?'

He was incapable of blaming her for anything, but he also wanted to be fair to Bernard. He conscientiously pursued his thought.

'This uncertainty about his future,' he said, 'isn't at all good for him.'

'You don't understand these things,' said Alicia. Charles understood, rightly, that she was in doubt about Bernard's possibilities as an actor, but further subtleties eluded him. Alicia did not care to explain that although she had felt intrigued by the prospect of producing a *moderately successful* son, any big success for Bernard would embarrass her just as much as a dismal failure.

She turned into the house, with a gesture of shaking him off. He knew he had been clumsy. Humbly he trotted in at her heels.

Lucius started when he heard the door open. Sally looked up and smiled.

'What are you two doing?' said Alicia.

'We were talking about you, Mother.'

Alicia looked from one to the other suspiciously. Charles, behind her, hovered.

'Isn't it nearly bedtime?' he said. 'I'm sure you're all tired.'

Alicia sank into a deep chair and closed her eyes. 'I am at the end of my tether.'

She felt that Lucius too had completely abandoned her. She did not want to look at him. When she opened her eyes, he had gone.

Outside the door, he reminded Charles that he had promised to show him a book. He felt it was tactful and intelligent of him to leave Alicia to Sally.

'I am really a very lonely person,' said Alicia.

'Poor Mother.' Sally put a cushion behind her head, and a stool under her feet. Alicia took such small services very much for granted. She felt thoroughly upset.

'Is that cosier?' said Sally. Alicia nodded and yawned. Sally watched her thoughtfully, wishing she could think of something sensible to say.

'Are you still there?' said Alicia.

'Yes.'

'You needn't sound so surprised. People keep on disappearing, and doing all sorts of things behind my back. Half the time I haven't any idea what you all think about. It's not very kind.'

'Well . . . I've arranged about my training. It starts in a fortnight.'

'What?' Alicia was wide awake.

'Well, you see, I don't want to be a parasite, or a lady of leisure.'

'This beats all. Just when you could have been useful and

when everyone else is treating me absolutely vilely. Oh, Sally, how could you be so selfish. It's not like you. I had depended on you so to help while I'm getting everything organised. Besides, why shouldn't I have a little of your company? Do you hate me too?'

'Oh, Mother, please, please, please,' cried Sally desperately, 'don't get worked up about it. It really is quite a reasonable plan. You must let me just tell you.'

'I don't quite see the point, if it's all arranged.' Her voice was well under control, but even more alarming. Sally struggled to keep her head.

'*You* will have a lot to do too.'

'That has nothing whatever to do with it. How do you suppose I shall feel, coming back to a home with nobody in it? You are really strangely lacking in consideration; and you know how much I am prepared to sacrifice for you. Do you want me to tell Lucius the whole deal's off? None of you seem very pleased about it, I must say.'

'Darling, none of us want to stop you doing what you want. We're trying to make it as easy as we can for you. But nothing is ever absolutely easy, and when you suddenly get in a rage for no reason at all, we . . . don't know what to do.'

'I don't understand you.' Alicia felt a kind of pressure on her mind, as if the disappointments and frustrations and uncertainties of the past day had gathered into a solid rock. She felt she could not tolerate it. Yet the effort of rejection made her feel quite ill, as if she were about to vomit.

'Someone ought to tell you the truth,' said Sally. 'We all love you. But you completely wear us out. All the time, you want to have excitements and dramas, and none of us gets any peace. Father spends his time looking at birds, because they don't talk, and don't want anything out of him.'

'You dare to reproach me. When I have given up ten years of my life for you.'

Now Sally was angry too, with the incapable, total fury of a naturally good-tempered person.

'That's a lie,' she said. 'Lucius said you left the theatre because you suddenly got frightened.'

Alicia got up, her eyes fixed and her whole body taut with rage, and dealt her a smacking blow across the check.

Most of the people in the house had been unhappy during the course of the evening. But it is possible that Joan, hitherto, was the most to be pitied, because, on top of everything else, she had to bear the pangs of boredom.

Boredom can easily become an almost physical sensation, like thirst. After a long stretch of imaginary conversation with Bernard there was a dead, desiccated air about her most subtle remarks to him (silently repeated for the tenth time); and his elegantly appreciative answers (although they grew steadily kinder) gave her very little pleasure. She tried repeating poetry:

Hence loathed melancholy. Of Cerberus and blackest midnight born. In Stygian cave forlorn. Find out some something sum. No, that's no good. The sun descending in the west. The evening star doth shine. The birds are silent in their nest. And I must seek for mine. The moon like a flower. In heaven's high tower. Taradi, Taradi. Tumtitum. Tumtitum. If music be the food of love, play on. Give me excess of it that surfeiting. The appetite may sicken and so die. That strain again. That strain again. That strain. Oh, damn and blast, why didn't I ever learn anything properly.

She cautiously opened the door. The house was silent. A brilliant idea suddenly occurred to her. Or was it brilliant? But surely, if she just quietly slipped away, it would make them all feel terribly sorry and ashamed.

Joan almost smiled. It was rather neat and witty. Just the sort of thing Bernard might think of. She would just like to see their faces when they realised how awful they'd been.

Bernard and Margaret were wandering back to the house, hand in hand.

'I ought to have known,' said Margaret, 'that you couldn't take Joan seriously.' She felt very grateful to him, because her feelings had been disentangled. She loved him more than ever. She just loved him. She loved the arrogant lift of his head, the warm pressure of his narrow hand, and the way he came to her whenever he was in real trouble.

'Joan,' he said, 'is probably the stupidest girl in the Eastern Hemisphere. Someone ought to take her in hand.'

'But not you.'

'On no account. Don't you see I'm busy?'

He gave her a final hug before they went into the house.

Joan got her coat off the peg, and crept cautiously through the hall. Her heart thumped so violently that she wanted to gulp in air, and she made a special effort to breathe quietly. At the door of the drawing-room she paused for a moment to listen for Bernard's voice.

Feeling rather wicked, she put her ear against the crack. There was no sound at all, and she guessed they had probably forgotten to put out the lights. She considered going in. If she could find a piece of paper, she would write Sally a note, so as to rub it in a bit in a perfectly polite way.

But quite suddenly, there was a most extraordinary sound. It was just as if somebody were being smacked! And then there was a strangled cry.

People often behave very unexpectedly in a crisis. In ordinary conditions, Joan was usually muddled and undecided because she was cluttered up with so much inapposite mental preparation. But when she was taken by surprise she could act without hesitation. She threw open the door.

Sally was standing with one hand Lifted to protect her face, and the other gripping the edge of a small table behind her, as she leant perilously backwards. Alicia, breathing heavily, appeared to be advancing upon her.

Joan stood in the open doorway and screamed, loudly.

For Maybelle, on the upper landing, the sound was thinned and flattened by distance. She supposed they must be having a game of some sort, and went on towards the bathroom. She was looking forward to a good wash, and had put on her pyjamas and her earth-coloured dressing gown with dark blue facings.

But there was something about the scurry of feet downstairs and the doors banging, that did not sound quite like a game.

'Now what?' said MaybeIle, frowning.

Then she put her sponge-bag down on the chest, and prepared to go and see. She forgot that her hair was in curlers. She had a shrewd idea that she would probably be needed.

Charles went straight to Alicia, who was sobbing into her hands. Sally was quite white, but did not make a sound. In a dazed way, she surveyed the company as if she could not recognise anyone.

Charles made soothing murmurs. Lucius stood like a wooden figure, expressionless. Bernard reached, unnoticed, for Margaret's hand.

'She hit her,' said Joan. 'She hit her.'

Everyone looked at Sally. She slowly shook her head, but bewildered horror kept her speechless. She met her father's eyes, mutely reproaching her, and abruptly turned and ran from the room. Only Charles, who had turned again to Alicia, failed to observe the broad red mark on her left cheek.

She ran blindly up the stairs, stumbling. Maybelle caught her in her arms.

'I don't know what I've done,' said Sally.

'Try to be calm,' said Charles. Joan timidly suggested she should fetch a glass of water.

'I am damned,' said Alicia.

'There, there,' said Charles foolishly. 'Don't think about it.'

Margaret knew it would be sensible to get everyone else out of the room, but they seemed to be held there by a kind of painful curiosity – and she was the furthest from the door,

'Damned for ever,' said Alicia.

'Perhaps we all are,' said Lucius. He thought Charles would have done better to take a rather brisker line.

'Where is Sally?' said Alicia. 'I must ask her to forgive me.'

'Oh, my dear,' said Charles. Beginning to understand what had really happened, he could still feel pity.

'I'll get you a hot drink later on,' said Maybelle, 'and bring it up to you in bed.'

'She did frighten me,' said Sally. 'I thought she'd gone mad. She seemed to think I'd been doing something with Lucius.'

'She frightens herself,' said Maybelle. 'That's at the bottom of it, I shouldn't wonder!

'It must be terrible.'

'Now, don't you go getting yourself in a state. Things never look so bad in the morning.'

'Somebody ought to look after her. You go down, Maybelle. I shall be all right.'

'Goodness!' said Joan. 'It's a quarter past eleven. I really ought to go home. Good night, Lady Maynecompton. It's been the most . . . I mean, thanks terribly for having me. I have. . . . Well, anyway, thanks a lot.'

'Bernard and I will come with you,' said Margaret. She looked enquiringly at Lucius, but he did not respond. He intended to slip off quietly to bed as soon as he could, and did not at all fancy trailing around over the country.

The three young people walked fast.

'It's a beautiful night for stars,' said Margaret.

'But what *was* it all about?' said Joan.

'It's much more profitable to study the stars,' said Bernard. 'Look at them – the Great Bear, the Little Bear, Orion, Betelgeuse, Aldebaran. . . .'

'Yes; but which is which?' said Joan.

'Don't go, Lucius,' said Alicia. 'There is something I must say to you.' She had no idea, as she spoke, what it was. But she was beginning to recover. The details, that is, of what she had done, and why, were blurring, and she was attempting to find an attitude for herself which would protect her from remembering too much. She had no inclination to explain anything away. Her instinct was rather to strike out some new line, so as to shift the emphasis from everything that was difficult to explain. This was not, of course, a matter of deliberate judgement; she depended on the less accessible sources of inspiration. It was as if she were feeling about for a role which would obliterate the effects of her previous performance.

She picked one of the simplest tricks on earth, and one that is in very general use. Suppose, for example, one breaks some household object of very little value, and exclaims with every appearance of distress: 'What a clumsy fool I am!' Most people (and Charles and Lucius were in this class) could usually be relied upon to make some encouraging remark – 'Accidents will happen' – which completely exonerates the agent. So finally Alicia, gazing at them very mournfully, announced: 'Alas! I have completely failed with my children.'

Neither of the men responded. It was the moment when a music-hall artist (in bowler hat and check pants) wrinkles up his indiarubber face and says: 'That wasn't much of a joke, was it?' But Alicia's audience was not quite ready to be stampeded. And Alicia herself was vaguely aware that she was still a little outside her part. She saw herself as a

penitent; and certainly felt sensations of regret and remorse. But they needed a few minutes at least to mature, and inspire a form of expression which would carry conviction.

She felt very sure of herself as she let the awkward silence run on. The word 'self-sacrifice' entered her mind. She imagined it as a huge, mythological figure, clad in purple and samite, and moving with a stately air of tragic luxury.

Then, with tears in her eyes, she addressed Lucius.

'My dear, I hope you won't take it too hardly. But I shall have to ask you to release me from my commitment. I have, after all, a duty to my children, and it is a duty that must come first. Charles, dear, support me. You know I'm right, don't you?'

He gave her only a shy, delighted smile. Tenderly, she laid her graceful hand on his worn cheek. Lucius looked quite furious, but she held out her other hand to him, smiling. It was lovely to feel so noble, and quite a relief to have dodged the formidable struggles and disappointments that went with his offer.

Before Lucius had a chance to say anything, Maybelle, fully dressed again, and with her hair in a fuzz, appeared with a glass of water and a couple of aspirins. She was vexed with Alicia for putting her to all that trouble, and was very firm about taking her off to bed.

'Yes, I am tired, very tired,' said Alicia. 'Good night, my dears. Sleep well. Lovely dreams.'

By two in the morning everybody was asleep. Bernard, curled up in a small ball, with the covers over his ears, dreamed of wandering in great caves. Margaret lay flat on her back, as she always did, unconscious and unstirring. Sally's warm cheek was thrust into a wet pillow. Maybelle frowned and wriggled in her sleep, for, in spite of an ingenious structure of three pillows and a bolster, one of her curlers was jabbing into her head. Lucius, lightly drugged, snored in a regular, restrained and gentlemanly fashion. Charles,

on the lumpy mattress in the dressing-room, twitched like a dog on a mat. Joan, having unwittingly chased a slipping eiderdown to the edge of the bed, hung there precariously.

Alicia lay aslant her pretty four-poster, with her arms disposed in a languid, generous, inviting gesture outside the sheet. She had conscientiously creamed her face, but she had re-powdered after, and put on just a touch of perfume and lipstick. Through the open curtains, the setting moon laid a shaft of pale and poetic light on a mature and lovely woman,

CHAPTER VI

THE sun rose misty on an autumnal landscape. On the pastures, the dew shone like frost, and a chill scent of earth and water and vegetable decay, lay everywhere. Here and there, the luminous head of a mushroom, almost visibly growing, pushed aside the clinging grass-blades. On the terrace, the last magnolias looked a little damaged, a brown stain spreading inwards from the tip of each exquisite petal.

A cock crew. Lucius hauled himself out of sleep; coughed and stretched and blinked; and sat up, buttoning his pyjamas. He had determined to leave early, probably before breakfast. But he loathed getting up, particularly at this unaccustomed hour, and he staved off the horrible moment by writing a note to Alicia. His toes, at least, found a delightfully warm place, as he propped a pad on his knees and unscrewed his pen.

Alicia dear [he said], it is anguish to leave your charming house and your ever-delightful company – a specific, as always, against anything approaching *dullness.* But I fear that the exhaustions of last night are likely to keep you in bed for most of the morning, and I am forcing myself to take advantage of this extraordinary weather to make a dash to an appointment which is heavily on my conscience.

Grateful thanks, of course, and love, I need hardly say.

He signed his name with a flourish, and re-read what he had written. Not a perfect letter, but what could be expected at a quarter to seven. At least it would convey to her that he was not disposed to be quite so indulgent as he had been

in the old days. It left her to resume negotiations when she was ready to deal with them in a calmer fashion.

As he shaved, hastily and rather clumsily, he remembered that she had already turned the whole thing down. It had slipped his mind, because he had seen so clearly that she was really thinking about something else. He wiped his soapy hands, and added a postscript:

I regard your last night's pronouncement as *frivolous* I am sure you will soon see it in that light yourself. Let me know, then, when we can have a *serious* talk. Your sincere friend, etc.

Alicia woke much later. She lay drowsily enjoying the sensation of having started a new life, and confident that no specific action was required of her for the present. She murmured an amiable greeting when Maybelle came in with her breakfast.

'He left a note,' said Maybelle. 'There it is, up against the coffee-pot.'

'So he's taken flight? Silly Lucius. He might have stayed to enjoy the sunshine. Really, what affectation. Every other word underlined, and a back-handed dig in every sentence. Listen to this, Maybelle.' She read the note out Loud, in a mocking voice, and ended with a little screech of laughter. '. . . and love, I need hardly say. The double-faced rat. And when he only came here for what he could get out of me. There's an example for you, Maybelle, my dear, of someone corrupted by ambition. What does he care for his friends. The moment they are no more use to him – out.'

She re-folded the sheet, and caught sight of the postscript. She read it silently, her face clouding. 'Well,' she said, 'and on top of that he thinks he can insult me. As if I don't know what I'm saying! Oh, to hell with him. What are you doing with my pillows? I want to lie down again. It's

no good bringing me any breakfast. I couldn't eat a thing. Coffee really has a disgusting smell if you stop to notice it. Do take it away, and tell them all not to disturb me. I don't feel well.'

Alicia managed to sleep, on and off, through the morning. When she woke at midday, she was bothered by her arm, which felt numb and prickly. She refused lunch. In the afternoon, she tried to read, but she kept on breaking off to test how her arm felt in different positions, and to practise flexing her fingers, for they seemed a little stiff. Her husband and children, whom she invited to tea in her room, were concerned about her because she did look very miserable; but they were able to assure her quite truthfully that her arm showed no sign of damage – no rash, no lumps, nothing. Bernard was the least sympathetic. It annoyed him to see her cradling her right hand in her left, and he was ashamed of his annoyance. Sally hardly noticed what she did, she was so oppressed by the conviction that there was something very wrong.

After tea, the weather turned thundery. Dusk came early, under black, threatening clouds. Alicia, switching on her bed-lamp, discovered that her fingers had lost the power of moving independently. She tried to pick up her book, and could not grip it. With her left hand she rang the bell.

'No, really, you can't go,' said the doctor's young wife. 'It's Sunday evening, and raining. It beats me how anyone has the nerve to do it. It's only because they're so rich that they have the impertinence. And remember, your mother's coming to dinner, and she always thinks it's my fault she doesn't see you more often. Now do be reasonable, please. She isn't your patient, and her own doctor's coming back to-morrow. You won't even make enough money out of it to pay for the petrol.'

'I know. I know.' He realised he was being ridiculous,

but Sir Charles had sounded so distressed, and had been so very apologetic. He was a conscientious young man, not very gifted, and after a long struggle with examinations he felt that his profession had done him a very great honour by admitting him to it. He was not very certain of being able to help, but he *could not* turn away an appeal, even if it meant being torn in pieces by his wife and mother.

'I'm sorry,' he said. He sounded cross, and his wife would not answer.

'Here he is, my dear,' said Charles. The doctor had not yet encountered a bedroom that looked so handsome, or smelled so lovely; and that went for the patient too. He was not to know that she had dressed up a bit, and done her face for his benefit. He was surprised to find her, after the urgency of the call, not very much concerned about her affliction.

'It's just too silly,' she said. 'I quite simply can't move it, and you could pinch me black and blue without my knowing. But it can't be poliomyelitis' (she pronounced it correctly, without stumbling), 'because I haven't got any temperature, or even the suspicion of a sore throat.'

He took her temperature all the same, to keep himself in countenance and give himself time to think. He did not look at her, but felt her brilliant eyes upon him, and faintly blushed. Oh dear, he thought, I shall never be a real doctor.

But Alicia rather took to him. He peered with such tremendous concentration at her tonsils and ear-drums, tested her blood pressure, and lifted her poor arm, as she afterwards said, like a Ming vase. And it was so amusing of him to ask if she had been carrying anything heavy, or chopping wood.

Obediently, she put her other hand over her eyes while he checked the sensory reactions with little jabs of a needle. The forearm, it seemed, was quite insensitive, but any

touch on the upper arm made her squeak. 'I seem to have lost about the same chunk as the Venus de Milo,' she said, peeping through her fingers.

The only disappointment was that he didn't say anything definite. He recommended rest, and, of course, medical supervision. It was early days yet, and his colleague would advise her in the light of later developments. He admitted under pressure that if the condition persisted it might be necessary for her to see a specialist; but he did not commit himself to what kind.

He gave her a sedative. She had a large collection of various brands already, but it is always nice to try a new one.

'Well, what was it?' said the doctor's wife. 'A lot of nonsense?'

He hunched his shoulders over the newspaper. He was not going to gossip about his patients. In any case, he did not know what he thought. He wondered if it could possibly be a hysterical paralysis. He had unfortunately never seen a classic example. All he knew was that this case was quite unlike anything he *had* seen.

He would have like to tell them about the house and about Sir Charles, who was so like one of the funny old men in the village. But his wife, bogged down long ago in strained conversation with her mother-in-law, had the neat idea of teaching her a new patience; and now they were both rather engrossed in the game.

Alicia had quite forgotten how much she enjoyed being ill. She was in such a radiant mood that the rest of the household were tempted to enjoy it too. It is no trouble at all running up and downstairs with trays if you get a good welcome. Alicia laid herself out to be grateful, and to make amusing conversation. She was even prepared to listen, up to a point.

'Darling, stay and keep me company,' she said to Sally.

'I can't wait to hear how you got on in your job. Was it really fun?'

'Oh, yes. They were such amusing children, so intelligent. . . . But, Mother, are you still angry with me?'

'Angry? But you've been sweet, darling. Nobody could have looked after me better.'

'I mean before. You see I didn't . . . Lucius didn't. . . . There wasn't anything. .

'Oh, but I never seriously thought so. I just got caught up in a kind of awful brain-storm. I don't think about Lucius any more; he's gone out of my life. It's so nice being cosy together. Go on about those naughty children. I'm assuming they were naughty because you said they're so intelligent.'

They spent a very happy half-hour. But Sally still had at the back of her mind the thought that she was responsible for the brain-storm and for its consequences. As she was leaving the room, she paused and said in a very off-hand voice:

'By the way, I've told them I'm not taking the training. I decided I'd like to stay and look after you.'

Alicia wrote Lucius a gay, brave little note. It was of no consequence, she told him, whether he believed her or not, since she was now quite incapacitated, and could not in any case consider an engagement. She told him how sweet Sally had been, and how nicely Bernard read aloud; and in one way and another presented a picture of domestic happiness which she judged would shake him to the soul.

Lucius did not actually read this letter very carefully. He had got home completely exhausted, with a pain in his stomach, and was keeping himself very busy with light meals every two hours.

A roundabout rumour, disturbing in those circumstances, that certain delicate negotiations about a theatre were likely to produce unusually quick results protracted his

pains. His informant was inquisitive about the cast. 'Most satisfactory,' he said curtly.

He rang up David Transom and asked him to have another go at Roxane. 'After all, it may be years before that Hollywood contract materialises.'

'You sound wretched,' said David. It was a comment, not a condolence.

'I am.'

'You were warned, weren't you? I had a premonition that Alicia couldn't quite rise to it. But I do beg you *not* to tell me what she thought of the play. You know I loathe criticism, and I wouldn't dream of changing a line.'

There was a significant pause. Lucius hastened to report that Alicia had been most enthusiastic and was delighted with her own part.

'But she's ill,' said Lucius. 'Like most of us.'

Alicia had great talents as an invalid; but she was incapable of keeping all the rules. In particular, she was never very good at taking doctors, like medicine, regularly; and Sally and Charles were driven almost frantic by her resolute refusal to let them get in touch with her own doctor.

'Why can't we get that nice young man again?' she said. 'This is the most peculiar affliction, and our doctor is so unimaginative. Besides, he looks dreary. This wretched arm is worrying enough as it is, I don't want to be made more miserable.'

'But you really ought to do something to make it better,' said Sally. Alicia's teasing smile warmed her heart, but did not relieve her mind.

'Yes, really, my dear,' said Charles. If nothing else would make Alicia happy, he was prepared to offend his old friend; but he hoped to be let off. The deadlock was solved by an inspiration of Alicia's.

'I know what I'll do. Someone was telling me about an extraordinary woman – a bone-setter, or faith-healer, or

nature-curer, or werewolf or something – who's done wonders with all sorts of people. if I can't have the doctor I like, I may as well go to her.'

Sally drove her over the next day for a consultation with Mrs. Eleanora Smith. She lived in a bungalow, one of a row, outside the market town.

'Poor thing,' said Alicia, surveying the symmetrical red roofs. 'Like a row of dolls' houses. I'm beginning to feel scared. Do you think she'll let me out alive?'

'I'll come in with you,' said Sally.

'No; don't do that. I'll be brave. I'd sooner you waited.'

Alicia walked slowly up the brick path, between two straggly rows of Michaelmas daisies. She was shown into a consulting-room – or rather, a parody of a consulting-room, for the couch was lodging-house antique and the schoolroom desk was adorned with two dahlias in a blue mug.

Mrs. Smith rose to welcome her. She was cheerful, square and weatherbeaten, and Alicia was glad she had a good excuse for not shaking hands.

'I'd better confess at once that I'm really rather sceptical,' said Alicia.

Mrs. Smith gave a hearty, rather adolescent laugh. 'That's of no consequence. I'm not dealing in magic, or the power of mind over matter. I'm quite a simple person, with a few simple remedies. Herbs mainly, but some of the commoner minerals are often useful. There is a school that swears by the precious metals, gold particularly, but to my mind that savours of superstition – not to mention profiteering.'

She was energetically washing her hands and her massive, freckled arms. Alicia sat down on the couch rather gingerly, beginning to be really frightened.

'Trouble with your arm, is it?' said Mrs. Smith, coming over. She pulled up a chair, and felt about with firm,

square fingers on Alicia's forearm. 'Anything of the sort before?'

'Never. But of course I have had other things. . .'

Mrs. Smith cut her short. 'The human body is a gimcrack sort of affair at the best of times. By rights, of course, we should all be going around on all fours. And there are some conditions where I assure you it does wonders.'

'Really? I do hope you won't prescribe it for me.'

'Don't worry. Not at present. But you should certainly consult me over anything in the nature of a prolapse. I've done some extraordinary things with different people's insides.'

'Oh, dear,' said Alicia faintly.

'I'm not hurting you, am I?'

'A bit.'

Mrs. Smith was making energetic progress towards her shoulder. 'You seem to be a nervous subject. You are probably feeling the pain in anticipation. I'm not really doing anything so far.'

Alicia winced as she rocked her thumb over an edge of bone.

'Are you going to . . . pull it about?' she said.

Mrs. Smith laughed loudly. 'You don't need to look so anxious,' she said. 'I shall be very careful. We have to be. After all, qualified doctors are very thoroughly protected; but if I break your neck I shall be had up for murder.'

Alicia gulped. It was the most ghoulish consultation. But there was a refreshing air of crack-brained confidence about Mrs. Smith that she could not help liking. After the first shock, it was rather agreeable to be pounded by those stubborn hands.

'I think I may be able to do something for you,' said Mrs. Smith.

'That sounds as if it's very serious.'

'Not a bit of it. In my own mind, I don't feel any doubts

at all. But I know all you people. You laugh about us behind our backs, and don't credit us with any knowledge or experience, and make jokes about setting up in the business yourselves. I don't happen to be a charlatan or a mountebank, and I want it quite clear that I'm not making any promises.'

She looked Alicia straight in the eye. 'Now, do you want me to treat you?'

'Yes, please,' said Alicia very meekly. In her own circle, for some reason, she seldom saw displays of unmistakable vigour, and she found herself impressed. Besides, she wanted another opportunity for perfecting an imitation of this fierce, rapid voice, and of picking up some more of the wonderful quotations.

'And then she went on,' said Alicia, ' "Have you ever considered the properties of common salt?" She stared at me quite belligerently and, darling, she has the most astonishing eyes, like rather gay little boot-buttons. I confessed not. I mean, there is never any occasion for thinking about salt. But it appears that you and I are made almost entirely of water, and it's salt water. "Our ancestors were fishes," she said, "and the blood that runs in our veins" – she has the most gory imaginations, I told you she looks forward to becoming a murderess – "is a saline mixture exactly comparable to the salinity of the sea when the human race first crept out of it." She was really most interesting. Apparently the date can be fixed by this thing about blood, because the sea is getting steadily saltier. So the moment I get home, I'm to immerse my arm in salt water and then, well, just keep it there.'

'How queer,' said Sally.

'Do drive a bit faster. I can't wait. The water has to be blood heat. What is blood heat? I've never thought all that much about blood either.'

'Ninety-eight point four,' said Sally.

Maybelle was driven nearly out of her mind. Alicia complained if she thought there was any sediment of salt in the bottom of the basin, and ordered that the mixture should be made with boiling water and left to cool. Consequently the place was cluttered with a variety of vessels, so that one or other would be at the right heat whenever she needed a replacement.

Alicia lay on her bed, or the sofa in the drawing-room, or a long chair in the garden, evidently suffering, but enjoying the sense that everyone was hustling back and forth on her behalf.

As occasion arose, she held court. Representatives of the Young Farmers' Club called upon her, and readily enlisted her support for planting a grove of flowering cherry alongside the village hall. The Vicar paid a pastoral visit, and they discoursed on certain fine points of theology with mutual enjoyment; and Joan was summoned to be told that Alicia was perfectly willing to speak to the Girl Guides.

'But are you really well enough?' said Joan. She was still completely mystified by the whole affair. Alicia observed piously that she always liked to take part in local activities, and it would not really be a great strain making a little speech.

Charles was against it; but Sally, who had slipped into the position of head nurse, approved. 'It's good for people to do what they like,' she said. She was in a queer mood, active, docile and uncurious. It was as if she were trying to avert an evil eye by keeping herself very busy *behaving well.*

Lucius was trying to talk to David about her, since Roxane was still being flighty. David had taken her out to lunch twice, but he had no definite progress to report. All the same, he seemed very pleased with himself, which struck Lucius as most ominous. He was quite undisturbed on moral grounds by David's shocking reputation, but he

was not prepared to trust him an inch with his leading lady.

As a young man, David had formed the impression that no woman alive could resist him. This was a slight exaggeration, even in his best period, but it had set a standard which he was at pains to maintain through later years. Lately, the going had not been quite so easy, but his aura of experience (of a sort) remained sufficiently fascinating, especially to raw or unstable characters. His second wife was in the former category, his first and third in the latter; and roughly the same proportions prevailed amongst his mistresses, girlfriends, and the miscellaneous acquaintances to whom he had given the title of 'idle lays.'

He had not observed that he really had no idea what to do with these young women after he had proved to his own satisfaction that he could impose himself upon them. Each occasion had at the time a deceptively individual air. The circumstances were different; and the women, real to themselves if not to him, had some ideas of their own. This could often disguise for quite a long period the fact that he was wholly at a loss; but it did not make him an agreeable lover or a tolerable husband. He had made many women unhappy.

So Lucius did not care for the brittle, expectant mood in which he returned from the second lunch with Roxane. He had asked Lucius to his flat, in a divinely beautiful but devilishly inaccessible position on Highgate Hill; and had then been half an hour late himself. He insisted on drinking whisky, which Lucius did not relish in the afternoon; and, finally, after he had admitted that Roxane was still playing hunt the thimble round the American agencies, he went on talking most tediously about her charm and beauty.

So Lucius suggested that, after five days' grace, it might be useful to put some pressure on Alicia. David, in vague and general terms, recommended him not to fuss.

'But do you really have any hope of Roxane?'

'Ah, hopes,' said David. 'It all depends what you mean

by it, as Professor Joad said. But one can't hurry these things. I shall be seeing her to-morrow night . . . and possibly . . . possibly . . . .'

'As you know, I would prefer Alicia for the part.'

'Then it's damned bad luck you didn't get her. I should be quite satisfied with Roxane.'

As Lucius waited in a long block by Camden Town, he reflected how very much he disliked David. He also brooded over the perennial question – how was it possible for a man with such vulgar ideas, and with no sense of living character, to write plays at all? And, moreover, plays which were well above the average level in the contemporary London theatre. Very likely it was common practice for writers to employ a second personality to write their stuff for them, but it still remained a mystery how so many of them were able to give out what they had, apparently, no chance of taking in. Lucius thought it more than likely that most of the cosy, domestic romances were written by tyrannical fathers and husbands, or by capable business women, with flair, who had wisely decided they were better off single. He recollected a wicked social satire he had lately read which was known to be the work of a respectable married woman who also very much enjoyed doing her own housework.

He reverted to worrying about Alicia. At one moment he felt he had achieved nothing; the next he assured himself that at least he must have slightly unsettled her. He hoped her children were not having too rough a time. They both had, he reflected, a certain muted charm.

'Shall we be seeing Lucius again?' said Bernard. He had just carried a bucket of water across the lawn, and sat down to rest.

'I doubt it,' said Alicia. She moved her hand from the cold basin to the warm bucket. 'Why?'

'I liked him,' said Bernard.

Alicia raised her fine eyebrows. 'I had the impression he took quite a fancy to you. Oh, don't smirk, Bernard. It's unbecoming.'

'I can't help my face.'

'Nonsense. You are very fortunate in your fact, as you very well know. But you ought to beware of expressions which make you look like a schoolgirl.'

'Oh, really. . .

'Haven't you got any girl-friends,' said Alicia, apparently at random, 'at Oxford?'

'No.'

'What a pity. I'm sure it would do you good to fall violently in love.'

'I see you have my welfare at heart,' said Bernard, very cross indeed.

'I worry sometimes, like all mothers, I suppose. It's sad there are no girls who would do for you round here.'

Joan rang up the young doctor to remind him that he was judging the First Aid Competition in the Girl Guides display. He assured her that he had it in his diary, and undertook to be punctual.

'Have you really got fixed up for Saturday afternoon?' said his wife. 'That does seem unnecessary. Had you forgotten that Bob's coming for the week-end? Of course, I shall be delighted to amuse him all the time, but he is your friend. I won't be able to reminisce about medical school, or talk about the latest ruse for getting rid of boils.'

'We'll have to see if he'd like to come over with me. It might possibly be amusing.'

Alicia's natural impulse to run away from Joan was hampered by her desire to enlist sympathy for her incapacity. She compromised by looking drooping, and also bored. Bernard quietly melted away, leaving Joan to cope as best she could. She explained that she had only come to get

her programme for the display approved. 'We are very anxious not to tire you, you see; and if you did want only to stay for half time, then of course we could arrange things to suit you. It isn't that we wouldn't love you to stay, but . . .'

'Let me see the programme.' Joan handed her a sheet of pencil notes. She read them aloud, slowly, with comments. '*Signalling*. I shan't be able to make head or tail of that, but if I can sit down, I shan't suffer. *First Aid Competition*. That's sensible; there's such a lot of it needed nowadays. *Country dances; Horsey Weir; Up-and-Coming; The Quantock Basket; Lovaduck; The Three-legged Sailor; Gathering Peasecods while you may* and *Tossle-go-Lightly*. They sound charming. I really hardly knew there were so many country dances. But won't the Guides be terribly exhausted if they dance them all?'

'They always seem to enjoy them, and we did think some of the parents might like to join in. Of course some of them are quite tricky – we've been practising *Lovaduck* and *Tossle-go-Lightly* for simply ages. But anyone could pick up the *Three-legged Sailor*.'

Alicia smiled. 'Well, we don't want to waste all your work, or spoil the mothers' fun. Why don't you cut out two or three of the others? What's next? *Team race*. That should be exciting. And then *Speech* and *Prize-giving*. Oh, my dear, you can't ask me to give my speech immediately after the dancing *and* the team race. All the Guides will be panting: I shan't be able to make myself heard.'

'That is rather a point,' said Joan, much concerned. 'I don't know how I missed it. What a good thing I asked you before I did the final copies.'

Alicia was prepared to be kind. 'Never mind. These things need experience. The vital thing is to put the physical exercises early and the first aid last. That's what the prizes are for, I suppose. What are they?'

'Well, it's one prize actually. A sort of little cup that

someone once gave us for Nature study. But the Guides seem to hate Nature – I suppose they see such a lot of it – and I didn't think it was right to give a prize for some perfectly awful pressed ferns that they'd stuck in at the last moment with bits of scotch tape. So I decided, off my own bat I'm afraid, to make it for first aid, which they do try hard about. Do you think anyone will mind?'

'I should say nothing about it if I were you. *Song*. Can the Guides sing?'

Joan blushed. The simple word 'song' disguised a plan of her own about which she felt a little embarrassed. 'It's *a* very short song,' she said.

'Well, perhaps we can all join in if it isn't difficult. *God Save The King*. Splendid. I'm quite beginning to look forward to it.'

'I am sure you will make a perfectly marvellous speech.'

Alicia was a complicated being in some ways, but she was very simple-minded about flattery. If people said nice things to her, she not only liked them better, which is very natural, but also revised her opinion on such irrelevant points as character or looks. On this particular day, also, she thought she had noticed a slight falling off in her children's attentions, and her first reluctance to talk to Joan at all had now given way to the idea that she was definitely better than nobody. Indeed, the look of hero-worship was really rather touching, and Alicia was even beginning to enjoy her company.

'Do you know,' said Alicia, 'I'm sure it would suit you to have your hair cut shorter. Come nearer; I want to try and see what it looks like if I twirl it up a bit round your ears.'

'If I'm not interrupting your work,' said Bernard, and waited until Margaret removed her hands from the keyboard of the typewriter. 'I'll tell you something. The trouble about Mother is that she simply cannot help being dominating and aggressive. One has to assume that there is some very

deep-seated sense of inferiority, although I confess that I have seen no evidence. And now she's got more time than ever to spend on interfering in other people's lives. . . . She's turned Sally into a household drudge, and as for me . . .'

'Are you very miserable?' said Margaret gently.

'Sometimes. I don't know what I should do without you. I wish I could make a clean break. I did think of sneaking up to London and getting some advice from Lucius, but I gather that would precipitate a most unholy row. Sometimes I think she will never approve of anything I decide for myself simply because she didn't think of it first. You know, there's no one in this house who understands her as well as I do, but it doesn't help me.'

'You talk about it so cleverly, Bernard, but you don't do anything.' The tone of Margaret's voice was regretful, not rebuking. She had come to the conclusion that the best she could do for herself was to take Bernard as he was. The system had been in force nearly a week, and she was certainly much happier than she had been.

'I suppose I've got a mother-fixation,' said Bernard gloomily. Margaret did not want to repeat herself, so she simply got up and kissed him. She did not approve at all of diversions during working hours, but Bernard seemed so sad.

Charles had noticed that Sally was looking fagged, and had been quite firm about taking her for a walk. They had discussed Alicia exhaustively. Charles was still very much worried because she still refused to have orthodox medical attention; but Sally supported Mrs. Smith. Although she was obviously a most peculiar person, she did have the knack of getting Alicia to do as she was told.

'The arm doesn't get any better,' said Charles.

'No. It's terribly worrying, but at least she does seem rather well in herself.'

'It keeps her at home,' said Charles.

They were walking along the edge of the hill. Charles

took her arm, and they paused to look in silence at the view. He wondered if he should tell her that he had decided to organise his affairs without telling Alicia, and ask her opinion of a draft letter to his chosen directors explaining the scheme and inviting them to serve on the board. He sighed gently, undecided. It would be a relief to confide, but perhaps it was disloyal.

'We ought to hurry,' said Sally. 'Mother may be getting fretful.'

Alicia was fascinated by the problem of Joan's hair. She pushed and twisted it in every direction, only complaining from time to time that she could not do all she wished with her left hand. Finally, she sent Joan to find Maybelle

'And tell her to bring some scissors.'

Joan usually hated it if people mentioned hair, because she knew she was very unsuccessful with her own. But Lady Maynecompton had given her no time to change the subject; she had just taken her in hand. So Joan sat very meekly, with a towel round her shoulders, while lumps of hair fell on the grass and Alicia kept up a running fire of directions. Secretly, Joan felt *thrilled*.

'And now, May-belle,' said Alicia, 'take her away and set it. I am glad I thought of it, because I'm sure it's going to do us all credit.'

How pleasant it is, she thought, to be able to help young people; and it only needs a little imagination.

'Have you talked to Mother about Bernard?' said Sally as they approached the house. She felt she had taken on the family, and Bernard, who had never been very close to her, was included. She had been horrified to find that he did not seem to know whether or not he was going back to Oxford.

'I made an attempt,' said Charles.

Sally sighed. 'I'm not sure that it's altogether Mother's

fault,' she said. 'Or yours. Bernard himself won't think about it sensibly. That's what's so impossible.'

'I was rather hoping,' said Charles, 'that Margaret might help him to see reason.'

'Why Margaret?'

'She's a very sensible girl, and between ourselves I rather think Bernard is getting very fond of her.'

'How extraordinary! What makes you think so?'

Charles did not know. The thought had suddenly crystallised for no reason, a few days earlier; and now he was absolutely sure it was true. Sally was too much astonished to believe him at once.

'Would you be pleased?'

'Delighted. I like Margaret. And Bernard needs somebody like her, calm and unselfish.'

'Poor Joan will be livid,' said Sally.

But Joan's star was rising. Alicia was asking herself whether she mightn't, after all, be somebody for Bernard. People usually appear more valuable once you have done something for them, and Alicia intended to do more. There was a dress Sally never wore which would suit Joan's colouring, and Maybelle would certainly have time to do her hair once in a while. When the process of improvement had gone a bit further, it would be perfectly pleasant to have her around.

Also, Joan evidently appreciated Alicia, and was not likely to get too independent. Alicia thought how awful it would be to have a strong-minded daughter-in-law. Not that she envisaged Joan in quite that capacity. Her plan, not very clearly formulated, was that it would be nice if Bernard took an interest in Joan *for practice.*

Charles and Sally were delighted to find that she did not seem to have been fretting. She was only mildly impatient to see the results of Maybelle's handwork, and asked once or twice where on earth Bernard had got to. Sally was

finally sent to look for him. After a tong hunt, she heard him talking to Margaret behind the garage, and did not like to interrupt.

'There!' said Maybelle.

Joan looked in the glass. 'I wouldn't recognise myself.'

'You do look a lot better. But don't forget, you'll have to sleep in a net.'

'Oh, I'd do anything to stay looking like this.'

'Quite a nice little figure you've got too, only you don't make much of it.'

'Well, it's all a bit awkward . . .' said Joan. At this late stage, she suddenly felt one must draw the line somewhere. It seemed indecent, the way Maybelle examined her as if she were judging horseflesh.

Maybelle simply did not notice that she was causing embarrassment. She would have been quite prepared to tuck little bits of cotton wool here and there, if she had seen any signs of anything to put it in. But the problem was even simpler than that.

'I'll find you a bra',' she said.

Joan almost died of shame. As she waited, she made up her mind that she would not on any account allow MaybeIle to try it on. If necessary, she would throw it away when she got home.

'I know you'll be quite amazed,' said Alicia. 'Just look. Here she comes.'

Joan, from the neck upwards, was quite transformed. Her head was an excellent shape, and her features seemed to have become much more definite.

'Don't look so shy,' said Alicia. 'It spoils the effect. You girls don't know how to hold yourselves; Sally is just the same. Put your shoulders back.'

'Oh, Mother, but she looks wonderful,' Sally said. 'How did you persuade her? I've been trying for years.'

Alicia gave a knowing smile. Joan thanked her profusely, and then said she must go. She felt genuinely very grateful, but she did not – for the moment – think she could bear any instructions on deportment.

'Oh, no,' wailed Alicia. 'I would like Bernard to see you; he has such good taste.'

Joan felt rather torn. It would be nice to surprise Bernard; but she was busy, and also it might be a good idea to save up the surprise and make it even better.

'I'm really rather frantic,' she said. 'I've got to jelly the programmes for the display to-morrow.'

She took herself off. '*Felly* the programmes,' said Alicia wonderingly. 'Does she mean, like eels? She really is a most amusing girl.'

Sally was mystified, but delighted, to see that Joan, who was so very deserving, was making headway at last.

The evening was desultory. Alicia decided to go to bed early, and most of the household followed her. But Charles stayed up to rewrite his draft letter. He got on very slowly, for he constantly had to refer to the intricate correspondence with his solicitor. Company law was not a subject he found easy to understand.

Joan was also working late, but rather more happily. After supper she had put on the brassiere and a thin, short-sleeved jersey, and settled down to copy out the programme in thick violet ink. As she worked, she was curiously conscious of her body, and it did make the laborious job much less boring. She hummed cheerfully to herself as she mechanically rolled off the duplicates, and did so many that the last half-dozen were quite illegible.

After she had packed up, she went and had a good look at herself in the bathroom mirror, which had the best light. She was not at all sure, yet, if she really liked the effect, but there was no doubt that it did make her more like everyone else.

Alicia was determined to have a quiet morning, and decided rather arbitrarily that this could best be achieved by playing Ludo, which she said she had always adored as a child. There was some difficulty in making up a four. Sally and Bernard were amenable, but Charles could not be persuaded. Finally, however, he agreed to spare Margaret.

Alicia was suffering from washerwoman's fingers and had temporarily given up her treatment. Bernard suspected that the arm was better, but she said not. She kept it in a sling, and told Bernard he was to be her right-hand man, and shake for her.

They settled on the terrace in the sunshine. 'This really is nice, isn't it?' said Alicia. 'And it's so depraved to play games of chance in the morning, we ought to do it more often. I must be red, remember, because it brings me luck.'

'You always are lucky at games,' said Bernard.

Alicia was complacent. 'I do generally win,' she said. 'Come on. Start.'

As they played, they kept up a desultory conversation.

'Oh, good,' said Alicia. 'I've moved out. First, you see. Sally, when we go over to the Village Hall, do bring that old green dress of yours. I want to give it to Joan.'

'Whatever for?' said Bernard. 'I've started too.'

'It turns out she's quite a pretty girl,' said Alicia. 'Your turn, Margaret.'

'I'll take it over some time,' said Sally. 'But she'll be in uniform this afternoon.'

'I sent you back,' said Bernard.

'You brute,' cried Alicia. 'When I wasn't looking. I know, Sally, but I want her to come back here to tea afterwards, and it will remind her to change. Dear me, I am playing badly. I must make an effort. Shake nicely for me, Bernard dear.'

'What are you going to say to the Guides?' said Sally.

'It's about honour. I made some notes in bed, but I forgot to bring them down. Remind me, Margaret, I want

you to type them. Oh, good – a six. Now you must all look out for yourselves.'

'Is it a long speech?' said Bernard.

'No; quite short. I shall want to get home after all that dancing and bandaging. But I did think of quoting some poetry. Whose turn is it?'

'Yours,' said Margaret.

'Oh, sorry,' said Bernard. 'I keep on forgetting I have to have two shakes. Is there any poetry that's really relevant?'

'Vaguely,' said Alicia. 'But in any case it's an education for them to hear verse properly spoken. And there's a snippet from the Guide Law that Joan says I can end up with.'

'It's your turn, Mother,' said Bernard. 'I'm improving. It's a five.'

Alicia moved her forward piece. 'Look at that. Sally, back you go.'

Bernard's jaw dropped. 'Mother, you're cheating.'

'It was a five, wasn't it?'

'Yes, but you moved for a six. You were *there*.' He put his forefinger firmly on the board.

'What utter nonsense. I was *there*.' Alicia's finger lighted on the next square. Bernard appealed to Margaret.

'I didn't notice,' said Margaret.

'Let's get on with the game,' said Sally.

But Bernard was not to be moved. 'But surely you know yourself . . .'

'Oh, skip it, Bernard,' said Sally impatiently. 'Mother always cheats at this silly sort of game.'

'Then it's silly to play.' Bernard got up stiffly. He felt he was being slightly ridiculous, but it was satisfactory to be able to take a line about something.

'Bernard,' said Margaret warningly. He sat down again so obediently that Sally decided her father must, if anything, have underestimated their attachment.

Alicia tried to be specially nice to him, but he was remarkably unresponsive.

Joan sorted bandages and splints, and arranged them in two identical piles, one for the Thistle Patrol and one for the Acorns. She disposed one pile at each end of the Village Hall. Then she noticed that the piano would have to be shifted, so as to allow adequate length for the team-races. She went into the road to look for someone to help her.

The only person she could see was Christine, who rather surprisingly offered to come.

'That's nice of you,' said Joan, 'but I don't suppose you'd be strong enough.'

'Oh, I've done worse than that, Captain,' said Christine. 'I'm strong.'

As they moved the piano inch by inch, Joan made an attempt to profit by the opportunity. 'I hope you'll do your best, Christine, to make this afternoon a success. There are a lot of important people coming, and most of the village too. It's quite time Thistles got a move on, and really tried to win the cup. The Acorns have had everything their own way for far too long.'

'Why, Captain,' said Christine, 'you've got your hair done different.'

Joan laughed and sent her away. As she ran through the music she was to play that afternoon, she felt very pleased with herself. It was nice of Christine to notice.

By lunch-time, Alicia had got tired of being kind to Bernard, and had given him several nasty digs designed to get under his skin. As they were unsuccessful, she was goaded to further effort of a rather haphazard sort. He went on eating steadily, bitterly offended with her.

'Charles,' she said suddenly, 'I've found a most suitable girl-friend for Bernard.'

'Surely, my dear, that isn't necessary.'

'Yes, indeed. And it's not even true to say I found her. Actually I made her. I've transformed Joan.'

'Oh, Mother,' said Sally.

'You needn't protect him,' said Alicia. 'It does Bernard good to be teased a little, particularly when he sulks. You weren't there yesterday when he was complaining to me about the terrible shortage of girls in this county.'

'I did nothing of the sort,' said Bernard.

Sally glanced at Margaret's face. It was deeply distressed, but Alicia had eyes only for Bernard. She was smiling at him, pleased to have made him talk at last, and evidently tempted to work on his nerves again. Sally could stand it no longer.

'Mother, do stop. Bernard is more or less engaged to Margaret.'

'No. We are not engaged,' said Margaret quickly. Bernard looked from her to his mother. He seemed to be in a condition of absolute panic.

'Well?' said Alicia, in her coldest voice. 'It appears you are not engaged to Margaret. Are you?'

Bernard appeared incapable of speech. Alicia, sustained by her taste for impossible situations, addressed Margaret with perfect amiability. 'Well, if Bernard has nothing to say, I suppose I must take your word for it.'

Margaret, under greater strain, betrayed her impeccable reputation for tact and good manners.

'We are not engaged. We never were. I couldn't even consider it. Just look at him.'

Bernard was in tears.

CHAPTER VII

'THIS would probably be a good day,' said Lucius, 'for running down and seeing how the land lies.'

'It's rather a long drive,' objected David. 'And they may all be settled in for a peaceful week-end. Besides, I meant to have an early night.'

Neither of them mentioned Roxane. Lucius knew David had dined with her on the previous evening and had gathered that all doors were still open. But he noticed that David was showing definite signs of wear and tear.

'In any case,' said David, 'you could go alone. What's the point of dragging me along?'

'I'm certain Alicia would adore to sec you. And between us . . . I don't know. . . .

'You must promise to look after me, then. I'm terrified of women.'

It had occurred to him that it might be quite a good move to be out of town when Roxane telephoned, as she undoubtedly would.

'How could I know?' said Alicia. 'I was really only pulling Bernard's leg. And now I can't do anything about comforting him because I must get off to this hellish jamboree.'

'I should leave him alone,' said Sally. 'Of course, it was a mistake. I was really to blame. He won't speak to me, and Margaret won't speak to him. I really think Father had better stay at home, and keep a tactful eye on them both, from a distance.'

'It's most annoying. I wanted him to carry my bucket.'

'Surely you aren't taking that? I thought you'd given it up.'

'I tried to. But it's made my arm so much worse. It really feels wretched. But I didn't like to mention it at lunch.'

'Couldn't I ring up Joan and say you're not well enough to come?'

'I don't feel I can let her down. I've been giving her so much encouragement – as it turns out, quite uselessly. I'll get through it somehow.'

'Well, if you really do want the bucket,' said Sally, 'I can carry it.'

'I'm sure Lady Maynecompton will impress you,' said the young doctor. 'She knocked me for a loop. I was reminded of my three favourite film stars rolled into one; and on top of that rolled in Chanel No. 5.'

'You seem to have picked up some useful information,' said Bob, 'since you started in practice.'

'My wife identified it.'

Bob whistled. He was, like his friend Eric, neither handsome nor distinguished. In fact, they were both nice boys more than anything else. But whereas Eric was short and neat, Bob was large and somewhat shaggy. His distinguishing feature was a mop of dazzling red hair.

'It's all right,' said Eric. 'Phyllis and I laughed ourselves silly, after a trifling passage of back-chat. Lady Maynecompton actually struck me as a first-class circus turn. But her arm was really interesting. I'd like to know what you make of it. Apparently . . .'

Charles knocked timidly at Margaret's door. She asked who it was, and would only turn the key when she was satisfied that he was alone.

'May I come in? But please lie down again. I don't want to disturb you, but I had to come and say how sorry I am. I feel I am very much to blame.'

'You've always been sweet to me.'

'My wife is terribly impulsive, and Bernard . . . You've been treated abominably.'

'I expect I brought it on myself. If you don't mind, I'd much rather not talk about it.'

'There isn't anything more for me to say. Except that I myself would have been very proud and happy to have you for my daughter-in-law.'

'Thank you.'

Charles knew he ought to go, before Margaret started crying again; but he still had to give her a message on Bernard's behalf.

'He is in a terrible state, you know. If you could bring yourself to see him for a moment . . .'

'It won't do any good. He deserves to be miserable. I should only make him feel worse.'

'It seems wrong to me,' said Charles gently, 'that you have only talked to each other in public. I don't want to hurry you, but I am quite alarmed on Bernard's account, and it would be a generous gesture on your part.'

'I don't feel I can bear to see Bernard.'

Charles looked at her with so much sympathy that she made an effort to pull herself together.

'Very well. I'll try. But not yet.'

Joan welcomed Alicia and Sally in the porch. She saluted them smartly, and led them through to the hall. All four sides were lined with chairs, and most of the chairs were full. Alicia and Sally were placed in a position of honour at the centre of one of the long walls. A third chair, reserved for Charles, took the bucket.

Alicia, having settled herself, caught sight of Eric and Bob facing her across the hall, then immediately turned to make a whispered comment to Sally on Bob's astonishing red hair.

Bob also whispered: 'What on earth is the paraphernalia? Are you responsible?'

Eric hastily shook his head.

Joan walked to the centre of the room and clapped her hands. 'I'm very pleased to see such a good turn-out. We're going to begin with signalling. You can see our two patrols. The Acorns are on the stage; the Thistles are by the entrance. When I blow the whistle, the two patrol leaders will come to me at the double. I shall give them a message to signal back to their patrol. Now .

The whistle blew. The messages were collected without a hitch, and the two patrol leaders, standing back to back, began to wag their flags in a frenzied fashion.

'Surely it can't mean anything,' said Alicia.

Bob, who had been a Boy Scout, was watching with real interest. He rather thought the Thistle signaller had mixed up some of the letters. Under his breath he told Eric he'd risk a shilling, evens, on the Acorns. Eric did not take it. He was less knowledgeable than Bob, but he liked the Acorn girl's round, red face and the way she got on with it. 'Two to one? Three to one?' whispered Bob. Eric closed on four to one to make him shut up. He was rather conscious that he was present in an official capacity, and a very sinister old man (Christine's grandfather) was eyeing him with an air of complicity.

'Do you like Margaret?' whispered Alicia.

'Very much.'

'I used to. But she must have been up to something,'

One of the Acorns bounded from the platform and delivered the message, as received, to Joan. She clapped her hands and made an announcement.

'The Acorns are first. Only, I am sorry to say, they have made one mistake. If the Thistles can bring in a correct version within two minutes, the patrols will be equal on points.'

But there seemed to be a violent argument going on among the Thistles. The bigger girls were standing in a close knot, and Christine was darting round outside, trying to push

her way in where she saw any sign of a gap. As soon as she realised that the attention of the whole room was directed to that particular corner she piped up: 'Please, Captain, we can't make any sense of it.'

'That's a pity. Then the Acorns have come out on top. Not, I may say, for the first time. I won't get the Thistles to signal the message again, because I am sure you are all longing for the dancing.'

'Why don't we turn round and go home?' said David peevishly. 'Or stay here. That looks a nice pub. Oh, we've passed it. I haven't even a clear idea what we're supposed to be doing. Are we just sticking our necks out on principle?'

'I am very anxious to get this business settled,' said Lucius.

'I suppose you must be really keen on the play,' said David, still languid, but prepared to open up a little. 'My trouble is that I've just started another, and it's obviously very much better. The plot is most ingenious. When the curtain goes up . . .'

Christine was a natural dancer. The patrol leader, the big girls, the strong, conscientious ones who were the prop and comfort of their families, went through the correct motions with painstaking thoroughness, slightly behind the beat. But Christine performed the simple steps in a neat, flying style that had great charm. Alicia noticed it at once, and considered the possibilities of organising the queer little creature into a ballet school; but then she reminded herself that one could not do everything for everybody.

'And now,' said Joan, 'our final dance. It is very easy. Almost as easy as Sir Roger de Coverley. So please will you all join in.'

The Guides, evidently instructed, rushed to the walls, and picked out a giggling mother, a resigned father, or a big brother who had to be dragged by force to the middle of the room. Christine led out her grandfather. She had

taken the precaution of making him practice beforehand, and expected him to do her credit.

Bob, who had the innocent idea that it was natural to do whatever was going on, walked across the room and presented himself to Sally with a ducking bow. Only after she rose and gave him her hand did he notice that there were no other 'visitors' couples.

'I say,' he said, 'do you mind?'

'No; it's fun.' She smiled rather wanly. Bob's sensitive spirits sank. Sally struck him as a bit grand. The Captain, in spite of her uniform, was far less formidable. Bob liked girls who bustled about and did things, and Joan was certainly making a jolly good effort on the rickety old piano.

Alicia beckoned to Eric. He made his way, by an adroit series of darts and dashes round the edge of the room, and took Sally's seat. He asked Alicia how she was.

'Still alive. It's nice to see you. I wish we could dance.'

The set became progressively more ragged. 'Move up this way,' cried Joan, but no one heard her, and the dance went on shifting to the far end of the hall like a pile of leaves turned over by the wind. The mothers were gasping and holding their bosoms and catching their hair-pins; and the men and lads, with guilty smiles, had abandoned their earlier prancing style and reduced their footwork to a shuffle. Christine and her grandfather, with the remote air of experts, kept firmly in position, and moved regularly up towards the piano. But they were near the top of the set, and the only effect was to create a huge gap on the other side. Sally and Bob were well in the middle of the shambles.

'Do you suppose this tune is going on for ever?' said Alicia.

Margaret brushed her hair and sponged her face, and went downstairs to give formal notice to her employer.

'When do you want to leave?' he said. It was clear from his expression that he was distressed and reluctant, but

naturally not surprised. Margaret tried to remember the sensible little speech she had composed in her bedroom.

'I should give you a month's notice, I know. But won't that be rather awkward for all of us? I mean, I hate to cut and run when I know there's an enormous amount of work that needs doing but . . . everyone must hate the sight of me.'

'I shall miss you very much.'

'Oh, dear. I don't know what to say. I shall be miserable going. But it seems impossible to stay.'

'I expect you're right.' Charles looked very old. Margaret tried not to look at him, but she could still hear him jingling his keys, and could imagine the baffled, wretched expression on his face. She made a big effort to remain ruthless and practical.

'It won't take me long to pack.'

'Then let me know when you are ready, and I'll drive you to the station. Have you some friends to go to?'

'Sort of.'

She was about to leave the room when he called her back. 'Of course, you must have a month's salary in any case.'

While he wrote the cheque she waited uncomfortably. It was ridiculous to be proud, of course; but she hated to think of him giving her something for nothing. With a feeling of nostalgia, she looked round the grim little room. She had enjoyed working for him.

It was pathetic to see what a mess he had made already, after working by himself for half a morning. But she could not, at this stage, embark on a major tidy. The one final symbolic act she allowed herself was to put the cover on the typewriter.

As she went to do it, she saw a sheet of headed paper in the machine – he had been trying to copy his formal letter to the directors. To Margaret's professional eye, his pitiful attempt, badly spaced and scattered with x's to cover mistakes, was shocking.

‘It’s no use,’ she said. ‘I shall have to stay for a day or two and sort you out.’

‘Who is your nice friend?’ said Alicia. The team race bored her. The rest of the audience was sharply divided into supporters of the Thistles or the Acorns, but she had not even managed to identify them. She was much more interested in Bob, who was watching the flying figures with attentive eyes. Beside him, Sally was looking rather glum.

‘We trained together. Now he’s a house surgeon, and doing very well.’

‘I’m glad Sally got a dance. She’s looking rather liverish, don’t you think? But he seems to be cheering her up.’

Bob had said something to Sally which made her laugh. Then she nodded quickly, and turned to watch the race with more interest.

‘And he’s already taken an easy shilling off me,’ thought Eric indignantly.

‘Bernard!’ called Margaret. He came out of his room and stood scowling at her.

‘It wasn’t fair,’ he said.

‘It was hard on everyone,’ said Margaret. There seemed no reason to move away from the landing, so they stayed there, regarding each other coldly and critically. Margaret saw a crumpled creature, absurdly young, whom no one in their senses could regard as anything but a broken reed; and Bernard saw a self-contained, unencouraging young woman, from whom it was ridiculous to expect even ordinary kindness.

‘What was I to do?’ he said, making a bid for justice at least. ‘It was you said it was all off.’

‘Someone had to say something.’

‘It left me absolutely defenceless.’

‘I told myself I was protecting you,’ said Margaret with a shaky laugh. ‘But now I think of it again, that may have

been just what you call typical self-deception. I begin to see that was probably the moment when I realised it was all a silly dream from start to finish. A pity, in a way. I enjoyed it very much – some of it.'

'You sound so bitter.'

'I'm afraid I am. But I shall get over it.'

'I'm not going to find it so easy.'

'Now, Bernard, don't be an ass. You can't still think you're fond of me.'

'It's curious,' said Bernard reflectively, 'but in a way I still am. I think you're being quite odious, and saying much more than you mean, and you frighten me, and I've been spending the afternoon wanting to kill you. But all the same . . .

For Margaret, his words had a sinister echo of all their previous quarrels. However clearly she knew her own mind at the start, once she had listened to Bernard's measured analysis of the situation and seen him work his way through it to a better mood, she was lost. All their quarrels had ended by reducing her to slavish submission.

'No, Bernard. This won't do. It's no good talking about it. I'm sorry you feel ill-used, but I can't do anything. That's all.'

Bob and Eric, after a whispered consultation, gave the Acorns fourteen out of twenty for their bandaging. Then Eric asked them a few questions, lightly touching on poisoning, burning and foreign bodies in the eye. The Acorns scored another fifteen, making twenty-nine out of forty.

The two doctors walked across the hall to the Thistles. Christine was lying on the floor. Her right leg was securely lashed to a broomstick, there was a tourniquet on her left arm, and the patrol leader was dealing with her broken jaw. But there seemed to be some hitch. The patrol leader uncrossed the bandage and tried crossing it the other way

round. Bob thought he saw Christine's lips moving, but he wasn't certain. The patrol leader went back to her first idea, and made a very tidy job of it.

Christine's impudent eyes were still full of life. Otherwise she was a helpless lump. When Eric asked for the tourniquet to be tightened, she blinked but did not wriggle. She was definitely trying to do her best for the Thistles.

'This is quite good,' said Eric. 'Nineteen, would you say, or eighteen?' Bob recommended they should err on the side of generosity, and Christine winked at him.

'What would happen to you,' said Eric, 'if you ate some laburnum seeds?'

'Convulsions, delirium, failure of respiration and collapse,' said Christine with relish. She had slipped out of her bandages like a contortionist.

'They're all down at the Village Hall,' said Maybelle; 'and I dare say they'll be some time. Would you like to wait?'

'What can she be doing?' said David.

'It's a display,' said Maybelle briefly.

'Then she's quite recovered?' asked Lucius.

'I couldn't say that, Mr. Angmering. There's still a lot of trouble with her arm, but she's quite herself again. Only you shouldn't do anything to upset her.'

'Heaven forbid!' said Lucius. 'Don't you think, David, we might as well look in on this festivity? It may provide some innocent enjoyment.'

Alicia spoke sitting down. She had not been able to get her notes typed out and, since they were illegible, she had left them at home. Consequently, there were various references and long quotations missing. Therefore, after a short passage of introductory patchwork, she wisely decided to change to a simpler treatment.

The text of speeches is usually disappointing unless they have been composed with an eye to publication. In order

to understand why her speech had the success that it did, it is necessary to remember several unusual circumstances. She was capable of delivering almost any assemblage of words as if they were loaded with meaning; she looked magnificent, and dispensed her smiles so that each member of the small audience felt personally flattered; and she already had a solid reputation as a great lady of a wholly original kind. The village people were proud of her, and did not at all mind listening to nonsense.

'I remember very clearly,' she said, 'a painful experience in my childhood. I was painting a ripe cornfield, and I had run out of yellow ochre. My brother's paintbox was quite new, but I had been forbidden to touch it. I remember standing with that lovely box in my hands, struggling with myself. At that moment my brother came in and, believing he had caught me red-handed, flew at me. I thought him unjust, and we both became so angry and upset that we had to be separated. And we both passed a very miserable day apart.

'Now, I like to think that I would have resisted this temptation in the end. But how much better it would have been if I had firmly refused to allow it to enter my mind! It is on occasions like these that the Guide Law . . .'

There was a stir round the entrance. As Alicia, in liquid tones went on and on, paying out her rope of sand, she observed Lucius and David. Lucius smiled and bowed to her, but David was wearing his most forbidding and cynical expression, and she was not at all pleased. He ought to have a go at it himself, she thought.

'. . . Honour among Guides,' said Alicia. The words were rich and round like a final chord. Everyone clapped heartily.

'And now,' said Alicia, 'I see we have a very distinguished visitor, and I am going to ask him to present the cup.' She waited for the applause, which came. 'Mr. Transom.'

'There's no getting out of it,' said Lucius under cover of renewed clapping, and pushed David forward. He was

very much relieved he hadn't been picked upon himself.

David was rather at sea. Eric passed to him a sheet of paper with some figures on it, which he had some difficulty in understanding, and Joan gave him the cup – a curious object with so many handles that it was difficult to hold.

'But who actually gets it?' he muttered.

'The Thistles. Don't you see, they got a total of thirty.'

David bravely straightened up, and looked round the room. The fathers, as a whole, appeared indifferent, or else distracted by tight collars; but the mothers were settling themselves in their chairs, and nodding and smiling to each other, as if they were really looking forward to the unexpected turn. Christine's grandfather, in a class all of his own, looked quite ready to speak himself. The dance had excited him.

'I'm at a double disadvantage,' said David. 'You have taken me by surprise, and you have asked me to follow a very gifted speaker.' Applause. 'I can't even say I have enjoyed the performance, because you all know I have only just arrived. But I can see that you have enjoyed it, and it is a real pleasure for me to present the cup.' His lips smiled, but his back, presented to Alicia, was extremely grim. 'I'm going to keep you in suspense for a moment, and tell you that the Acorns – where are the Acorns? – did very much better than the Thistles on questions. The Thistles appear to be strong on poisons, but weak on burns. However, the Thistles picked up very well on their bandaging, and it is to them that I will present this very interesting cup.'

The Thistle patrol leader, blushing with achievement, came forward. David shook hands with her.

'The wages of sin is death,' said Christine's grandfather. He did not see why he shouldn't get a hearing too. David dropped the cup. The patrol leader picked it up and scuttled. Joan darted over to the piano, and played the opening chords of *Song*.

‘For she’s a jolly good fellow,’ screamed the Guides. The mothers nudged the fathers to stir them to action, and get the miserable old man out of the building. As he departed, with a hefty farm-labourer bearing down on each of his elbows, he dispatched a final rocket:

‘Woe unto you, daughters of Sion . . .’

‘And so say all of us,’ trilled the Guides.

‘Oh, I do want my tea,’ said Alicia. ‘But it isn’t like the theatre. We shall have to stay for “God Save the King.” ’

CHAPTER VIII

'I'M sorry you're going,' said Maybelle. She had invited Margaret to tea in the old nursery, which she sometimes used as a sitting-room. 'But I don't blame you. They aren't easy to get on with. I sometimes get restless myself, and I've had twenty-two years.'

'It's a shame you aren't getting back to London.'

'I was looking forward to it, that's a fact. I did tell her ladyship, when she was fussing herself about Bernard before lunch, that I wasn't at all sure I could stay on here!'

'Wasn't she upset?'

'She acted like she hadn't heard. I don't know I'm sure. And my sister in Australia keeps on writing.'

'Have you realty got a sister in Australia, Maybelle? Just at the moment, I'd give anything to be the other side of the earth.'

Joan was tidying up the hail. The Guides were helping, and the two young men had nobly offered to shift back the piano.

'Wasn't it appalling!' said Joan. 'I could have sunk through the floor.'

'It was damn' funny,' said Bob.

'Everyone will be laughing about it for months.'

'Do them good,' said Bob. Joan began to feel definitely better. Eric seemed a little pompous; but Bob, although he didn't look anything much, was wonderfully cheerful and friendly. She asked them both back to the Vicarage to tea.

There, her father monopolised Eric, hoping to persuade him that the annihilation of a certain village school would prejudice public health as well as scholarship and piety.

Joan seized an opportunity when her mother went out to cut some more bread and butter to ask Bob a searching question.

'Do you mind telling me something? Do you think Girl Guides are silly?'

Poor kid, thought Bob, she must have had some gruelling treatment from those stuck-up bitches. He felt very much on her side, but he had to give an honest answer to an honest question.

'Very likely they are a bit silly. But if the girls enjoy themselves, and learn something, what *does* it matter?'

At the Manor, conversation was desultory. Lucius and David were invited to spend the night and, since that was their intention, they accepted. Consequently, Lucius was in no hurry to talk business, and Alicia gave them no opportunity. They had been so busy discussing David's work in hand on the drive down that they had not settled what line they should take about Roxane, but when Lucius rather implied that she was taking up the part, David did not contradict.

'Don't I remember her as an *ingenue*?' said Alicia.

'She has matured,' said David, 'lately.'

'Oh, I dare say she'll do very nicely,' said Alicia, with a great air of indifference. 'It's nice to see you, David. How is your wife?'

'Fugitive, but not cloistered.'

'Darling, you really ought to put that in one of your plays.'

'Sweetheart,' said David, making the most of his ugly, mobile face. 'I have.'

Lucius began to feel rather out of it. He noticed that the children were not so much in evidence as they had been on his last visit; and he was quite sorry.

Margaret did not appear at dinner. Bernard was silent, and Sally restricted herself to remarks that might have

come out of a handbook of generally useful conversations for those who are not at home in society. Charles was agreeable but unresourceful. After dinner, the children disappeared again; and Charles was later squeezed out by malicious gossip about people he did not know.

Alicia, feeling that the evening had not turned out very bright, made rather a piece out of the absurd romance between her son and her secretary.

'And I was only saying to you, Lucius, do you remember, how dangerous these quiet, ordinary-looking women so often are.'

'Margaret is quite handsome in her way,' said Lucius.

'Do you think so? I suppose that was what Bernard thought. But she is behaving perfectly sensibly now, and won't have him. Of course, she should have noticed before that the poor boy is hardly out of his cradle.'

Bernard had fancied that his life was laid waste for years, or at least for several days, and when he consented to play snooker with Sally it was only for the sake of getting through the time somehow. But it was a very close game; he found himself making more and more of an effort, and taking more and more interest; and it was a satisfaction to win in the end. When he went upstairs, he was vaguely conscious that he was regaining something he had lately missed from his life – the sense of surplus energy.

His room was in a mess. There were clothes on all the chairs, and books and papers on all the horizontal surfaces. He began to tidy, quickly and neatly.

Alicia put her head in to say good night. Bernard leaned forward across the overflowing waste-paper basket and received a peck on his cheek.

'Not brooding are you, dear?'

'I'm all right thank you, Mother. Just busy.'

The room was unwelcoming too, so Alicia did not stay. Bernard went on re-reading a nostalgic little note from his

tutor. 'You should have been with us in Switzerland,' it began. This was a perfectly accurate statement. For Bernard, by refusing to join the reading party, had done himself a very bad turn.

This can only be described in general terms. The episode with Margaret, unfortunate as it was, can only be regarded as a symptom; and one might even feel that Bernard was lucky to find such a nice person as Margaret to stand by him through a distracting period. No; Bernard's real mistake was to allow his brain, as well as his muscles, to rot, while he dangled around his mother, hoping that she should decide whether his dreams were worth taking seriously or not. Yet it was not altogether his fault. His O.U.D.S. success had unsettled him, but his first carefree reference to the possibilities of a professional career on the stage were actually in the nature of a try-on. It was Alicia who had first put in the circumstantial detail which had turned the fantasy into a project, and the project then became linked in Bernard's mind with dim but powerful ideas of honour and prestige.

When, as happened soon after, the whole thing bogged down, all Bernard's other interests were brought to a standstill with it. He took very little exercise, and did no work. He was occupied with feeling miserable and physically out-of-sorts. He had clung to Margaret, but he had not clearly distinguished her from a straw.

It has been suggested that anxiety is a malady of the intelligence. Like other gnomic, psychiatric utterances, this is difficult to accept as a general truth, but it does illuminate – and perhaps that is all that was intended – certain realms of experience. Bernard had been one of those pale, fervid, questioning children who seem. to exhaust themselves by working their brains too fast; and he had been consistently kept back. This is a common practice rather like driving on the flat in low gear. An intelligent child, like a fine engine, has considerable forces at his command. It may be possible,

over many years, to reduce his forces by misuse, but the only immediate effect is to deny him achievement. Bernard had been a victim of this policy. Charles had put him down, at birth, for Eton, in the modest hope that his son's career there would be more distinguished than his own. But Alicia, in a passing panic because Bernard was so delicate, had insisted on sending him instead to a newish public school where the buildings were modern, the food excellent, the staff thoroughly well-intentioned and the teaching poor. A mastoid operation at sixteen had two notable after-effects. It gave him an excuse for indolence and kept him out of the Army.

Bernard had blossomed, for the first time, at Oxford. He had a naturally good memory; he read fast, and could snatch out the guts of a book while others were still plodding through the introductory chapters; and, unlike many people who have been trained on the written word, he could listen to lectures with the right sort of attention. The tutorial system suited him very well. Under guidance which was a good deal more purposeful than it felt, he had discovered in himself an astonishing capacity for concentrated work. He did not, naturally, indulge it to excess. Friends, politics, art, athletics and nonsense took up a commendable proportion of his time; but he still worked longer hours than he had ever done before, and his work had an entirely new quality. Previously, he had always worked half-heartedly, with an eye on the future, reading to knock off a certain number of set pages, and writing his essays in anticipation of hearing them read out to the class. It was a revelation to discover that it was possible to live in the present, even when working; and that it was, moreover, enjoyable. Simultaneously, he developed a new zest for his other occupations. He was a busy and popular person, and probably as happy as most people of his age. He pretended to have a mild grievance against his tutor who, satisfied that Bernard had made up for lost time, showed signs of

expecting something more; but the pretence was fragile. At heart, he liked and admired him, and wanted to impress him.

This high rating of Bernard's abilities must be taken on trust; he has been seen through a period when they were tucked away under a bushel. In Alicia's absence, the tug on his navel-cord relaxed; in her presence, he could not forget it for one minute; and during this miserable summer he had reverted to a personality that had already proved, in happier circumstances, out of date. It was as uncomfortable and unsuitable as a cast skin, already somewhat shrivelled; and it remained to be seen whether Bernard was doomed to wear this encumbrance for ever.

His tutor had not been pleased to get from Bernard an arrogant, muddled intimation that they might not be meeting again. But he was too wary a bird to make an issue of it. Instead, he wrote affectionately and cheerfully about what he had been doing. He had a great deal of sympathy with this brilliant young man whose education had been so lamentably mismanaged, and he was by nature more of a leader than a driver.

His letter touched off at a number of points. 'The scenery you know,' read Bernard, and immediately felt a shiver of mountain air, and the curious, agreeable twitch of a relaxing muscle. He turned the page. 'Had you realised that the centre of the earth's land-mass is somewhere near La Rochelle? We have been pursuing the strategic implications.' Bernard made a mental note to dig out the big atlas. Then followed, in diverse connections, the names of all his closest friends.

Bernard stayed up quite late, sorting his papers, arranging his ties in order of merit, massaging his hair, fixing a broken connection on his lamp, and reading (in translation) those remarkable speeches in Thucydides which might have been made yesterday.

As he was going to sleep he recalled the genial, stimulating

atmosphere of his college with peculiar clarity. He knew he would miss it. Obviously, it was no good just messing about with the stage. His training must be organised properly, with a couple of years, say, in provincial repertory.

David was down early. He was one of those people who find it difficult to sleep in the country because it is so noisy; and the bells for early service were the last straw. He found Margaret alone in the dining-room.

'Good morning,' she said. 'I am the secretary. Shall I give you some coffee, or will you help yourself?'

David held the cup, and let her do the pouring. He seldom left a job to one person where two could do it as well. The curious air of intimacy which haunted his most trifling social doings was evident even first thing in the morning. He felt it himself; and looked forward to a *tete-a-tete* with someone whose situation intrigued him. He did not know what to make of a business girl who allowed a prospective baronet to slip through her fingers. Margaret felt him watching her, and as he dawdled over three lumps of sugar she neatly placed his bacon and eggs at some distance from herself.

'I'm afraid,' she said, sitting down, 'the Sunday papers don't come till midday. But there are masses of books and magazines about, if you like reading at breakfast.'

'Or perhaps we might talk?'

'Oh, of course.' Margaret put her book down. 'Did you enjoy the drive from London? The first hour I always think is torture, but after that there's some lovely country.'

'I'm only a very moderate Nature-lover. But I see you have a genuine taste for it. How fortunate that you are able to work in such very congenial surroundings.'

'Oh, yes, I love it. But I'm leaving soon. It doesn't do to stay too long in one place.'

'You shouldn't talk about yourself as if you were a housemaid,' said David reproachfully. Margaret laughed.

'The main difference is that housemaids are even more in demand than we are. Still, I'm not worried. I shall find a job quite easily.'

'Perhaps I could help?'

'Thank you. But I haven't yet decided what sort of job I want.'

'So many of my friends are crying out for secretaries, and a capable, attractive girl like you . . .' David took pains to adopt an 'objective' tone, but no woman over school-leaving age could have failed to detect the impertinence. Margaret did not like it. She decided he was a wolf of the *indefatigable* class, and strongly suspected he had picked up some gossip about her.

'Don't be silly,' she said.

Naturally, David protested he had no idea what she meant, and complained that she had taken him up quite wrongly. Margaret, who had lately learned to refrain from interesting herself in red herrings, smiled amiably and picked up her book.

'Have you read the *Daisy Chain*?' she said. 'I am finding it absolutely absorbing.'

But as she turned over the pages she was really absorbed in the glorious sensation of having put him very properly in his place.

Alicia, having heard from Maybelle that David had broken all visitors' records for early rising, sent an urgent message to Bernard.

'She wants you to look after him and keep him amused. She says you have a lot in common, and mentioned particularly an interest in something or other, could have been morbid psychology, if that's anything.'

Bernard was feeling very spry, and hurried his dressing. But David was a disappointment. He was alone, apparently intent on *Country Life*. Bernard could get nothing out of him, although he tried to meet him halfway by making

some observations on the weathcr, the crops, and the hesitant character of the rural building programme.

Bernard had nearly finished when David made his first contribution. 'Here's a twenty-five-bedroom castle near Edinburgh with turrets for five thousand pounds. Obviously the only way to buy houses is by the ton.'

Bernard was inclined to give him some marks for that; but he was not able to think of any crack to follow and possibly outshine it before David threw down the magazine and left the room.

Margaret had corrected some of her employer's grammar and was typing out the fatal letters, with a top copy for everyone. Her fingers jumped merrily about the keys, and she hummed to herself as she changed the sheets. She was sorry for poor Sir Charles in this wretched situation, but now that she was on the point of leaving she did not mind so much. 'I must be rather a cad,' she thought, copying the same stilted sentences for the fourth time. 'Well, it's probably the only way to get on in life.'

Charles came in just as she was finishing, and added four samples of his laborious, rambling signature.

'Shouldn't you read them through?'

'I know them by heart.' He could not bear to contemplate them yet again, but he lacked the resolution to put them finally out of his mind. He picked up one of the carbons, folded it several times, and put it safely away in his wallet.

Alicia trailed downstairs about eleven. She had reverted to her sling, but admitted bravely that her arm was no better. She took it out for a few minutes, and made David and Lucius waggle her fingers.

'You see, quite lifeless. Isn't it extraordinary? And I can't even feel when you touch me.'

This peculiar scene was interrupted by Sally, who begged Lucius to come and play tennis. 'Otherwise we shan't have

a four.' She had used the same argument with Margaret and Bernard, separately, aware that they were avoiding each other. Since they obviously must meet some time, Sally was in favour of getting it over quickly. She had not the arrogance to wish to interfere directly with the vagaries of the heart, but she was a great believer in the beneficent effects of normal behaviour.

If she had succeeded in applying her practical mind to the problems of a nursery school, she would have been paid for it. Otherwise, there was not much difference. The children of various ages respond alike. Bernard and Margaret were already getting tennis rackets out together quite happily. They were both surprised they did not feel more uncomfortable. In fact, their only serious discomfort was a vague feeling that they ought not to be behaving in quite such an ordinary way. This explained their slightly feverish concentration on such safe subjects as who was to use which racket.

At the last moment, Bernard did a very nice thing. He insisted that Margaret should use his new racket, which really suited her much better than any of the others. This made her feel momentarily a little shaky, but she accepted so gracefully that Bernard's mind was much relieved.

Alicia and David, on the terrace, recalled the Guide display. Alicia explained that Christine's grandfather was simply a familiar local feature whom nobody could take very seriously. 'Although if I'd been feeling stronger, I'd have laughed myself silly.'

'I was in no mood to laugh.'

'Oh, David dear, I couldn't resist pulling your leg, you looked so dignified. The perfect image of a visiting notable, marked by Providence for presenting prizes. Surely you forgive me?'

'Certainly I forgive you.' But David was actually in a spiteful mood, planning revenge. Alicia rattled off a lot of

moderately entertaining village gossip, and he worked off a number of lines that were at present on probation in his current play. But his mind was not diverted from its purpose.

The girls played the boys. Lucius was rather a rabbit, but he thoroughly enjoyed working up a good sweat. Sally and Margaret played a neat, co-operative game, and Bernard was energetic and dashing and just ungentlemanly enough to collect any really fine opportunities on his partner's side of the court. There were long stretches when he and Margaret could look at each other, and even yell at each other, without the shadow of a qualm.

'What is all this nonsense?' said David.

'Nonsense?' Alicia's fine eyes were unusually blank.

'I mean, what really has happened to your arm?'

'I wish I knew. Seriously, I'm quite as worried as anyone else. But I do feel this ridiculous Mrs. Smith will be able to do me some good if anyone can, and I'm supposed to be seeing her again to-morrow.'

'I'm not so much interested in what you're doing about it – although it seems idiotic – as in how you came by it.'

'Nobody has any idea.'

'Did you by any chance hurt it when you were beating up Sally?'

'I did nothing of the kind. What has Lucius been telling you, the treacherous fellow?'

'Not much. But he talks about you a good deal, and has probably told me several things he doesn't know himself.'

'Sally exasperated me beyond endurance, and I gave her a light slap. But don't let's discuss it, David. I've been punished enough already. It was because I felt my children were getting out of hand that I refused your very tempting offer.'

'Were you quite happy about accepting it?'

'Of course. Until I realised, as I told you, that my children . . . '

'Yes, yes. That's curious, isn't it? That a woman who has been resting for nearly ten years should feel quite so self-confident about taking that plunge. You must be exceptionally brave, Alicia. I can imagine a lesser character worrying a little, feeling rusty, recalling any chance failures they suffered in the past, conscious perhaps of physical changes. . .

'David, you're a devil. What are you trying to do?'

'My dear Alicia. You don't mind addressing the Guides. I do. If you make a monkey out of me, I'm surely entitled to show you the monkey you're making of yourself.'

'I honestly don't know what it's all about. Nothing you say has any connection with anything else.'

'Far be it from me to present my hunches as a logical argument. Let me go on thinking aloud. Poor, silly Lucius, informed that you were making this great sacrifice, as you call it, for your children, very rashly let you know that he didn't believe a word of it. That was most unfortunate. If he had only let you alone, you might have worked out for yourself some method of modifying the sacrifices without eclipsing the effect of making them. You see, I know something about the way you think, because I am a bad character myself, and I am quite enjoying making you cry. It will teach you not to pull my leg.'

David was a bad character, small-minded and vindictive. But he was not so sensationally bad as he thought. He was the only person who had realised that Alicia's condition was extremely serious, and he was pursuing, in a cruel way, the plan of getting her to his own psychiatrist. As it happened, his evil temper overlapped with his humane intention, for it is well known that the quickest way to get people to Harley Street is not persuasion, but panic. From this point of view, the perverse pleasure he took in inducing panic is irrelevant.

She was crying so much that he decided to give her a push in the other direction.

'Of course, I would far rather have you than Roxane, and it might still be possible.'

Lucius was far too exhausted to play a second set. He sank down on the bench. The others went searching for the sixth ball, which had evidently found one of the many holes in the netting.

Margaret and Bernard, beating about the shrubbery, came face to face.

'Your game has improved enormously,' said Margaret.

'Ah,' he replied, daintily extracting his right trouser leg from the clutches of *Berberis Darwinii*. 'I am capable of improvement.'

Margaret found she was not in the least annoyed by affectations which would have driven her wild so long as she felt responsible for him. Now they seemed a playful and innocent habit which was not likely to last.

'You're a nice boy, Bernard. I hope you get on all right.'

'I'll try.'

'May I just say one thing?'

'Is it painful?'

Margaret wondered if she should check herself. Whenever she had tried to give him advice in the past, they had both suffered, and the advice had never been taken.

But in those days, which now seemed such a long time ago, they had been so close. Nothing was quite disinterested. For one horrid moment, Margaret saw herself ludicrously battling with Alicia for Bernard's soul. Could that happen again? She rather thought not. It seemed that Bernard was slipping into the same category as her other friends, for whom she was accustomed to feel a lively, affectionate, unworried interest. Her hope far him was that he would one day be able to call his soul his own.

She could speak from a safe distance. 'I don't think

you'll be wounded. That isn't the idea, anyhow. But I thought it might help – oh, dear, that's such a silly way of putting it, I can't really help you at all. I don't know anything about the stage, and I haven't the faintest idea whether or not you'd do well there. Probably you'd be absolutely brilliant. But . . .'

He was stirring the leaves with his foot, smiling faintly. Clearly she had not wounded him, yet.

'The point is, Bernard, I only want to give you some information. I know I can't judge.'

'Let's have it,' said Bernard. 'I won't bite.'

'I just wanted to remind you how terribly difficult it is following in your parents' footsteps. It doesn't seem to make much difference whether you are brilliant or not. When I was in business, there were several young men — sons and nephews — who were supposed to be working their way up from the bottom, and most of them had a lost sort of air for years. I always thought it was because they got a quite different training from anyone else, and were judged by quite different standards. People were always saying they weren't a patch on the old man, and if ever they did something quite bright they were supposed to be empire-building. And the old man couldn't stop fussing about them, you would have thought the world was coming to an end if one of them put a foot wrong.'

'If I was in repertory in Wolverhampton, I don't suppose Mother would bother much about me.'

'Wouldn't she?'

'Well, she might. I can, as a matter of fact, see her hauling me away to walk on in the West End when I ought to be having a shot at Mercutio, and Algernon. Moncrieff, and the husband in East Lynne. Still, I could resist her. And then, I suppose, she'd come to Wolverhampton every week to criticise my performance and generally see how I was getting on. I can see it may be rather difficult.'

Sally sat down alongside Lucius. She had found the lost ball and put it in the box with the others.

'Margaret and Bernard have made it up,' she said.

'Had they quarrelled? I didn't know.'

'It was just a scene. We seem to have them so often. I can't believe it's the same in all families. The people I was with this summer were quite different. I liked it very much. I'm ordinary. And although Bernard isn't ordinary, this sort of life doesn't really suit him.'

'I noticed he was looking peeked.'

'Oh, did you? Yes, he's not strong, and he's in a muddle about his future. Do you think you could talk to him, and clear up some of his ideas?'

'I've been meaning to.'

'Poor Bernard. People never get around to him. Do try.'

'It's a promise.' Lucius glanced at Sally as she frowned into the sun. He thought she was looking, if anything, more worn and battered than Bernard.

'And what about your future? Tell me about yourself.'

'Me? There isn't anything to tell.'

Charles went out on the terrace. He did not wish to appear to be avoiding his guests. He thought David a most undesirable type, and had no hope that he would improve, as Lucius did, on acquaintance. Consequently, according to the code Charles had inherited, it was particularly important to treat him with cordiality.

But his intentions were frustrated because he noticed immediately that Alicia was looking definitely off-colour.

'You've been tiring yourself,' he said anxiously.

'It must be my fault,' said David. 'I've been talking too much.'

'But I love hearing you talk,' protested Alicia. 'What a virtuoso, I say to myself.'

She was keeping her end up very well; but Charles did not understand the problem. He stared at her shamelessly,

obviously extremely worried, and finally asked her outright what had upset her.

'Really, Charles, how you keep on. Well, I am upset, but I hadn't the heart to bore poor David with domestic skeletons. The fact is, Maybelle's leaving. And that, David, is a real tragedy. Has she said anything to you, Charles?'

'No. I haven't seen her.'

Alicia kept the conversation going. 'What have you been doing all the morning?'

Charles sighed, and felt in his breast pocket. 'You'll have to see it some time.'

Very slowly he unfolded his letter, and handed it to her. She read with gathering indignation. The tennis players, approaching up the steps, had the impression that they had seen the lightning and were waiting for the thunder.

Suddenly, she took the sheet in both hands, and with several quick, furious wrenches, tore it in pieces.

'There!' she said.

When she looked up, the expressions she saw round her were not what she had expected. Charles did not reproach her. He was in a transport of delight.

'Why,' said Alicia, looking at her hand in surprise, 'that witch-doctor has brought it off.'

CHAPTER IX

ALICIA'S miracle was a subject of conversation among those who had witnessed it, and others, for many weeks. Opinions about it were very much divided. Some said she had been malingering all the time, but David and Lucius testified that her hand had certainly been out of action, and swore that a paralysed limb is quite different from one that has simply been allowed to go limp. Mrs. Eleanora Smith, who shared this view, recorded a notable success. Bob's wife was very sceptical. David, who developed an odd feeling of responsibility, held that the so-called miracle had happened, but that it could be explained scientifically. Privately, he thought it only a partial success, because all that had been cured was a symptom; but he kept his mouth shut. Sally and Charles were far too delighted to take a very critical interest; and Bernard, who might have been disposed to do so, was very much engrossed in his own affairs.

The scientific explanation, which David believed in simply as an article of faith, is not available. There are certain causes which could conceivably have produced this particular effect, but there are rather too many of them. Ideally, where the situation is so bristling with variables, the experiment should be run through again, excluding each in turn, but that is not practicable. So the best that can be done is to sum up exactly what happened.

Initially, Alicia's affliction was a very great convenience. It ensured her against the risks of a professional come-back; and it was a valid response to the accusation of play-acting in private life. In a sense, she had been serious in embracing the idea of sacrificing herself for her children; but it was quite another matter to put the idea into practice. The

sceptical note from Lucius could reasonably have been answered by some indication that she was actually doing something about them; but Alicia shrank from going even as far as that. She did not want to know whether she was serious or not. The note was an act of treachery because its contents were already known to her. She had them buried somewhere in the unopened rag-bag section of her mind.

These rag-bags we all drag around, as we go to and fro to work in pin-stripes, or a bib-and-brace, or an office frock, certainly stink to heaven; and a brief glance inside often reveals a number of discreditable objects. But it is a mistake to identify the objects too quickly; many of them are not quite what they seem. The mask of sacrifice, for instance, which Alicia, certainly, put on as a face-saving device, was a rather more ambiguous object than Lucius thought. Bernard had given her a bad fright, he had run away from her. Sally, in a more orderly style, had previously done the same. She thought she was losing them; and she could not tolerate the thought of losing anything. She was determined to win her children back. Therefore, her remarks on sacrifice, although they did not carry the literal meaning of the words, did carry some meaning. They expressed an intention outside the immediate strategy of rehabilitating herself.

She was playing, of course, to two audiences: to the material figures of her entourage, and to the conglomeration of impulses, habits and ideas and memories which pursued their wayward existence inside her own skin. In general, the ‘outside’ audience was the more perceptive, but on one major point it was completely led astray.

Alicia did feel guilty. Although she had always rather liked the thought of physical violence, and in earlier days would readily have thrown saucepans at Charles if he had given her any occasion, she had never before hit either of her children. When she saw what she had done, she was violently shocked, not so much on Sally’s account, for her

imagination was limited, but because of the savage pleasure and release she felt in herself.

She felt guilty; and she felt she ought to be punished. So she began by depriving herself of the opportunity she both dreaded and desired. It was a half-hearted attempt, and unsuccessful. Lucius refused to ratify her punishment; and she was not altogether certain that she wanted to ratify it herself. She was left a convicted criminal, but unsentenced.

At this point she gave up the struggle. She lay in bed with all her purposes unachieved. Eight hours later, she was stricken by a partial paralysis.

What happened in the interval is a matter for conjecture. Apparently she was at the end of her resources, and she even slept heavily for part of the time. All the same, waking or sleeping, something must have been going on, and it seems simplest to assume some authority within herself which was more secret, more powerful, more persevering, and more crudely logical than any of the opportunist impulses that went under the name Alicia. Judged by results, this force or conjunction of forces did not serve her interest in any ordinary sense; it ran counter to her usual practice of getting all she could out of as much as possible by a series of skirmishing bargains with ways of retreat permanently open. But on this occasion, signs of calculation (as to cost) were absent. The relief of an internal tension was the first and only necessity; as happens also to people who are sick in taxis.

It is better, of course, to be sick in a taxi than at a dinner party. Alicia, too, was lucky that her symptom was not more painful to herself. The same purpose could have been served by migraine, gastro-enteritis, trigeminal neuralgia, or death. The fact that she got off comparatively lightly with an affliction of the limb that had been used on Sally, is probably just another example of the primitive music-hall wit which is such a strange feature of the unconscious mind.

Alicia was also very fortunate in her cure. David was quite right in thinking that her case was a specialist job. Many similar cases have been relieved by psychiatric treatment, but it often takes some time. Alicia was able to avoid the analysts, the hypnotists, the electric-shock merchants, the inducers of insulin coma, and the injectors of sodium amytal. She was worked up on, successfully, by the chance operations of life. One of her children proved more docile than she had any reason to expect; the other more abject. Her premature stage-fright was alleviated partly by time, and partly by the news that Roxane was supplanting her. This roused a vigorous spirit of competition. She hated the idea of Roxane playing 'her' part, and now that the part had been offered to so incapable an actress she could no longer doubt her own ability to play it. Then, since we are dealing with mental processes where incompatibility of ideas is of no particular consequence, it may be supposed that the mere appearance of Lucius and David together – a strengthened team – gave her the impression that she was much valued and wanted.

Perhaps it is frivolous to suggest that Maybelle's threat of leaving exerted some additional pressure. In any case, that is not important. The more notable facts are that David called her bluff; Mrs. Eleanora Smith provided an adequate excuse for a cure; and Charles' letter supplied an occasion which enabled her to take herself by surprise.

'Alicia is so touchingly naïve,' said David. 'How typical that she should tear up the carbon. The pure dramatic gesture, with no consequence whatever. I wonder sometimes about well-made plays, where nothing is ever allowed to drop into outer space. That may be what makes them so fiat. Every thread is picked up, as in petit-point. In the middle of the third act, when the wife wishes to inform her lover that she is not after all pregnant, the husband is rung up by the police and told that his mistress, who

understandably threatened suicide in the second act, is actually doing it in the flat above. So he has every reason for walking off. That is the contemporary code, which I practice in order to earn a tolerable living. But I have a nostalgia for more spacious and arbitrary methods. “Exit, pursued by a hear,” seems to me the ideal way of clearing out all the characters with no further duties to perform.’

‘I came up here,’ said Lucius plaintively, ‘to get a number of important points settled.’ They were in the Highgate flat, and Lucius had had a particularly tedious journey because of the fog. The brilliant autumn had lasted out through October, but November was doing its worst.

‘It was you who started talking about Alicia,’ said David. Lucius shrugged his shoulders. He still had a teasing memory of the day when they had finally ‘got’ Alicia. He and David had been going over again several of the points which are set out more systematically in the previous section. They had wasted about an hour and a half in reminiscence and conjectures; and although the two-page summary, with no dialogue to break up the paragraphs, is possibly rather a bore, a recording of their conversation would have been a lot worse. Lucius was ashamed of having let it go on so long.

‘I’m afraid you won’t like this,’ he said, picking up a prompt copy. ‘But while Sam is looking for the letter in the waste-paper basket, we must give Polly something more. All she says is “Stop it.”

‘Well, that’s natural. I’m a realist.’

‘Yes, but my dear David, she doesn’t stop him; he finds the letter; and unless he jumps for it as if he were making a catch at mid-on, she’s left with her hands dangling while he goes on searching.’

‘She could bite her nails,’ said David. He normally wrote with a keen sense of the exigencies of the stage, and if ever there was some acting point he had overlooked, he viewed it as a personal affront.

‘Or?’ said Lucius. He was very patient.

‘ “I consider your actions have disgraced the husbands and fathers of the far-flung British Empire.” That must run for about fifteen seconds. He could have all the rubbish out on the floor in that time. Or better: “I consider your actions have disgraced you as the husband and father, etc., which you purport to be.” I have never used the word “purport” before, and I rather like it. I shall be the first person to use it since 1850.’

‘Perhaps you could think about it,’ said Lucius mildly. Having drawn off David’s summer lightning, he was confident that some sensible suggestion would be forthcoming.

Alicia was rehearsing. This does not only mean that at 10.30 on a certain Wednesday morning she was in rehearsal: it means that she was in an entirely new phase of her life. When she said, to a forgotten cousin that she met by chance in the glove department of Debenhams, ‘I am rehearsing,’ she meant that she was thinking and dreaming all day and all night about the play; that she hardly saw anyone; that she went to bed early; that she was enslaved to a strict routine of massage, face packs, chiropody, and Turkish baths; and that she was supremely happy.

Alicia, like Bernard, could be a fanatically hard worker; and hard work suited her and made her much easier to deal with. She remained, of course, coquettish, aggressive, impatient, inconsiderate, and generally maddening. But however often she wailed and screamed and went off in a huff and popped back with a new bag of tricks, there was never any doubt about one point. She intended to see the play through. Consequently, she was never careless or inattentive. She could argue Lucius to a vertigo, but she always remembered what he had said, and followed his direction more scrupulously than she knew.

Alicia and Maybelle were settled in a service flat. Bernard had gone back to Oxford. Sally was at home, looking after

her father; and Margaret, encouraged by the absence of Alicia and Bernard, had stayed on with them to see the business through. Alicia left them to it. In the glorious rush of moving to London, she casually told Charles he must do as he thought best.

She wrote to Sally occasionally, but mainly to ask for things she had left behind; and she had started a letter to Bernard in which she thanked him for his tactful delay in pressing her for a decision. 'We must see about it all later,' she said. The unfinished letter lay about for some days, and finally Maybelle posted it unsigned. Bernard, who was interesting himself in historical documents, decided this one would not carry much weight.

It was not surprising that Alicia forgot the people she did not see; what was unexpected was her remote attitude to the people on the spot. She concerned herself very little with their affairs, and did not exert herself to any major acts of interference. She knew that Polly had strong feelings for her, veering between envy and adoration, but she did not trouble to play on them and she hardly cared which way the wind was blowing. She had not noticed at all that Lucius was uncomfortably fascinated by Sam; or that Sam himself had an eye for the scrubby young lads who hung about the local street corners. She did know that David had got his decree nisi, because David had told her. But she was not in the least interested; she was working too hard, working laboriously through a series of minute details.

'No, I can't, Lucius; really I can't. It's impossible.'

'Try.'

'What was wrong with the way I said it before?'

'Nothing. But I felt I would know what was coming.'

'Well, if David will write it that way, I'm not to blame. Good heavens, nobody's going to be surprised when I change my mind.'

'You might be surprised.'

'But I can't *pause*. It's ridiculous.'

'No; that isn't what I meant. Why not try. . . '

A faint stiffening of her whole frame, a movement of the eyes, a modulation of the voice comparable to a change of mode rather than a change of key – by those means, Alicia could achieve her most compelling moments.

'How does it feel?' said Lucius.

'Not quite so bad as I thought. Oh, I suppose it will do.'

Sally was busy too. With Maybelle away, she found she had a great deal to do in the house. In the background, as always, an old woman and a young girl did most of the basic work, but neither of them did any of the thinking.

Sally had not realised before that under Maybelle's dispensation (since her loyalty was to Alicia) no one had really looked after Charles. For instance, he had drunk coffee for breakfast for twenty years, although he preferred tea. This was changed. Sally also observed that he put his bolster out on the floor every night, and that the maids put it back every morning. So Sally took away the bolster.

There were small details, but, with a number of others such as the reintroduction of boiled puddings, they made Charles feel very much more homely. He was only distressed because Sally took so much upon herself. She had discovered a drawer full of shirts with split collars and ragged cuffs, and seemed to spend hours devising new collars and cuffs out of the shirt tails.

Occasionally, she dropped everything and went for a long bicycle ride with Joan. This was nothing new, but whereas in the old days they had seemed an ill-assorted pair, they were now beginning to look rather alike. They both wore very similar mackintoshes, berets, brogues and old tweed skirts, and they had rather the same expression, not quite anxious or discontented, but vaguely unhopeful. Joan sometimes moaned about their miserable condition, miles from anywhere, and with nothing ever happening, but Sally did not encourage her.

‘It’s rather nice having a cosy time with Father. We haven’t had a chance before. We always used to have far too many visitors. By the way, ought I to start making the Christmas puddings? Has your mother done hers yet, and can she lend me a recipe?’

‘I can’t imagine what they’re doing down there,’ said Alicia. She was in the lady’s cloakroom at the Ivy, unnecessarily improving her face. Her companion, who did not doubt that her face could get along on its own for a short period, simply ran a comb through her hair. She was a painter, and was involved in the play because she was doing the sets.

‘You are lucky, Claudia, to be able to wear your hair so short.’

‘It’s convenient,’ said Claudia briefly. Both of them were behaving as if they wanted to emphasise the difference between them, like any two handsome and talented women who do not know each other very well, and are slightly on guard.

Lucius, in conference with the head waiter, was diligently composing a beguiling meal. He knew both his guests would appreciate it and hoped they would appreciate each other. It was a pleasure to look at them as they walked downstairs together, Alicia so blonde and expansive and gracious, and Claudia so dark, tense and vivid; both of them carrying, obviously, an explosive charge.

‘If one’s working,’ said Claudia, ‘one has to make incredible efforts to see one’s husband at all. But I’ve come to the conclusion that it is worth it’

‘I expect you manage these things better than I do. Oh, isn’t Lucius sweet. He’s arranged everything so that we don’t have to think.’

Christmas was only a brief interruption in Alicia’s real life. She was glad when it was over, for she thought the

country looked particularly woebegone, and her husband and daughter also had a wintry air. Alicia, single-handed because Bernard was away in Aberdeenshire, set herself to cheer them up; and was so pleased with her success that she insisted on taking them both back to London with her.

In London, Sally found that on some days she was rushed off her feet with small jobs for her mother; and on others entirely at a loose end. She visited one or two museums and journeyed to some of the places that are shown on the fronts of buses, such as Homerton, Wormwood Scrubs and Wanstead Flats. Charles haunted the bird-room in the British Museum (Natural History) at South Kensington, and attended a couple of meetings of scientific societies to which he belonged.

It was at one of these meetings that he met an old friend – a marine biologist – who had become a professor at Cambridge. Charles took him to lunch at the Athenæum and in that melancholy yet congenial setting they exchanged news with a couple of bishops discussing cricket on one side of them, and on the other a clutch of wan civil servants who were commenting bleakly on the inopportune snowfall of documents that always occurred in Whitehall at noon on Saturdays.

Sir Charles mentioned regretfully the changes that were being made on his estate; the professor envied his good fortune in being able to go on living there. He himself led a constricted life in the middle of Cambridge, in a small house that was overrun with daughters and students. For the present, also, it was cluttered with cases of tinned food, concentrated vitamins, and medical supplies, for he was supervising the organisation of a scientific expedition to Peru.

They discussed with ardour the manifold problems of mounting an expedition. Charles had once tried, in his student days, to arrange something of the same sort, and it gave him a peculiar thrill to consider the relative merits

of different types of tent and to check the calculations which expressed the cases of stores in terms of a balanced diet.

The professor was pleased by his interest; impressed by his practical grasp of a problem which was much akin to the problem of feeding cattle through the winter; and touched by his wistful reference to Peruvian birds. He remembered that young Charles Maynecompton had got quite a creditable degree in natural science and had always been extremely reliable and easy to get on with.

'It seems a pity we aren't going ourselves,' he said casually. It was a remark he had been making for some years, with decreasing conviction, and he did not notice its effect on his host. Charles started. His weather-beaten skin flushed. The dream of his youth, reawakened by a chance meeting, had not lost its magical vigour. In imagination, he had already sent himself out to Lima and crossed the water-shed of the Andes to the Amazon basin. His hand shook a little as he lifted his coffee cup.

'There's a great deal of work to be done still,' the professor went on calmly, 'in these marginal areas between the typical mountain country and the tropical forest. We expect considerable results, and of course a useful range of specimens. . . .'

Charles listened entranced. For one glorious hour he quite forgot that Alicia's first night was almost on him.

'It's perfectly awful,' said Sally. She was standing, all dressed up, in the middle of the room, trembling. Alicia had left long ago for the theatre, in a state of ostentatious, ice-cold calm, and Sally had taken upon herself the crisis of nerves which, it seemed, somebody ought to have. Her father, suffering also, but less articulately, poured out two glasses of sherry. They drank to Alicia.

David and Roxane, at the Connaught, were drinking outsize martinis. Bernard and his tutor were recuperating,

after a tiresome journey, on oysters and stout. Claudia had just called to her husband to remind him that they must start in five minutes, and had rung up her guest to implore him not to be late. Joan, on the way in from Wimbledon, where she was staying with cousins, was looking in her bag to make sure the complimentary ticket was still there. Eric, who had also appeared on Alicia's haphazard list, was waiting in the cold for Bob outside Swan and Edgar's. Alicia had sent him two tickets, in case he had a wife, but the wife, as it happened, had a young baby, so Bob was taking her place.

All these people were on an outer ring of the vortex of excitement. Alicia, at the very centre, in a charmed circle of hasty footsteps, urgent voices, hands patting a costume or lifting a curl, was still very calm. She was not indifferent to the feverish atmosphere around her, but it affected her in a strange way, giving her strength as if it fed a hunger.

Lucius was much impressed. He was conscious of many deficiencies in the production and knew beforehand all the moments where he had not been able to achieve exactly what he wanted and could expect a crisis of anxiety. Alicia, who had worked quite as hard over innumerable details, no longer felt them as a weight on her mind. Like somebody happily in love, she was absorbed in a single, comprehensive faith – that the play was perfect.

Any description of the play itself (which had good notices and ran for a respectable five and a half months) would be out of place in a story about private lives. What is relevant can be gathered from the people who sat watching it, remembering or forgetting their private lives under the influence of the occasion, and viewing the world of illusion, packed in a three-sided box, with the particular focus of a unique disposition.

Lucius, waiting for the curtain to go up, spared a thought

for that distinct collective being, the audience. Would it be kind, receptive, willing? There was no knowing. It would not even come into existence for at least – Lucius looked at his watch – six minutes. He went on assuring Polly that she was not going to repeat the mistakes she had made in the dress rehearsal.

In the auditorium, one of the critics had already composed a telling phrase, a fine example of his style, entertaining rather than informative, which he hoped would apply. He repeated the words to himself, with a straining effort of memory, for he did not care to be seen, at this stage, writing them down. Roxane waved and smiled at her friends from the front of the stage box without interrupting what she was saying to David. She was in high spirits, for the Hollywood agreement was through; and she was not to know yet that she was entering the most frustrating period of her whole life, or that her film, so appealing in the form of a brief treatment, would never be shown. In the stalls, Sally and Charles were silent, oppressed by, the same thought: 'This means so much to her'; and Bernard and his tutor were comparing the cost of production on the classic Athenian stage with costs here and now. Their estimates for the second period were entirely guesswork; but the correct information was available (had they known it) in the box above David's. There, a certain manufacturer of machine tools, a great lover of music and an agreeable performer on the oboe, was suffering an attack of depression, convinced that the money would have been better spent on an orchestra.

In the dress circle Claudia greeted her guest, who had just made it with one minute to spare. 'I had to telephone,' he said. 'It's on its way.' Claudia laughed. This brisk reference to their joint grandchild, already overdue, was so like Gilbert. She turned to her husband to pass on the report. Gilbert, looking briskly round for acquaintances, was also wondering how soon his wife would get back to him, and whether the

General Election would come in November or February. As always, he had a lot on his mind.

The house lights were down. Joan stumbled to her seat at the back of the dress circle. Roxane, in a generous mood, laid an encouraging finger on David's wrist; the musical manufacturer shrank into his chair as if he were cringing from a blow; Gilbert, a lawyer by profession, willed away his straying thoughts; Bernard handed the programme to his tutor, now that he had no more use for it; and Sally, literally, held her thumbs.

As the curtain went up, Claudia heard something like a sigh pass over the audience. The collective being was ready to wake. She glanced at her husband, who smiled. Yes: he was pleased with the set too. That must prove that she had kept a nice balance between naturalism and fantasy. A little late, she began listening to the actors.

In the upper circle, the red-haired programme girl decided it was a good house. She hoped she would get time to see a bit of the play; but her friend in the far aisle (a stop-gap and inexperienced) was making a hash of some latecomers. Freda went swiftly and silently round the back to try to sort it out. Then she took Elsie outside and gave her a whispered lecture:

'You ought to have put them in the empty seats without arguing about the numbers.'

'You told me to be so careful.'

'Well, I wanted to make sure you'd read the numbers. But couldn't you see that some numbers had got in twice. You have to use your head in this job.'

When they went back, Alicia was on. The audience was tense and silent. No one coughed, no one shuffled or rustled a paper. Freda settled down to enjoy herself. She had known all along that Elsie would do something silly, but she wasn't going to let it get her down.

Joan enjoyed herself enormously, with an eager, uncritical taste very like Freda's. She felt quite stupefied when the lights went up, and did not at first notice that she was sitting right beside Eric and Bob. She had been thinking about Bob a great deal during the past weeks, and a natural feeling of embarrassment, when he stumbled over her feet, was further confused by a sense of disappointment because he was less handsome, less tall and less easy in his manners than she remembered. He had not thought about her; but he was pleased to see her, and he and Eric between them persuaded her to come out for a drink.

The bar was densely crowded. The critic, who had arrived first and got his drink easily, was exchanging cautious remarks with his opposite numbers on other Sunday papers. They all wanted to check their impressions without disclosing exactly what they were thinking of saying. Gilbert was praising Alicia's acting to Claudia; and the patron, rather happier in his mind now, was talking to Claudia's husband, discussing the performance point by point.

'I am enjoying it,' said Joan.

'Yes; it is jolly good, isn't it?' said Bob.

They found each other very easy to talk to, and waited quite happily for Eric to struggle through the crowd with three glasses of lager. Bernard passed them, and bowed gravely.

'Who's that?' said Bob.

'Bernard Maynecompton. I don't really know him very well.'

'He looks very conceited.'

'Oh, well, it's a terrible thing to say, but the Maynecomptons are rather conceited. Except Sally.'

'Is she here?'

'She must be; but I haven't seen her.' Joan made as if to look around, but it was not a very serious effort. She was not, as she had rather expected, feeling lost.

Sally, in fact, had not left her seat. She was talking to

her father about South America. Neither of them had anything much to say about the play, except that it certainly seemed to be going all right.

Joan did not really pay so much attention to the second act, but she enjoyed herself even more. Eric and Bob had put her between them, and that in itself was a great cause for pride and satisfaction. Eric was, she had to admit, the better-looking, but Bob was nicer; and after all, it doesn't really matter about men being ugly. Most of them are. Look at Sir Charles. And the ones like Bernard or Lucius, who wear pretty bow ties, and don't allow their hair to get rumpled, are usually alarming and undependable.

It is sad for women, thought Joan, that it is their duty to be beautiful. The terrible despair of those who believe no one can reasonably be expected to love them touched her, and then withdrew. For Bob and Eric had treated her as *if* she was in the enviable class of attractive women; and a surprise glimpse in the mirror of the bar had confirmed that she did not look so bad.

Alicia's extraordinary and striking beauty, as she smiled and lifted an expressive hand, seemed very remote. Joan was more concerned with her left arm-rest, where Bob's elbow was taking up an inordinate amount of room.

Bernard watched the same movement with a different kind of detachment. He was captivated by Alicia's art, and could take delight in it, because he was at last working himself free from a puerile sensibility. This exquisite being was, certainly, a mother who had treated him vilely; but what of it? He surprised in himself a certain fellow-feeling for her egotism, if it was for this. He forgot she was his mother, and sank himself into the play.

Sally was in a very different state of mind. Oh, it was a good performance, it was brilliant, one did not need to worry at all about this distinguished actress. But Sally, relieved of the anxiety that had haunted her for weeks,

felt a grim emptiness in her heart. She felt it had been perfectly silly of her to fuss so much about her mother – this strange creature whom she would never in a hundred thousand years be able to understand.

There was a party afterwards, of course – a slightly hysterical party because it all seemed to have gone off so well. Roxane kissed Alicia on both cheeks, amid a trail of endearments: 'Darling, you were wonderful.' 'Was I really all right, darling?' 'Oh, perfect.' Lucius kissed Alicia's hand. Alicia hugged David and Claudia (who was not much of a kisser) and Bernard and Polly and Sam and her own husband and the patron and Bernard's tutor, who seemed to come up for it at the right moment, but was actually quite unprepared.

Bernard was faintly embarrassed; and rather clownishly embraced Roxane, to take away the taste. He settled down beside her at supper, and they embarked on a gay, intoxicated flirtation which amused them both. Alicia, between David and Lucius, kept them both very nicely in play. Although she had been seeing them constantly, she had an odd sense that she had been neglecting them; and was disposed to make up for it.

The patron was slightly bored. Now that one could expect the play to be a reasonably good investment, he wanted to think about something else. Claudia told him that her husband, on the far side of the table, was devoted to music, and also ran an engineering firm; but she did not seem particularly interested in either subject herself. He politely asked her what modern painters were worth buying; but he did not listen to the answer very attentively, for he had not yet got around to collecting pictures.

Joan was having quite an extraordinary evening. First of all, Bob had insisted on taking her dancing, and then, since it seemed improbable that any train to Wimbledon would still be running, had actually persuaded a taxi-driver to

take her home. On top of that, he had got into the taxi himself; as if it were a perfectly natural thing to drive out to Wimbledon and back in the middle of the night. Their conversation opened in a somewhat pedestrian style.

'It seems months since I was in your part of the world,'

'I think it's nine weeks,' said Joan.

They had enjoyed themselves very much, and any words would have done to keep them feeling happy. But they were both additionally charmed to learn, in the form of a very simple cipher, that they were much liked.

'It has been a lovely evening,' said Joan. 'I've never been to that sort of place before.'

'We must try and do it again.'

'That would be nice,' said Joan. She tried not to sound too pleased, but she did not succeed. That was lucky really, because Bob was particularly touched by her readiness to be charmed by his arrangements. He did not care for sceptical, bossy girls like Eric's wife; and he thought it a damn shame that anyone as lively and enthusiastic as Joan should be buried alive in the country. She was a very sweet kid, and he liked the way her hair tickled his chin when they were dancing.

Joan suddenly felt terribly nervous. 'Where are we?' she said, leaning forward and pushing her nose against the window. Bob. instead of looking out of his window, leant across behind her, and stared conscientiously at the same view.

'Just crossing Battersea Bridge,' he said.

Joan did not know what on earth to do. She was within an ace of slipping on to the floor, but she felt she literally could not move. Perhaps Bob was really interested in Battersea Bridge, and would be quite horrified if she heaved herself back more or less into his arms.

She felt him withdrawing, but a hand, or something, lingered somewhere between her shoulder and her waist.

'Well?' said Bob.

'I don't know,' said Joan. 'I don't know at all.'

'I suppose I shall have to tell you,' said Bob. He put his arm right round her and kissed her hard. As soon as she could get her breath, Joan gasped with astonishment. Of course, she had really suspected he was going to kiss her, but she had no idea of the peculiar sensations she herself would feel *all over*. He stared at her, and she smiled. So that is what happens, she thought. Then he kissed her again and she stopped thinking. She did not think at all from Clapham Junction to Wimbledon Park.

CHAPTER X

'READ it out to me, Sally,' cried Alicia. She was lying in bed surrounded by the morning papers, and Sally was helping her look through them.

'It's not quite so nice as the rest, Mother.'

'Oh, well, it's only one out of many. Let me look then. Good heavens! How very stupid. This man must have gone on somewhere else after the first act. Anyhow, he always slates everything. That's his line.' The telephone rang. Alicia went straight on talking into the receiver. 'Yes, I'm pleased, Lucius my dear. Aren't you? This is my favourite.' She read him a long extract. 'Oh, yes, of course you've seen it, but he really has quite a style; it reads aloud well. Yes, I'm seeing you at lunch. *A bientôt*. Sally, don't forget to write the name of the paper on all the cuttings. Why did Charles go away? He's only seen half. . . .' The telephone rang. 'David, I must congratulate you. Oh, yes, thank you, that's a sweet thing to say, but of course you gave me all the opportunities. Oh, yes, of course I shall be seeing you soon, very soon. We must celebrate. Give my dear love to Roxane. Tell her she was looking divinely lovely. Yes, of course I noticed. She's done something to her hair and it gave me quite an idea. Oh, here you are at last, Charles, you must look at that one Sally's just cutting out. Yes, I'm still here, David, but I was just talking to somebody else. You mustn't be petulant.' She laughed and put down the receiver. 'Charles, dear, are you really going back this afternoon?' The telephone rang. 'It's a call from Oxford. How very sweet of Bernard. Yes, darling, I'm just looking at all the notices, but the great thing is did *you* enjoy it? Well, that does please me, because I rank you among my

severest critics. It was such a pity you had to rush away. I thought your tutor was becoming quite human. Yes, of course I'm still in bed, but there's quite a lot of company, and Maybelle is just bringing us some coffee. Show Maybelle that one under the ash-tray, Charles. It will make her laugh. Yes, Bernard, they won't be my only copies. I'll send you the full set if you promise faithfully to send them back. No; it can't be the pips *yet*.' The instrument went dead. She looked at it reproachfully, and gave it a shake. 'He must have rung off. I suppose he forgot to transfer the call.'

But the fact was that Bernard was short of time, not money. A promising essay on the mediæval wool-trade had to be finished by three o'clock. As he crossed the High, delicately threading his way among random cyclists, he contemplated the curious and fascinating rivalry that had persisted so long between Westminster and the City of London. It was a subject which, he felt, he had treated very neatly, but he still had to look up one or two references in the Bodleian.

Charles, summoned by his bailiff at some early hour in the morning, when his line was still free, left soon after lunch; but Sally did not go with him. Alicia was determined to get her some clothes and take her to some parties; and remarked that it was nice to have some of the family about. Sally was disposed to fall in with any arrangements that were made for her; and in due course the clothes were bought and she went about in them.

'That's all it amounts to,' she told Joan, who had extended her visit to Wimbledon, and had asked Sally to coffee at Fullers'. 'I know I ought to be pleased and delighted; but I'm not. I'd far sooner be at home.'

'Why don't you come back with me? It's going to be horribly dull.'

'I wish I could. But Mother seems to want me.' She held

a corner of her lump of sugar on the surface of the coffee and watched the brown stain spreading. It seemed as good an occupation as anything else. She wished she hadn't started moaning to Joan, who was quite obviously in wonderful spirits. She had settled down to a long and fervent description of somebody called Bob.

'Who?' said Sally.

'Bob. You know him. He was at the show we did with the Guides.'

'The one with red hair?'

'Well, auburn,' said Joan.

Charles missed his daughter, but he supposed it was right for a young woman to enjoy some London gaiety. He missed Margaret, who had told him quite firmly she was not coming back after Christmas because with Alicia away there was hardly anything to do. And he missed Alicia. Sometimes he wondered if she would ever settle down in the country again; and he knew very well he could never settle in London. Besides, he had the impression that they got on very well on their own. Sally's account of their engagements was formidable, and seemed to leave very little space for him. He was not surprised. He had always known that he was a rather dull dog.

To say that he thought himself inferior is accurate but misleading. The inferiority complex is a title that has been used too often as if it referred to a standard article of which competitive egotism is the salient feature. In fact it really is a complex made up in different ways for different people. For Charles, the emphasis was less on a need to disguise or justify his limitations and more on an inclination to admire other people, and possibly rate too highly their virtues and abilities. So there was little resentment in his regret, as he tramped the dripping woods, holding off the unhappy moment when he returned to an empty house, and a long table set for one.

'I must rush,' said Joan. 'Bob's taking me to a rugger match, and I simply must buy some gloves, and the shops close middle-day. Do you think green to go with my coat? Or brown to go with anything?'

They debated the point up Regent Street, and were still uncertain as they leaned over the counter, with samples before them. Sally was frowning painfully. She did not know what was the matter with her. Green or brown, it didn't seem to matter much.

'What do you think, really?' said Joan.

Sally made a great effort. 'I don't think the green quite match.'

'They tone,' said the sales-girl. Joan, pining for confident advice, listened happily to a capable sales talk. They were well-made gloves, French, they cleaned well. . . .

Sally stopped listening. She stared about, trying to make out what was wrong with her. It was disgusting to be such a wet blanket to Joan, simply because she felt bored and discontented. It wasn't even as if anything had happened to make her miserable. Alicia was perfectly cheerful, and Lucius, their most frequent visitor, was always kind; and any girl in her senses would have settled down to enjoy herself.

But Sally felt there had been some terrible change in her own nature. It seemed that she had stopped having ideas or desires of her own. Worse than that, everything looked different. The faces of people going past were expressionless; the objects she saw around her were quite uninteresting; shapes were meaningless and colours flatter.

'Look!' said Joan, displaying with delighted pride her two green hands.

'Lovely,' murmured Sally. She wished she could feel like that about anything.

Late that night, when Charles was looking up the lesson he was due to read at matins, a long-distance call came

through. The professor asked him point-blank if he was prepared to start for Peru in ten days. The ornithologist, it appeared, had fallen over a fender and broken his ankle in three places; and was definitely out. Sir Charles was speechless with surprise and pleasure.

'Well?' The reedy voice sounded a little impatient.

'I shall have to think it over.'

'Then, look, my dear fellow, I'm meeting the leader of the expedition in London to-morrow afternoon. Couldn't you join us? We'd very much like to persuade you, and we could talk over the arrangements. . . .'

Charles hardly slept that night. Like a child on Christmas Eve, his longing for the morning kept him wide awake counting over his expectations. He saw in his mind's eye the high, dry mountain slopes and an eagle beating through the still air; and a humming-bird hovering among dense tropical foliage. The bitter-sweet thought of Alicia, who would let him go without even a momentary pang, followed him into sleep.

'Did you get home all right, Joan?'

'Oh, yes. Thank you so much for the rugger match, Bob. I never knew it was such an interesting game.'

'It's a good game. I'm glad you enjoyed it. What are you doing now?'

'I thought I might go to church. What are you doing?'

'Working. But Sister's just brought me a cup of tea.'

'With three lumps of sugar?'

'Certainly. I've got all my girl friends thoroughly well trained.'

'What's she like?'

'Not nearly as nice as you. What did you say?'

'Nothing.'

'I thought I heard you smiling. Is anyone there?'

'No.'

'Then just tell me something. Three words.'

'I couldn't. Not possibly. Not on the telephone.'

'Then when am I going to see you?'

'If you touch me, Lucius, I shall scream.'

Poor Lucius, entering the flat, was prepared with a habitual affectionate kiss; he obligingly put it back into store. But he did not sit down at once, because he noticed that one of the pictures, as so often, was hanging crooked, and he went over to adjust it.

'No, please, Lucius. Leave it alone.'

He checked again. Then came and stood by Alicia, regarding her with a sombre stare.

'You ought to have your feet up,' he said.

'In a minute, dear, when I feel like it. Don't give me a footstool just yet.'

Alicia had decided that Lucius needed discipline. Since Charles left, ten days ago, he had haunted her; and she had become very dependent on him. He advised her what to say in letters, approved her choice of clothes, and was incredibly deft about the house. If someone spilled a drink, he knew exactly where to find the right cloth for wiping it up; he could cook, and did cook when Maybelle was out; and he arranged flowers delightfully, and without seeming to suggest that Maybelle did them badly.

He had been enjoying himself very much. Like many men whose deepest attachments are to their own sex, he was by no means indifferent to women. Indeed, just as he needed men to save him from his cold-heartedness towards women, he needed women to save him from the instability of his love for men. The boys he loved were creatures in a period of violent change; and his love, like theirs, had been short-lived. He had influenced, educated them, looked after them; suffered acutely when they left him; and met them later, as responsible bread-winners, without a pang. But he regretted always that love, as he had experienced it, was so fugitive; and he cherished a perennial hope that

he might enjoy with a woman a more constant, though less vivid, affection, something that was halfway between love and friendship. This hope had not been realised, since he had found that women are liable to want too much, or to care too little; or both. For a brief period it had seemed that Alicia's needs ran with his.

He persuaded himself that he might, after all, have married her if only he had been a little more persevering; and he found the idea of marriage very beguiling. For in a fantasy that relegated to the past the crisis of physical union, he felt safe in imagining himself as a husband.

These thoughts were not expressed, hardly even recognised. But they were the background to a soothing domestic routine. They usually had lunch together; he was very conscientious about reminding her to rest in the afternoon; and often hung about while she was resting so as to stop her answering the telephone.

To begin with, she had encouraged him. His devotion was touching, his company entertaining, and his physical presence agreeable. Her main energies were otherwise engaged, and it was pleasant to find a family atmosphere laid on whenever she happened to be home. With Lucius around to amuse her and spoil her, she did not miss her husband or her son; and she could avoid spending too much time alone with her daughter, who was such a dear good girl, but rather heavy going.

It all seemed ideal, and perhaps it would have lasted if it had not been for Sundays. The weather was awful and there was no point in attempting to get out of London just for a day; so they had more time for each other. The first Sunday had been amiable, but at the prospect of a second, Alicia was suddenly overcome with nervous dread. She felt she simply could not stand his domestic airs.

'I brought you the papers,' he said, 'but there doesn't seem to be much in them.'

She reached out her hand. Lucius settled on the other

side of the fire. Alicia whisked over the pages, and glanced at him occasionally with a certain amount of disapproval. He did look as if he had been sitting there for years.

'Why don't we do something?' she said. 'We might go to the Zoo.'

'My dear, it's pouring with rain.'

She read him a bit from Nat Gubbins which made them both laugh a little; but Lucius was still thinking about the rain, and finally interrupted her.

'Did anyone ring up the landlord about the leak in the bathroom ceiling?'

Alicia put her hands to her head and glared.

'This is becoming quite impossible. You behave as if you were my husband.'

'Really, Alicia . . .' Lucius was deeply disturbed.

'Or,' said Alicia, 'like a very attentive lover.'

'But I have never . . .' He shrank into himself, appearing both smaller and older. 'I'm sorry I get on your nerves.'

'It's not your fault,' said Alicia more kindly, 'or mine. Probably it's just because Sunday in London is so dreary. It's a good thing I've got to go out to lunch. I've just remembered.'

The telephone rang in Claudia's empty house. It rang in Roxane's flat, and Roxane decided she really couldn't be bothered to get out of her bath. Finally, David took off his receiver.

'It's me. Alicia. Could we meet somewhere for lunch?'

'Darling, what a nice idea. I never see nearly enough of you, all your other friends are so terribly possessive.' He thought quickly, and caught a discreet, delectable smell of cooking. 'But couldn't you come here? I've been given a pheasant, and a heartless young woman has just this minute informed me that she's standing me up. The younger generation has no taste. I feel sure the pheasant will be happier with two seasoned gourmets like ourselves. So you

will? Wonderful. Goodbye, darling, and see you in, what, half an hour?'

He dialled another number, thoughtfully, undecided whether he had better have influenza or tonsillitis. Finally, he told the young man who was collaborating with him on a film script that one of his glands was swollen and the doctor suspected mumps. He was rather pleased with himself for having discovered an alarming complaint which could be cured overnight merely by altering the diagnosis.

'Is Mother out to lunch?'

'Apparently. And I must be going, too. I'm just looking for some books I believe I lent her.'

'There are masses of other people's books about the house. Is this yours?'

'What is it? I do wish Alicia didn't always put books back upside down. It can't be pure chance, because then some of them would be the right way up. Yes, that is mine. I'll take it.'

'Is she cross with you or something?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'Oh, dear, and she's been so much more cheerful lately. I expect it will blow over. Can't you stay and have lunch with me? There's such a lot of food, and we can put all the books back right way up afterwards.'

Lucius readily accepted. It did not seem to conflict with his plan for keeping out of Alicia's way for a day or two; and he had been intending to tidy up the books for some time.

David thought he knew why women asked themselves to lunch. He had ample time to promote a pleasing sense of anticipation, and his welcome was faintly unctuous and patronising. Alicia, however, did not notice. She was so pleased to have got neatly away from Lucius, and after all, David might just as well have been Claudia or Roxane. Mercifully, this did not occur to him, or he

would not have wasted a bottle of remarkable claret.

They both enjoyed their meal, and by concentrating on it under cover of aimless chatter evaded any possible tension in the atmosphere.

After lunch, when Alicia was curled up in the corner of the sofa with a cup of coffee, David entertained her with a lengthy and damaging account of his last wife. She was feeling warm and well-fed and comfortable, and quite ready to laugh or murmur condolences, as the occasion demanded.

'There are so few people one can really talk to,' said David. 'You and I have always understood each other.'

Alicia did not rise. The streak of cruelty in David's nature fascinated her, particularly when it was directed towards someone else; but she did not so much care for him in the role of a sufferer. As he gave her this invitation to sympathy, there even seemed to be something slightly wrong with his face.

'Oh,' she said lightly, 'I love listening. You make it run on like a novel. But it's a quarter-past three, and I really must tear myself away.'

'Don't go yet. I wanted to talk to you seriously.'

'Then I shall certainly have to stop listening.'

'Sit down. It won't take long, and it's not about myself, I only felt I ought to ask you if you know quite how much gossip there is about you and Lucius.'

'How perfectly silly! There always is gossip. But if you like you can tell your friends it's entirely an invention of their own.'

'Can I?'

'Of course. You don't mean you believed it, surely?'

'I don't know. You seem very fond of him.'

'I suppose I am,' said Alicia; 'but he irritates me.'

David had no difficulty in drawing her out at length. By five o'clock she was still there, pouring tea; at twenty-past he took the cup from her hands, sat down beside

her and remarked that it was high time they talked about themselves.

'What else have we been doing all afternoon?'

He gave her a smile that was only superficially enigmatic. Before she could do anything, he was leaning over her with a hand on either shoulder.

'Let me go,' she said, struggling.

He thought he knew that kind of struggle, and he found it exciting. Alicia saw a nightmare face bearing down on her, a face like a madman's, with twisted lips and swollen eyelids. She was terrified. She knew it was all her fault and that, if there was any way of escape, she had long ago passed the turning. She went off in a dead faint.

Charles had spent the afternoon, very happily, in a slow train. He had brought a pile of bird books with him in order to study identifications, but he relapsed, often, into dreaming. As he stared, for instance, at an elegant painting of a white-tailed tropic bird, with its dove-like body and the dramatic black bar down the wings, he imagined himself on the deck of a ship, ploughing through a warm sea. He tried to picture his companions, the young scientists with whom he was to undertake this joint enterprise, but their forms were vague. He was conscious only of a feeling of comfortable companionship.

As he drew in to Paddington, and the immediate business of the meeting took precedence of these larger visions, he became a little nervous. He feared they would think him very old, out of date in his ideas, and sadly ignorant of the statistical methods which had come, since his time, to dominate so much scientific thinking. He had intended to get everything settled before he attempted to explain it to Alicia; but, seeing that the train was on time and he had nearly an hour to spare, he changed his mind, and took a taxi to the flat.

He found Sally sitting alone in the firelight, apparently

doing nothing. When he switched on the light, her face shocked him, it looked so pale and blank. But she brightened up when he told her the purpose of his visit.

'Oh, Father, you must be pleased.'

He smiled shyly. 'It's certainly going to shake me out of the old grooves.'

Sally stared at the fire, sinking back into her own featureless world as he stopped talking. It distressed him to see her so remote; and he was ashamed of having talked so much about himself. He felt that he ought to ask her some important question. Yet he did not know what that question was. Out of diffidence and delicacy, he feared to trespass on her reserve, but, as he watched her, he realised that he could not leave her without having tried at least to get past this mask of politeness to the independent spirit behind.

'How have you been?' he said.

'All right.'

'And Alicia?'

'Busy. I thought she'd be back by now, but I never know.'

'You're not looking very well.'

'I'm all right.'

Sir Charles sighed, and looked at his watch.

'Oughtn't you to be going to your meeting?' said Sally. He got up slowly, feeling very stupid and clumsy. Despairing of words, he laid his hand lightly on Sally's head.

'Nothing like that will ever happen to me,' she said with sudden and extraordinary bitterness.

'I hoped you were enjoying yourself,' he said.

'I ought to be. It's my own fault.'

He shook his head, blaming himself for lack of insight and energy.

'What would you like to do?' he said.

'I don't know.'

'Didn't you have some plans for yourself?'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'I thought I had. But that was before. . . .' She would not finish the sentence. Yet it

seemed that she had swept time back, and they both saw the horrible scene when Alicia had struck her.

'I don't want to talk about it,' said Sally.

She could hardly have conveyed to him more clearly the fear and fury and guilt which still hung about that memory. It was an overwhelming revelation of the struggle that so visibly crippled her.

'I don't hate her,' she said obstinately. 'She's nice to me. She tries to be nice. I know she was ill. She had to be treated like an invalid. I wasn't too bad at that, was I? But ever since, everything has been quite different.'

She looked up at him, with tears in her eyes. He was conscious of a fleeting, hopeless wish that he could destroy the past, annul Alicia's cruelty and his own negligence. He ought to have known; known that Alicia was not capable of repairing the damage she had done; and known that Sally, like himself, was ready to make almost any sacrifice for the sake of loyalty.

The Peruvian journey had become an impossible dream. It was for Sally that he must find a way to freedom, since the power to do it for herself had been snatched away. For the first time in his life, he thought of Alicia with cold and critical judgment as a selfish and spoiled woman who had exploited patience and kindness wherever she found it and had repaid his devotion with indifference.

But when she came into the room, looking old and angry and tired, he was proved wrong on one count. As she caught sight of him her face lit up, and she let out a muted cry that was somewhere between surprise, and pleasure, and relief; and threw herself into his arms.

CHAPTER XI

FEW stories outside fairy tales have a clean finish. The uneasy balance of life may reach a moment of stability; but the event which concludes one action (a marriage, a death, an achievement, a failure, a decision or a change of heart) itself creates a new set of circumstances and new limits for the play of character and temperament.

Sometimes it seems that character is as indestructible as diamond, and the apparent changes occur only when different facets are shown under different lights. Alicia, for instance, who never learns from experience, is unlikely, one feels, to change much. In the 1970's, if she is still alive, one may expect to see a violent and self-willed old lady snubbing her granddaughters, coquetting with her grandsons, and readily forgetting them all at the prospect of any larger or more flattering audience.

Of Bernard and Sally it is less easy to prophesy. Under the formidable maternal shadow they both suffered a period of inhibited growth. But they are still quite young, with sap enough to close a wound and to swell the tardy buds when the sun shines. Bernard, at any rate, has got himself transplanted to a more favourable site; and Sally, whose milder nature chose withdrawal not rebellion, will be better placed if her father succeeds in standing up for her.

He has some chance of success. Although his judgment is so diffident, he may be unexpectedly firm once he has found himself an unmistakably good cause. Sally will be sorry that he missed the chance of a lifetime, but she will

never know exactly why. The fact that Alicia wants him, if not at her side, at least in the same continent, seems reason enough.

Charles has made a real sacrifice; but he has also done himself some good. He has never presumed to criticise Alicia on his own account, or to make a stand for himself, and it is difficult to respect a person who never makes a stand for anything. He has given Alicia all sorts of excuses for thinking him an inferior being, and to that extent has treated her most unfairly. He has helped her to forget that other people have lives of their own.

It is sad that he will never go to Peru, and that he will dream of it for the rest of his life as others have dreamed of Atlantis, or the Isles of the West, or the Gardens of the Hesperides. But that dream of rejuvenation was probably doomed in any case, for he was mistaken in thinking that Alicia could cheerfully do without him.

It was a stroke of luck that he made up his own mind before she could do it for him; and a consoling touch that, at the very moment when he saw their whole relationship in the crude terms of power, she was able to reach his gentle heart by a simple gesture of affection.

For it still was that, in spite of the vulgar motives – impatience with Lucius, fury with David, disgust with herself – that came into it too; and although she had often made the same kind of appeal before, she had never done it with so great a sense of need.

The personal tragedy of egotists, like other forms of parasite, is that they may fatally damage their host and so be left without visible means of support. Alicia had thoroughly frightened herself by falling out with her admirers, and she was particularly frightened because it had happened at a time when life should have been perfect. In the past, she had been able to blame her misfortunes on her lack of any outlet for creative energy, and had believed that everything would be quite different if she were working. It was not so.

Her power to hold an enraptured audience did not, evidently, help her to keep her friends. So she turned to the one person on earth she could trust blindly and completely and, squeezing out a tear or two on his rough shoulder, had some intimation that the tic between them was stronger than she had ever imagined.

He held her with great tenderness. His devotion, in becoming less blind, had not become less constant. He felt oddly light-hearted.

'Some time or other,' he said, 'when you have finished crying, I want to talk to you.'

This happened last year, on the 29th of February. Since then, several of the lives that could be seen for a short period like the roads and rivers of a single landscape have taken sharp turns over the horizon in different directions. But there was one day in August that provides an opportunity for a last look at them.

It was the date of the Annual Agricultural Show. Alicia, with a success behind her, and a new production fixed for the late autumn, was resting, and disposed to enjoy a local festivity. The weather was faultless and the occasion itself notable, for it was to provide material for an overseas broadcast. David, who was partly responsible for the programme, had had a certain amount of trouble with her, for she could not understand why she should be kept off the air simply because the B.B.C. have a prejudice against educated voices.

'My dear David,' she said, 'I can talk dialect just as well as Christine's uncle. In fact, better.'

In the end, he had admitted that all the prizewinners were to be interviewed, and as she applied to her face a rather dense maquillage, suitable for a long afternoon in the open, she was pinning her hopes on the Maynecompton pigs.

Charles, darting out of the official tent to greet the judges at the gate, was buttonholed by David.

‘Would it be possible, do you suppose, to have the church bells rung during the recording? We would like to have and authentic rural background.’

Charles frowned. ‘I doubt if you could persuade the postman to leave his ducks. He rings the treble bell.’

‘I could ask him. Where is he? With the ducks, you say?’

‘Yes; over there by the Dutch barn. But I should suggest you approach the Vicar in the first instance. Excuse me, will you? I must warn the judges that if they go further up the lane they will never be able to turn the car.’

‘My gloves, my gloves,’ cried Alicia, pausing halfway downstairs.

‘You are wearing them,’ said Sally.

‘Yes, I know; but I need some spares. Darling, do run up and look in the drawer of my dressing table. Have we kept you waiting, Bernard?’

‘No longer than I expected,’ said Bernard. He closed his book, keeping a finger in the place. ‘Is that everything?’

‘I think so. How do I look?’

Bernard ran a speculative eye from the graceful hat to her neat shoes. He considered what he would think if she were someone else’s mother. Smiling gravely, he assured her that the other boys would envy him.

‘Oh, dear,’ she sighed. ‘I do wish sometimes you were still at school.’

‘Heaven forbid,’ said Bernard. ‘It is embarrassing to have a remarkable mother in youth. But now I can begin to enjoy it. Hurry up, Sally. We must start. Really, Mother, do I have to carry your third pair of gloves in my pocket?’

‘Please, darling. You don’t really need your book. Why are you smiling, Sally?’

Sally looked from Alicia to Bernard, and giggled.

‘I just can’t help it, Mother. You are so terribly funny.’

Lucius, who had started out earlier with Charles, surveyed a scene of animation bordering on confusion. The sheep were behind hurdles, the cattle in pens, and the poultry in coops. But the people, drawn from a large tract of country, were very much at large. Here and there a trip-wire, half-hidden in the tangled grass, suggested to its victims the presence of a concealed microphone. In the Dutch barn a group of engineers, with blank eyes and headphones over their ears, inhabited their exclusive electrical universe.

'Run out and check over number five, will you, Bert? It's dead.'

Lucius strolled off to have a look at the church, which he had previously only seen in the dark. It was disappointing. The comfortable Norman shell was hard with orange plaster, broken by yellow woodwork and windows like cheap jig-saws. The Vicar, who popped out of the vestry, in a somewhat suspicious manner, drew his attention to a long row of Maynecompton tablets, many of them no longer legible. But he was clearly preoccupied, and hurried Lucius outside in order to complain of David.

'He has offered the bell-ringers three pounds. It is far too much.'

'I hardly see,' said Lucius soothingly, 'that it can do any harm.'

David showed Christine two half-crowns and prudently put them back in his pocket.

'You see those cows in the next field?'

'Yes, I see them. What about them? Lady Maynecompton's they are, but my grandfather says he doesn't think a lot of them.'

'Do you think, during the broadcast, you could get them to do their stuff?'

'What stuff?'

'Well, you know, moo.'

‘I dare say it would worry them if I drove them up and down.’

‘That’s the idea.’

‘And then do I get those two half-crowns?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t think Lady Maynecompton would like it,’ said Christine virtuously. ‘No; I’m almost sure she wouldn’t.’

‘We could ask her. Look, don’t go away. How would it be if I gave you one of the half-crowns now, and the other after?’

Christine turned sharply back, and held out her hand.

‘Well, as a matter of fact I was wondering if the ice-cream cart would still be here by the time I got my money.’

‘Bernard, this is my fiancé. I don’t think you’ve met properly.’

The two young men shook hands, while Joan beamed at them.

‘Congratulations,’ murmured Bernard. ‘Mother has just been saying how fast we are all growing up, and this drives it home. However, I have decided not to marry till I’m thirty.’

‘That’s all very well,’ said Bob. He gave a hearty guffaw, which Joan took correctly as a charming compliment. Bernard, regarding them with an almost paternal interest, decided that when it came to a wedding present, an electric iron would suitably express his feelings. In the meantime, he set himself to amuse them.

‘Shall we look at the geese? I learn from my father that they are the finest example of monogamy in all nature. So unlike cuckoos and moorhens, who seem to behave even worse than human beings.’

‘Bernard, you are awful,’ said Joan.

Bob squeezed her arm. With some experience of the seamy side of life, he did not believe that cuckoos and moorhens could have thought of anything new; and if they had, Joan had much better not know.

'Pretty,' said Alicia. She and Sally were taking shelter from the sun, and were standing among the flower arrangements, under canvas.

'One sees the influence of Constance Spry,' said Alicia. 'Do look at those white peonies with the red cabbage. It must be that pretty little widow from East Noting.'

'It's original,' said Sally. 'But I still like the bunches with lots of fern and asparagus.'

'The only person I ever taught to do flowers the way I liked them was Margaret. What's happened to her? Does Bernard ever hear?'

'She wrote and told me she was marrying a widower with three little boys. She said she was very happy.'

The judges had reached the pigs. Charles, close at their heels, made no attempt to conceal his excitement. His sufferings, during a long argument and shuffling of the first and second prize tickets, were evident. In the end, it was the second prize he got; but he was still very pleased. Rather to his surprise, the fact that the pig was attributed to the impersonal ownership of Maynecompton Estates made no difference whatever. It was still his pig. The first prize-winner, one of his own tenants, gave it generous praise. Nothing had really changed.

He looked round for Alicia.

'Alicia darling, may we make your cows moo?'

'Certainly, if yoú know how.'

'I've signed on a very tiny girl with a business-woman's temperament, who says she can do it.'

'That must be Christine,' said Sally. 'You'd better keep an eye on her.'

'She seems competent,' said David serenely.

'Women,' said Alicia with a teasing smile, 'are very hard to understand.'

'I've given up trying,' said David firmly. They had

settled down quite easily into armed neutrality and found it on the whole quite agreeable.

Maybelle stayed in the house. At her time of life, she felt she was entitled to begin limiting her duties and choosing her pleasures. Now that she was back in her old profession she was much less of a servant and had more time for the greatest pleasure she knew – namely, putting her feet up.

Her room, sealed up all day from sun and air, was both cool and stuffy, and promoted a pleasant state of torpor which was not quite sleep. Without opening her eyes, she switched on the radio which stood at her elbow, with a clutter of photographs all round. She expected to hear the broadcast. No one had managed to explain to her that it was being made for the inhabitants of North America, ten days later.

'Number four's out now,' said Bert gloomily.

Ronnie twiddled some knobs and watched some dials on a big switchboard propped against some hay.

'See what you can do about it, will you? If that girl with the ice-cream has been monkeying round with number four again, beat her.'

'She says Mr. Transom has given her a job.'

'Oh, lor'. Well, she'd better keep off my microphones. The trouble these people give us; they think all that matters is the chat, and never give a thought to what's behind it. If four's right out, hell just have to make do. He can see the cows from five, and if he can't, he must know what a cow looks like.'

'Alicia, I've been looking for you everywhere. Where were you?'

'Just inside the tent, dear. The flowers are charming. What is it?'

'The pig's second.'

'Oh, Charles, how splendid. I am pleased.'

Arm in arm they went off to sec their pig. Once there, Alicia refused to move; the prize-winners, she explained, were going to be interviewed.

'Not me?' cried Charles in horror.

'If you'd rather, darling, of course I could do it.'

The engineers were more cheerful. Technically, everything was set; and although they had no confidence whatever in the human element, that was not their job and did not worry them.

The temperature had risen to ninety in the shade. Even Bernard, in a stiffish American shirt, and Lucius, in the thinnest and handsomest of grey suitings, were beginning to look crumpled. Bert and Ronnie, sweating under a tin roof, were suddenly conscious of being most uncomfortable.

'Give me an air-conditioned studio every time,' said Ronnie, mopping his dank hair. 'Talk about a roll in the hay! This hay's enough to give you a heat-stroke.'

Sally, on her way to find Joan, took pity on them. 'You must be dying for something to drink. I could get you some tea – or I might find some beer.'

'Beer,' said Bert, grinning and turning up his thumbs.

'She should be able to find some,' said Ronnie. 'There's an old boy over there who's as tight as a tick.'

'How long do we have to stay?' said Bob.

'Oh, dear, aren't you enjoying yourself?'

'Of course I am, silly, but there are too many people; and I don't know a damn thing about animals. Just tell me, was Bernard making it all up?'

'Oh, no, he just says everything in an original way. I think it's rather tiring.'

'Tiring? It's murder. What on earth is that?'

Through the confusion of nearer noises, an unmusical penetrating jangle bounced on their ear-drums.

'They must be ringing up the bells,' said Joan. 'I can't imagine why. Shall we look at the flowers? It may not be quite so crowded in the tent.'

'I hear you got your First,' said David.

'Just,' said Bernard; 'but it will help. I am thinking of the Foreign Office.'

'Oh, yes,' said Lucius. But of course, he was saying to himself, that is just the place for Bernard; he will meet so many polite and intelligent young men who were once rather like him.

'And Alicia is pleased?'

'Certainly, I have learned how to manage her.'

'My dear boy, you must tell me your methods,' said Lucius smiling. Bernard's affectation of pomposity was not without irony.

'I try to tell her what she is expected to feel, and the chances are then that she feels it. I fear we were all a little feeble in the old days. But it was an eye-opener to me when Father asserted himself and packed Sally off to college. Mother hardly batted an eyelid. And now that we all see each other rather rarely, we might even be classified as a united family. Of course, Sally's college strikes me as the most dismal place on earth, but she loves it, the odd girl. And Mother will never get over her surprise at seeing Father put his foot down.'

'Isn't she sweet?' said Alicia, leaning over the rail and scratching the rough and quivering flesh with her delicate forefinger. 'Is David coming?'

'I don't see him at the moment.'

'Lots of time,' said Alicia. It is only amateurs who allow excessive time for standing by. 'I can't help feeling sorry for pigs,' she said reflectively. 'It is really rather sad to look so very ridiculous.'

In a leisurely fashion, she examined her soiled fingertip,

peeled her gloves down from the elbow, and took a fresh pair from her bag. A recording, like anything else, should be done impeccably dressed.

Sally, with a bottle and two glasses, entered the Dutch barn. Ronnie waggled a hand across his face, meaning 'Not now: put it down.' Sally, rather fascinated by the strange atmosphere of concentration, with nothing whatever to show for it, flopped down in the hay. Bert passed her a spare pair of headphones.

A shattering peal of bells made her jump. 'Well, here I am,' said David, 'standing in the middle of a field. But just for to-day, it doesn't look much like a field. . . .'

Sally hardly recognised his voice, there was so much enthusiasm in it. She looked so astonished that Bert had a momentary fear they had picked up the wrong person. Ronnie, however, was wearing the familiar inward expression of someone who has got a fishbone stuck in his teeth.

David's young collaborator, a mere characterless extra, permitted to make short diversions if the locals stalled, ventured a remark on the weather. His boyish voice was drowned by a loud bellowing that might well have come off the sound-track of a Western.

'What can have got into the cows?' thought Sally.

Bert looked at the bottle, then at Ronnie. Ronnie beckoned to Sally and made a pouring gesture.

'I'm told you're one of the half-dozen men in the country,' said David, 'who can lay a hedge.'

'I doubt if there's that many,' said Christine's grandfather. 'My brother, who died last year, was the only other one about here, and he hadn't got it as good as me, not until the end of his days.' He gave a challenging glance round the gaping crowd, for, outside hedges, his brother had been far more successful and respected than he had

been; and he hoped they were taking good note of his remarks.

'I suppose you both learned it as boys,' said David. 'May I ask you how long ago that would be?'

'Well, to look at me, I expect you're thinking it's close on a hundred years. But that's my hard life. Those hedges went out of fashion, and I've had to do a bit of labouring, which isn't what I was brought up to. Seventy-one years I've had in this vale of tears. . . .'

'Did you learn your craft from your father?'

'I did. And this is what he told me. . . .'

Bert found himself listening with attention to the accurate and detailed statement which followed. Quite an engineering job, he thought.

Maybelle switched frantically from old musical to new ways of cooking fish, and switched off in a rage.

Bob and Joan, alone among the flowers, whispered nonsense with their warm cheeks touching. And Sally kept an eye on the two glasses of beer and passed them up whenever Ronnie or Bert hand a hand to spare.

The bell-ringers, conscientiously determined to give good value, overran their contract. Christine, red in the face, urged the cows in and out of the near ditch. Lucius and Bernard took a turn up the main street, discussing the state of the world, and Alicia stroked her wrists until the kid clung like her own skin.

Sally jumped when she heard Alicia speaking. 'Oh, yes, of course, David. I'm delighted with our pig.' She had the illusion that Alicia was standing beside her. Even Ronnie looked pleased (for the higher registers were coming over unusually well) as she spoke movingly of the simpler pleasures of life. She stopped, as she had promised, after a minute.

David began his parting words. Bob glared at the trickle

of people coming in through the flap of the tent. Ronnie took off his headphones.

'So now that's over, I can have a proper drink.'

'Where on earth is Bernard?' said Alicia. 'I touched that filthy microphone, and now look at me.'

She made her way through the crowd, smiling and chatting. 'Yes; it has been interesting, hasn't it? And such a good show. I hope the Canadians enjoy it as much as we did. Oh, no, you shouldn't worry about a slip of the tongue; it sounds all the more natural. Joan, dear, have you seen Bernard? And tell me, is it really true you are going to be married in November? It's such a misfortune I shall be back in London then. Oh, there he is, the tiresome boy. Bernard, my gloves.'

Smiling, she handed him the pair she had taken off. Then, taking Lucius' arm, she drew him away to an unfrequented side of the field.

'I don't seem to have seen you all day. Have you been happy?'

'In my quiet way.'

'Yes, it is the most exhausting racket. We shall have to go home soon. I'm quite tired. Aren't you?'

'It's not nearly so exhausting for a stranger. But you must know everyone here.'

'I think I do. No; not quite everyone. Who is that woman over by the agricultural machinery? She has a nice figure, but I can't see her face.'

'David tells me it's Mary Crawford. Her face is nothing special.'

'Who is Mary Crawford?'

'She writes novels of some sort, I gather. She came down with David, but I don't really know why. She seems to dislike him, and now they've evidently cast each other off. Perhaps I should just dart over and say goodbye. Will you come?'

‘Don’t be silly, Lucius. I can’t say goodbye to someone I’ve never met. Surely you aren’t frightened of going by yourself?’

‘It’s an awful thought,’ said Lucius, ‘that she may be going to put us all in a book.’

‘She can’t do that to me,’ said Alicia, drawing on a clean pair of white gloves. ‘She doesn’t know anything about me.’

LAUGH OR CRY

another novel by MARY CRAWFORD

'The scene moves from town to country, from studio to drawing-room. The writing is subtle, restrained and economical; the characters spring to life at a touch. The narrator unconsciously reveals herself as slightly self-complacent, and this is duly brought home to her at the close of the most enjoyable novel I have read for some time.'

Sunday Times

'Upper middle-class life today is very pleasantly sketched, and most of the characters, particularly some minor ones, are very well worth meeting.'

Glasgow Evening Citizen