

DOROTHY M. RICHARDSON

PILGRIMAGE

with an introduction by Gill Hanscombe

Clear Horizon



VIRAGO

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with an FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: Clear Horizon: Pilgrimage, Volume 11

Date of first publication: 1935

Author: Dorothy M. Richardson (1873-1957)

Date first posted: July 23, 2018

Date last updated: Nov. 20, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20180795

This eBook was produced by: Jens Sadowski & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

CLEAR HORIZON

**BY
DOROTHY M. RICHARDSON**

VIRAGO

Published 1935.
This edition published by Virago Press 2002.

CLEAR HORIZON

TO
S. S. KOTELIANSKY

CHAPTER I

Between herself and all that was waiting to flow in and settle upon this window-lit end of the long empty room, was the sense of missing Lionel Cholmley. She realized his quality now more sharply than when he had been in the house, and felt his influence like a dropped mantle it would be very pleasant to assume if there were any possible way of making it fit. She was almost yearning for him. Almost willing to sacrifice breakfast-time solitude for the sake of his presence. Every one lingered in this room for a while, after leaving the house. Faintly. But his gentle image was clear and strong. There he sat, on his first evening, at the far end of the table at Mrs Bailey's right hand. Slightly beaky nose pressing ahead into life, uncogitative; rather prominent, expressionless china-blue eyes; round cherub head, closely fitted with soft, fine curls not too closely cropped, gleaming satiny-gold in the gas-light. Looking well-bred, a suddenly arrived oasis of quality. Mr Pewtress had been nearly opposite, between ancient, dilapidated Miss Reid waiting for a chance of describing toll-gate Bloomsbury, and sour Miss Elliot glancing about for material for sarcasm, mopping his moustache after his soup, looking relieved, his brow free from the little pleat of suppressed irascibility always inhabiting it at meal-times, looking almost hopeful in the cheering presence of a newcomer who might perhaps be counted upon to rescue his own conversational sallies from

their daily fate of being swamped by the wandering eddies of feminine table-talk. Clearing his throat, by way of announcing his intention to speak, he had remarked towards Lionel, deferentially, but a little too loudly, upon the interesting difference between the spelling and the pronunciation of *Cholmondeley*. And Lionel, after the slightest hesitation and preliminary working of the facial muscles that promises a stutter, said smoothly, in his unexpectedly deep voice, husky, with the glow of a kindly smile in it, 'There's no *onde* in my name; but it's pronounced Marchbanks all the same.' And flushed when he realized that his little jest was standing on the silent air, homeless. And his eyes met mine and rested upon them for a moment, gratefully renewing and deepening the smile that had disappeared before the shock of his guilt. And he went on talking, to bring his topic round to common ground.

And that same evening the whole party, drawn by his power of making every one feel significant, had assembled upstairs in the drawing-room. And he, not knowing that this assembly was unusual, and unaware of being its vital centre, sat in a corner telling me of his ambition: to disseminate poetry, either to live by disseminating poetry, or to sweep a crossing. And I asked what he thought of Clifford Harrison, and whether he agreed that a musical accompaniment, although in advance it seemed to promise a division of one's attention, actually had the reverse effect, helping, with its unaccentuated flow, to focus and vitalize the images evoked by a poem. And while he was enthusiastically agreeing, I thought of Hypo's definition of music as a solvent and was about to work off on him an interpretation that had just occurred to me, to say that music favoured the reception of poetry partly by causing the shapeless mental faculties that

deal with things, to abdicate in favour of the faculty that has the sense of form and sees things in relationship. And I heard myself speaking before I began, rather precisely and pedantically, and was glad to be prevented from saying my say by the realization that his voice was sounding in a silent room, in a horrible silence filled with the dying echoes of undesired topics and vibrating with the bitterness of permanent animosities. And when I asked him to recite, it was not because I wanted to hear a poem, but because his pleasant voice would clear the air. And he stood up and said into the silence, croakily, his face and voice glowing with the half-smile of his angelic effrontery, so that what he said was like a gentle punch upon the spirit of the hearer, 'Shall I say a short poem?' And instead of going to face down the room from the hearthrug, or to pose within the curve of the near-by grand piano, he remained in his place and said his poem as if he were a momentary spokesman, like a vocal testifier in a religious gathering, and, although the poem was heroic, his voice was only a little fuller and more resonant than usual, and quite free from recitational 'effects.' So that the poem prevailed and every one saw and felt something of what the poet saw and felt. And after a short pause he said a short pathetic piece, meditatively, without pathos, leaving it to make its own appeal. Because of his way of saying his poems, abdicating, making himself a medium and setting the poems quietly in the midst of his hearers, as if they were the common property of the group, every one could receive them, directly, unimpeded by the embarrassment involved in the relationship between drawing-room performer and drawing-room audience. When his poem was finished, he was immediately talking again, engrossed, and not in the least working off superfluous emotion.

In his gentle composure and sensitive awareness he is something like the ideal Quaker. Living in reference to a Presence. But a presence as to which he makes no profession. His relationship to life is urbane. Unifying sound, rather than unifying silence, is the medium of his social life. So that conversation with him is like an aside, secondary interchange between actors at moments when they are not prominently engaged with the ceaseless drama in which every one takes part. Festive interchange. He greets everything with a festoon. And lessens burdens because he *really* travels in sympathy as far as he can see into every life that comes his way. And the steady operation of his sympathy controls every word he speaks even when he is witty, and, when he is grave, one word or another will break on a mirthful little croak.

‘Perhaps if you will have a small piece taken from the back of your nose, *you* will be able to sleep with closed windows.’ A smile all the while and a croak on every word. One for me, and my pedantic lecture; given charmingly, disarmingly. I had forgotten him in the interval, yet I felt really pleased to see him back from his operation, with the pleasant little croak unimpaired. And to see him suddenly appear at early breakfast.

Though he brought the world into the room. When he came in, and I saw him for the first time alone with one person, I thought I should discover the individual behind his unfailing sociability and felt a momentary deep interest in what he might turn out to be; what less and what more than his usual seeming. But although he said good morning quietly, and did not at once begin to talk, the way he took his place, and helped himself to toast and speared a pat of butter, was social. Even at that hour of a perfect, still, spring

morning he was turned only towards humanity, keeping human lives in the room, the sight and sound and movement of them, and references to the past and references to the future.

Having paid him tribute while pouring out her tea and getting back to the window-end of the long empty breakfast-table, she bade farewell to Lionel Cholmley and watched him for a moment, going his way through life, contributing, wherever he went, his qualities of strength and gentleness, gentle strength, strong gentleness. A missionary from Oberland, poor, obliged to live by selling the family pearls.

He was gone. Her mind, returned to self-consciousness, would throw up no more images of him without a deliberate effort of memory which, if made with this returned surface consciousness, would add nothing to what had accumulated unawares and become a permanent possession, to be deepened and filled out all along the way. And he, himself, would not wish to stay merely to contemplate a spring morning. She turned, holding back her thoughts, holding her faculties in suspension, with eyes downcast so that no detail encountered on the way should disturb her meeting with the light.... The door was opening, was admitting Sissie Bailey coming in with food and greetings and, just as she seemed about to depart, moving, drawn by the brilliance of the light reflected into this end of the room from the sunlit house-fronts across the way, to the nearer window, where she stood with her back to the indoor scene, looking out. Silently. Seizing a moment of tranquil solitude in the presence of one from whom she had ceased to expect entertainment, before returning to the busy basement. Face to face with the brightness of the spring morning, she was seeing what it brought to her mind. Hampton Court Gardens in mid-June,

seen once in her early girlhood? The green alleys surrounding her convent-school in the Ardennes? These visions, stored up, dimly returned to her in moments such as this? But they were now far away. They had been faithless and unfruitful. There was nothing ahead with which they could link themselves. If indeed they returned at all, they brought no light to her face. Perhaps they could not completely appear when she looked from this window. Even if, on spring and summer mornings, they rose in her mind, they would be driven back by the nature of her familiarity with the spectacle before her eyes, which for her was so much more and so much less than a stately old street, serenely beautiful in the morning light. She saw those façades, known to her since childhood, with intimate, critical knowledge of their condition and their needs. And saw through them into what lay behind, with a mind grown experienced in relationship to the interior being of a large old-fashioned house, to its ceaseless demands and the prices to be paid, in labour and in thought, on behalf of its peculiarities and imperfections. So that for her, an old house was little more than an everlastingly exacting invalid. And her general expressionlessness was the façade of her detailed, intricate inner preoccupation with experiences that remained, for the world with which she dealt, unknown and without repute, a permanent secret behind her cheerless good cheer. Which also it fed, enabling her to face her world, serene in the knowledge of the worth of her labours.

Watching her, Miriam realized, with a pang of loss, how much Sissie had changed. During her own absence at Flaxman's she had grown from an elderly schoolgirl into a young house-keeper, able to command not only respect but also fear, from all the men and women in the house to whom

her ceaseless occupations were the mysteries whereby their lives were sustained. A curious, guilty fear, the fear of those whose exemptions are bought at the price of the continuous, unvarying labour of others. Sissie had attained power.

The morning light was harsh upon her graceless shape, upon her young face that already wore a look of age and responsibility, visible in the slight permanent lift of the eyebrows and the suggestion of tension about the compressed lips. But apart from the evidence they supplied of mental preoccupations and control, her features had gone their way without her knowledge and were set in an expression of half sulky, half mystified resentment. In repose. In moments such as this. And for the eyes of those who did not know and did not care for her. Including, strangely, even Amabel, who drew every one like a magnet, brought every one to life, and yet must have failed with Sissie. For at some time or other she had certainly tried to capture her. And it was this failure that explained her relentless diagnosis of Sissie's way of being. A more English Amabel would have been aware of Sissie from the first and would not have left letters about all over her room, and every box and drawer and cupboard unlocked. But discoveries alone would not have alienated a Sissie burdened with the guilt of spying. And Sissie was not one to make direct use of knowledge to which she had no right; or to be shocked by any one's private affairs, so long as they were private. She kept her knowledge to herself, using it to fill out her entirely objective vision. But Amabel had no private affairs. And being in and out of rooms all day, Sissie would have seen her casting spells over newly arrived boarders whom, with the capitulation of all the others stored up to her credit, to say nothing of her wealth of outside interests, she might

reasonably, from Sissie's point of view, have been expected to leave alone at least until they had time to look round.

Perhaps a shocked Sissie had even seen her exchanging kisses with Captain Norton—between two trills of laughter, the first encouraging and chiding and maternally consoling in advance, the second girlishly ecstatic—on the day after his arrival, and been the more horrified because he was a chance, temporary lodger and not present at meals. She might have been somewhere about on the next evening when, hearing him pass on his way upstairs, Amabel, to prove to me the truth of her tale, called to him through my open door and went out, tinkling and choking with suppressed laughter, half amusement over my incredulity and half joyous anticipation, and was silently gathered up and kissed, and came back dreamy for an instant after her spiritual excursion in the darkness, and then almost weeping with mirth over the kind of man he was: so frightfully *English*, talking at top speed, and as if all his remarks were contributions to an argument, and looking all the time the picture of an injured seraph, brows up, blue eyes wide. Mad on *parrots*. A little taken aback, at first, by her unconventionality, a little shocked too and revealing, 'for the flick of a bee's wing,' the life he had led between whiles, 'poor lamb.' And finally enthusiastic, finding her 'extremely unique' and talking to her about parrots.

'You've reformed him,' I said, 'someone will reap the benefit.' And she smiled, and for a moment seemed to be looking wistfully along his future. I half-envied the courage that enabled her to gather life-giving endearments as simply and as easily as others will hail a fellow-creature on a bright morning, go out of their way for the sake of the hailing, if the morning be very bright.

But to Sissie she will have seemed the enemy. An artful, fast young lady beside whom, men being what they are, a decent girl stands no chance.

So whenever it was that Amabel had first turned her propitiating ray upon Sissie, though it was probably unexpected, in the course of a conversation with someone else, just a reference to her, an inquiry for her opinion, so framed as to convey the gracious obeisance that was her unvarying salutation to any one who appeared to be standing off, she had nevertheless found Sissie prepared, had received a disdainful retort and met, or probably only seen, half-turned in her direction, cold blue eyes whose haughty gaze, like that of royalty in Academy portraits, saw nothing that was within their circle of vision. Exactly the rebuff that Amabel herself might bestow upon someone whose offensiveness called aloud for strong measures; only that she, unable to be other than radiant, would not gaze coldly into space, but, while administering her reproof, would slightly bow, her face inclined sideways as if to evade, and then raised, ignoring the offender, devoutly towards the nearest innocence; person or thing.

Amabel had mentioned Sissie only that once—mercifully she is now making off, with that bustling, fussy gait that seems deliberately to create disturbance and make a proper to-do of the business of getting herself to the door, and is certainly ungraceful and yet, for me, is redeemed by the way it seems hilariously to celebrate things in general, just as they are, to fly the flag of life and keep going in face of no matter what catastrophes—only that once, and, for a moment, seeming so to illuminate and explain her that I, wounded and surprised though I was on behalf of the Sissie I have known so long and uncritically liked, found nothing to say. And felt,

and feel, mean. But she is right as well as wrong in describing her, with contemptuous unwilling lips and bated breath, as an awful example of the woman who hasn't. Yet she is more wrong than right. There is something she does not see. Sissie's puzzled sulkiness with life for failing to fulfil its promises does not dim her cheery sanity, nor the rays shining from her dense blue eyes when she exchanges nothings with people she is fond of. Amabel is too rational and logical, too French to understand what happens during these exchanges. Impossible to make her see Sissie's life from within.

With her eyes upon the vision of Sissie pounding along through the years, incessantly busy and interested, making, for herself, fewer and fewer claims and defiantly defending those of all the people she liked, Miriam said farewell to her and to the discomfort of being unable to find for her any approved place in Amabel's scheme of life, and turned to meet the spring.

She had left, at a remembered moment in the recent past, some portion of her spirit waiting for this instant of serene and powerful realization of the being of spring, mid-spring with its beginnings still near enough to be recalled. And had feared that this year it might fail to come. And now that it was here it opened before her so spaciouly, and with such serene assurance of its eternity, that she paused on her way to its centre to look at what had recently accumulated in her life that at this moment was so far away and so clearly lit by the penetrating radiance into which she was being drawn.

The first thing to emerge was the moment with Michael at the concert, a revelation of him that would remain with her always. Just behind it, standing alone in a chain of kindred experiences because it was so solidly linked to earth, was the

strange moment of being up in the rejoicing sky. For two, three seconds?

She remembered how her eye had met that of the little manageress edging sideways along the narrow gangway, with a coffee for the man at the next table held high and clear of heads in one hand and, dangling from the other, the usual limp, crumpled table-swab, and it was as if, during that interchanged glance, the stout little woman contemplated, in her kindly, all-embracing, matter-of-fact way, the whole panorama of one's recent life as it lay spread out in one's consciousness.

And it was then that the wordless thought had come like an arrow aimed from a height downwards into her heart and, before her awakened mind, dropping its preoccupation, could reach the words that already were sounding within it, in the quiet tone of someone offering a suggestion and ready to wait while it was surveyed, she was within that lifting tide of emotion.

With a single up-swinging movement, she was clear of earth and hanging, suspended and motionless, high in the sky, looking, away to the right, into a far-off pearly-blue distance, that held her eyes, seeming to be in motion within itself: an intense crystalline vibration that seemed to be aware of being enchantedly observed, and even to be amused and to be saying, 'Yes, this is my reality.'

She was moving, or the sky about her was moving. Masses of pinnacled clouds rose between her and the clear distance and, just as she felt herself sinking, her spirit seemed to be up amongst their high, rejoicing summits. And then the little manageress was setting down the coffee upon the near table, her head turned, while still her fingers held the rim of the

saucer, in the direction of her next destination, towards which her kind tired eyes were sending their quizzical smile.

Joy, that up there had seemed everywhere, pulsed now, confined, within her, holding away thoughts, holding away everything but itself.

‘I’ve been up amongst the rejoicing cloud-tops,’ she wrote and sat back and sipped her coffee.

His little figure appeared in her mind’s eye, not, as usual, alone in his study or grouped and talking, spreading the half-truths of his gospel, but walking quietly along in space, not threshing the air with his arms as he went, and not wearing his walking look of defiant confidence and determination. Walking along unarmed and exposed, turned, so to speak, inside out. And it was to this solitary unrelated figure that her joyous message went forth. He would understand and approve the bare statement of fact without explanation or commentary. He would become once more the friend who, years ago, as she knelt on the hearthrug in his study, within the deep rosy glow of an autumn fire, pouring out her thoughts and forgetting the listener, had suddenly laid his hand gently upon her head and said—what was it he said that had so much moved her and had brought, for a moment, an unfamiliar sense of unity with humanity? She could remember only the wide, rosy glow of the fire receiving in its companionable depths the poured-forth words that seemed to be a long-prepared forward movement of her whole being.

This solitary figure her scribbled lines would pull up. For a moment her news would engage his attention to the exclusion of everything else; for just a moment, before his mind extended a verbal tentacle to grasp the miracle and set it within the pattern of doomed and disappearing things of which his world was made. He would be simple and whole,

dumb before the mystery, held back from his inaccessible and equally doomed and passing 'future' by a present eternity. He would be fully there, sharing, apart from her and one with her, as he had seemed to be on the day he announced friendship between them: 'large, manly, *exploring* friendship, full of ruthlessness; untidy, probably as choppy and squally, dear Miriam, as the old sea is to-day.' And as he had seemed to be on that afternoon in the study, a discovered extension of herself, available for companionship, enriching the companionship she had had with herself since the beginning, by his stored knowledge and his unused, self-repudiated personality. This had seemed so serenely certain that she had poured out her own version of some of the thoughts he had given her and gone on, with a sense of exploration; forgetting until, pausing, she had felt his hand on her head. She clearly recalled feeling alone and independent of him and yet supported by his unusual silence and then, presently, a lonely, impersonal joy in whatever it was she had tried to make clear, whatever it was that had brought that adventuring forth, from her heart's depth, of love and devotion that glowed like the rosy fire and seemed at once the inmost essence of her being and yet not herself; but something that through her, and in unaccustomed words, was addressing the self she knew, making her both speaker and listener, making her, to herself, as strange and as mysterious as, in the shaded lamplight, was the darkness behind the glowing fire.

And at the end of her journeying meditation had come the shock of the unspeakably gentle touch. All her life she would remember it, the way its light pressure, bringing her fire-warmed hair closely against her head, rested a moment. Thought had vanished with the reminder that it was she who

had been heard speaking and he who had been quietly with her as she spoke; and the flood of her voyaging love had turned and enveloped for a moment his invisible being, and the few words he gently spoke had filled her with joy in believing that in spite of his ceaseless denials he saw and felt a reality that thought could neither touch nor express. Had the joy and the belief survived for even that one evening?

Of course he would immediately socialize the news in his consciousness and respond to it with a suitable formula, embodying a momentary pang of genuine emotion, but brief and concise, tinged with feeling but carefully free from any sort of expansiveness, carefully earnest and carefully casual —‘My dear, I’m no end glad and proud’—and then would immediately sketch unacceptable plans and arrange a meeting for talk; and forthwith banish the circumstance to its proper place amongst his multitudinous preoccupations.

What she had just set down, he would take for metaphor. Up in the clouds. Seventh heaven. Any attempt to prove that it was not, would bring forth his utmost dreariness. He would light up and exhibit his private amusement with the tooth-revealing smile that the scraggy moustache made so unpleasantly fauve, and say rather professorially that the prospect of having a child had given her a great emotional moment, very much to her credit as showing her to be a properly constituted female, to be followed in due course by a return to the world of hard fact.

But it was the world of hard fact she had just visited. Feeling there, in the very midst of joy and wonder, not surprise but an everyday steadiness and clarity beyond anything she had yet experienced. The ‘great emotional moments’ must lie ahead; perhaps all the way along life. It was their quality, stating itself in advance, that had produced

the strange experience? And even he, if it were stated in plain terms by someone he could willingly believe, could not maintain that it was illusion.

She turned back to her adventure in the sky. What was it about those vibrating particles of light that had made them seem so familiar and reassuring? Why had they brought, at some point in that endless brief moment, the certainty that ages hence they would once more be there, only all about her instead of far away? The certainty that this strange experience was just a passing glimpse? They were, she reflected, something like the crystals upon the crust of moonlit snow. But these, by comparison, were large and coarse, motionless and dead. There were no ways of stating the strange blissful intensity of these vibrating particles. Nor their curious intentness. And even if there were, even if she could set down the whole spectacle from first to last exactly as it had appeared, everything would be left out. The rapture and the rapturous certainty. Joy, wonder, recognition. No excitement, because no barrier. There must somehow be *sober* intoxication. Movement that is perfect rest.

There were no words which would prove to him that this experience was as real as the crowded roadways converging within her sight as she looked through the window, as real as the calm grey church across the way and the group of poplars presiding over the cab-shelter. When her eyes reached their high plumes, feathering upwards towards the wide scarf of cloud screening the sky of her adventure, she knew she must not even try to tell him. To insist, against sceptical opposition, would be to lose, fruitlessly, something of the essence of the experience. Just these revealing, misleading words. And then silence, indefinitely. An indefinite space for realization, free of the time-moving distractions of *plans*.

Before her eyes could come far enough round to be met, Amabel's laughter leapt forth and ceased abruptly because she was so eager to speak.

'Yes, I know, I know!' she cried in the high tone of her laughter. 'One feels one ought to dance out one's child in the market-place!' But she, too, had taken 'up in the clouds' metaphorically, and it seemed impossible to insist, even with her. A strange, *glad* reluctance, this time, a sort of happy fear, seemed to prevent.

'Yes, with bands playing and flags flying and people cheering. It's true. Every one can endure more easily with the support of moral limelight than they can shut up in a corner with one person. Think of it, a smart, certificated young woman who cuts any amount of ice with the doctor who employs her if she can manage without him up to the last minute. She can't give the help a man could, either physical or moral, because she doesn't supply the natural right kind of sympathetic opposition, the help and support the old-fashioned family doctor gave before the profession grew bored with obstetrics and invented, made themselves believe, perhaps actually *do* believe, poor, crammed uneducated creatures, that it is just a mechanical process and nothing more, the convenient phrase: "Leave it to nature." Those old family doctors, Mrs Philps told me, used to be as tired as the mother when it was all over. Anyway no one ought to be shut in and left to fight alone, unless they really wish it. It's a wrong idea. False decency. And when people say, "Not a bit of it, look at the beasts, their secrecy in all these matters and the way they creep away to die," they forget that all beasts, so long as they are helpless and *visible*, are in danger, either

from other beasts, or from us. That is why they creep away. They daren't be caught off guard. Domesticated animals don't creep away. And they don't want to be left alone, either when they suffer or when they die.'

'I know,' said Amabel. But she had not been listening. 'I once said something like that to matah.' She had listened to the first part.

'What did your mater say?'

'Matah said: "That's all very fine, my dear, but wait till your time comes. Wait till you *know* a child is on the way!"'

The other immortal moment had been precluded by Michael's telegram. Reading its familiar words, she had failed for the first time to be disturbed by them, and wondered over her failure. It pulled her up in the midst of the square, and the high buildings surrounding it shut her in with a question: with what to give to any one, or to be to any one, was she going so zestfully forward in her life, if she was failing Michael? For it was she and not he who, in the unbearable pain of the last parting, had suggested that in case of need he should call upon her for help. Contemplating his life amongst strangers on the other side of London, she had known in advance exactly how and why this need would arise.

Again and again he had summoned her: for help in his pathetically absurd entanglements with people he attracted and entirely failed to read; for advice about his preposterous, ill-fated engagement, his unworkable plans conceived in the queer high light and cold darkness of rational calculation and perishing catastrophically the moment they were submitted to the smallest glow of imaginative foresight, whose

application never failed to start his mind on an unwilling tour amongst the unconsidered, insurmountable difficulties. A tour dreadful to witness, and from which he would return momentarily illuminated and downcast, and more than a little ashamed. And each time she had hoped that on the next occasion he would himself make the necessary imaginative effort. And with each fresh telegram had had to realize afresh his amazing, persistent helplessness; and to know, in terms of real distress, that whatever hurt him must hurt her also while life lasted.

Yet to-day she was feeling no pain. Because she had read the message coming across the square in the first of the spring sunshine whose radiance was assuring her that somehow all was well? Re-reading the wire, she searched her heart for solicitude, turning her eyes aside to conjure up the image of Michael in trouble, and saw instead the way the eastern light shone through the small leaves on the bole of a tree across the road, and immediately felt Amabel at her side, and walked on, leaving Michael forgotten, until presently he again intruded with his demand, and again she refused to be involved.

And then, as though it had prepared itself while she was refusing to take thought, there passed before her inward vision a picture of herself performing, upon an invisible background, the rite of introduction between Michael and Amabel. It slid away. Joyously she recalled it, supplying time and place, colour and sound and living warmth. And it stood there before her, solving the mystery of her present failure to suffer on Michael's behalf, filling so completely the horizon of her immediate future that it seemed to offer, the moment it should become the reality into which she had the power of translating it, a vista ahead swept clean of all impediments.

She hurried on, as if the swiftness of her steps could hasten fulfilment.

But her shocked consciousness pulled her up in the midst of relief, insisting that she should drive away the subtly attractive picture while it stood clear in her mind, and use its suspicious fruit, the aroused state of her whole being, to discover its secret origin and thereby judge its worth. Isolated with possible motives, she found herself in a maze whose partitions were mirrors.

Yet even if it were true that her real desire was to perform in person the social miracle of introducing one life to another, without consideration of the inclinations of either person concerned, even if it were true that she desired only to show off Michael and to show off Amabel, again without consideration, even if it were true that there was not the remotest chance of help coming from Amabel to Michael and that therefore it was she herself, and not Michael, who was the pathetic fragment, so cut off and resourceless as to delight in the mere reproduction of social rituals and the illusory sense of power and of importance to be attained therefrom, it was now impossible to imagine the occasion as not taking place. Something far away below any single, particular motive she could search out, had made the decision, was refusing to attend to this conscious conflict and was already regarding the event as current, even as past and accomplished. This complete, independent response, whose motives were either undiscoverable or non-existent, might be good or bad, but was irrevocable.

There were those two concert tickets for next Sunday afternoon. Michael should come early to Tansley Street, be introduced to Amabel, and then go on to the concert and say

his say in the interval. All these happenings would distribute his dark mood and make it easier to handle.

Amabel downstairs at dinner, ignoring every one but me, both of us using the social occasion to heighten our sense of being together, making it impossible for any one to break into the circle where we sit surrounded and alone. So strongly enclosed that not one of those with whom at other times she talked and flirted could mistake the centre of her interest. Bad manners. But how resist the enchantment? Why should all these people resent our silence in our magic enclosure?

Amabel at Lycurgan meetings and soirées, posed, an inquiring, deeply smiling satellite, towards one and another of the men who at the moment happened to be expounding their views. Deep interest in views, deep reverence for ability to express them, deeper reverence, behind it, for everything that seemed to promise change in the social structure. All these emotions came to life, embodied in Amabel posed and listening. Yet always in the end she would break into one of her little trilling laughs. Strange, ambiguous applause. Approval, and criticism. And sometimes she would turn away from a talking group to which, devoutly glowing, she had seemed for a while to be giving all her attention, and drop a tinkle of laughter into space, or into some convenient inanimate receptacle, as if only the flexible air or a decorative, patiently enduring bowl or vase could accommodate all she felt.

Queer fish she had found all these people, even while respecting them and all they stood for. Queer, all of them,

except that one man, the thin, tall, white-faced wisp of a man at the Arts Group Nietzsche lecture, an outsider drawn by the subject, standing up during the discussion, standing silent, with working features, for an appalling interval, and then slowly stammering out his simple words, annihilating the suave pseudo-Nietzsche on the platform. During his agonized effort, Amabel had clutched her arm: ‘Mira! He’s *real!*’

For these Amabels was now substituted another. Amabel meeting a man for the first time. Amabel handling a newly-met man. Amabel in her kimono, a string of heavy, low-hanging beads correcting its informality, sitting crouched on a footstool on the hearthrug, hiding the dismally empty bedroom grate, her Empire coffee-set ranged along the wooden mantelshelf above her head; she and her chosen china redeeming the room’s ugliness like a lit and decorated altar a dark unlovely church. In response to Michael’s little stories, told out one after another across the space between Amabel and the uncomfortable small bedroom chair upon which he sat hunched, radiating west-European culture from his fine brow and rich Jewish beauty from the depths of his being, she gave out her little rills of laughter.

She might be finding Michael, too, a queer fish. Within the laughter with which she greeted each of his little tales was hidden her extremity of amusement over his conception of entertaining a lady freshly met. But a caress also, the caress she would bestow upon a charming child. And, at moments when, shielded by Michael’s engrossment in his narrative, she would lift a hand to her hair and reveal, on her sideways-tilted face, eyebrows faintly raised and lips ever so little compressed by ironic endurance, a veiled message of all-

understanding patronage of the friend about whom she had heard so much.

Already the light had left Michael's eyes and the colour was fading from his voice. Between his intelligent brow and shapely beard his face was the face of a child, clouded and expressionless with oncoming sleep. Sagging on his comfortless chair, he broke a phrase with a sigh that was almost a yawn. The heavy white lids came down over his eyes and for a moment his face, with its slumbering vitality, at once venerable and insolent, was like a death-mask, a Jewish death-mask. Poor darling, working so hard at an unanticipated task, exercising, at this dead time of the afternoon, his one social gift. But though apparently sinking into lassitude, regardless of the havoc it worked with his appearance and with the delicate fabric of a social grouping, he was certainly, behind this abject façade, cunningly arranging some little plan. At the end of the story he was telling, he would at once reveal his determination to escape. Amabel was to see him at his worst.

Aware that only the wildest bacchanalia of laughter would suffice to relieve Amabel of the emotions she was about to experience, Miriam abandoned him. For it was now certain that he could not be kept there for the afternoon. As if his escape were already achieved, she savoured in advance the scene following his departure: Amabel's tense face regarding her, mirth held back, so that for a moment they might share a perfection of silent incredulity. A mutual, dumb, entranced contemplation of enormity, enhanced by their simultaneous vision of the neatly-escaped criminal waiting downstairs; a vision that would recur during Amabel's rapturous abandonment.

‘You will doubtless have anticipated,’ he was saying, and, looking across, Miriam caught the crafty gleam in the eyes that were blinking sleepily towards Amabel, ‘the end of this story. And in any case I have perhaps told you enough stories and should not weesh to bore you.’ He was on his feet with the last word, standing before herself, with head, bird-like, on one side. She exactly anticipated the small, high tone, very gentle, and the guilty schoolboy smile with which he said: ‘Miriam-shall-we-not-at-once-go-to-this-concert, for which, already’ (and he drew out his jewelled watch), ‘we must be very late?’ And almost without waiting for an answer he turned to Amabel, moving across the room with his easy dignity, his Eastern beauty once more fully blossoming, dominating his pathetically ill-chosen clothes. A modest, proud ambassador of his race, going through the ceremonial of farewell, bowing before, during, and after his deep-voiced murmurings; three formal obeisances, two over her hand, the final one, after her hand was released, leaving his head half-turned towards his line of retreat, away from Amabel at her loveliest, without having had any talk with her, almost without having heard her voice.

Amabel had concentrated on her poses and her rills of laughter. Perhaps this was her invariable way with any sort of man, to begin with. Poses to focus attention on her beauty, rills of laughter given forth from each attitude in turn. But all this eloquence had played about Michael unperceived. And she herself, having purposely allowed Amabel to dawn on him without preliminary description and then stood aside to await the result, had presently been too guiltily aware of having staged an absurdity and left it to look after itself, to do anything beyond throwing in a word now and again in the hope of heading off an anecdote. Left unchecked, he had

handled the situation after his manner, slaying the occasion before it was fully alive. And now, his duty accomplished, he stood disgracefully before her, bending, hands on knees, face outstretched, eyes quizzically gazing, and voice, though gentle and deprecating, booming as if to recall one from a distance: 'Shall we not GO?'

Turning back into the room from dispatching him to wait for her downstairs, she closed the door to give Amabel free range.

But Amabel was not waiting for her. Gone off alone, she stood at the far-off window, gazing out, very tall, posed against the upright of the window-frame, in her long, flowing robe. Remote. Withdrawn as though deliberately she had placed the length of the room between herself and the scene that had taken place at its other end, and intended not only to ignore but to obliterate it by another, for themselves alone, there by the window, that would carry them forward together as if Michael had never been brought in. Judgment, upon Michael, and upon any one who had found him worth a second thought. Having thus expressed herself, if they had been going to spend the afternoon together, she would for a while, only for a little while, in order to drive her judgment home, give it continuous expression in her gestures: a withdrawal of the eyes when one was speaking, an apparent absent-mindedness, an abrupt movement, ostensibly to adjust a curtain or open or close a window. And suddenly would abandon it and give forth the full force of her charm, leaving Michael placed, a far-off temporary aberration of one to whom all things were permitted.

But to-day there was no time for the little drama of criticism. There was only a moment or two. Reaching the window she stood at Amabel's side, looked down into the

garden, and tried, by driving away every image save that of the tall tree whose small new leaves, blurred by mist, seemed rather to have condensed upon it than to have sprouted from within its sooty twigs, to turn Michael's visit into an already forgotten parenthesis in their communion.

But Amabel was not with her. Glancing, she found her bent profile meditative. She was not looking into the garden. The downward tilt of her face gave the curve of her cheek a slight fullness and emphasized the roundness of her chin. Michael ought to have seen her thus. And have heard the small, quiet, childlike voice, in which, after a moment's contemplation, she would state a thought. The stillness held his presence there, dividing them. And with his presence, his unknown trouble, making Miriam feel she ought to be impatient to be gone. But Amabel had something to express. And this valuable something, even if it related to a perfectly mistaken view of him, might throw a helpful light. In a moment, she would speak. Having decided on her comment, she was collecting herself to present it effectively. Disguised, perhaps, not recognizable as a comment. Yet avenging, or justifying herself. Something that would put the responsibility for her unpleasant new experience—for Michael had not only failed to burn incense, he had not even displayed the smallest awareness of an altar upon which incense should be burned—in its right place. Either that; or this deep quietude might be the prelude to one of her wordless little exhibitions of meek protest. But it was beginning to seem like refusal to speak, so that she might have the full force of her nature gathered to meet whatever one tried to say, and to dispose of it in one or other of her ways of acknowledging the presence, in another, of a well-

deserved embarrassment; and Michael and his visit would remain for ever unmentionable between them.

‘Mira!’

The quiet word, and the pause which followed it, revealing Amabel about to think aloud, made Miriam’s heart beat anxiously, reproaching her for all she had caused these two to endure in order that she herself might have the satisfaction of bringing about a social occasion. But even now, with the crime committed and its results on her hands, she found herself resenting, since there was only a moment in which to reassert the self Amabel had invented for her, Amabel’s quiet departure from intimacy into one of her thought-excursions whose result would be a statement whose full meaning would elude and leave her to go away imprisoned within it, imprisoned by Amabel and teased by the memory of the Irish laughter that would break over her abrupt English winding-up and departure.

Defiant of this uncomfortable fate, she moved impatiently away into the room.

‘You MUST marry him!’

For a moment while the room swayed about her, she found herself, deserted by Amabel now standing reproachfully protective at Michael’s side, so close to the impossible destiny that it seemed as though her narrow escape of years ago had never taken place. Amabel was right. Amabel knew, now that she had seen Michael, that it ought not to have taken place. Saw, with the whole force of her generous nature, the cruelty of deserting Michael. Saw it so clearly that she was ready, in order to secure safety and happiness for him, to sacrifice the life together here at a moment’s notice. She had already sacrificed it. Judged, condemned,

and set it aside. Within it, henceforth, if indeed it should continue, was isolation. Isolation with Amabel's judgment.

The room steadied about her, but it seemed to be with the last of her strength that she forced herself to laughter that left her drained and shuddering with cold, and stood in the air a dreadful sound, telling of her hardness, her implacable, cold determination.

Amabel echoed her laughter gaily. But this laughter revoked nothing of her judgment. It stated nothing but herself, though within it, within this particular gay laugh, statement rather than one of her many kinds of commentary or of emotional expression, was contained her everlasting attribution to others of the width and generosity of her own nature. Taking it for granted, she believed it to exist even below the most pitifully constricted surfaces. This laughter gave no comfort. It gave only time, a breathing space during which thought could operate. And here indeed was thought, a tide flowing freely from an immovable deep certainty which for Amabel had no existence. This certainty stood between them, marking, now that it had been brought out into the open by a deliberate tampering with the movement of life, a fundamental separation. And there was no one alive who could decide, in this strange difference, where lay right and wrong. Why should it be right to have no sense of nationality? Why should it be wrong to feel this sense as something whose violation would be a base betrayal? Much more than that. Something that could not be. Not merely difficult and sacrificial and yet possible. Simply impossible. With her unlocated, half-foreign being, Amabel could see nothing of the impossibility of spending one's life in Jewry.

Re-reading the statements hammered into shape long ago in her contests with Michael, and now recovered and

crowding into her consciousness, she felt embarrassment give way to lonely sadness. The sadness she had so often felt in trying to put before Amabel the two sides of a problem for which there was no solution save in terms of temperament; a solution that left it still tainting the air. Here, clear in her mind, was a mass of communication for an admiring, patiently listening Amabel. Not all Amabel's generosity, not even her absence of national consciousness, could prevail against it if it could be stated in the terms which interchange with Amabel would inspire her to discover. They would reach a mysterious inexorable certainty. But even if there were time, the conflict with Amabel would be, in its own particular way, worse than had been the conflict with Michael. And useless.

Driven back into dreary self-possession by memories of that early suffering, when she had had herself as well as Michael to contend with, she looked easily across at Amabel. And found her facing down the room with the expression she wore when admitting an absurdity, smile hovering, eyes veiled pending restatement. But she remained silent, holding condemnation horribly suspended there between them, waiting, with this semblance of an apology, for some defence she could proceed to demolish, waiting to know its nature before taking a fresh pose.

And now she was about to speak, without any meeting of eyes, looking into space, tenderly, as if what she were going to say were to be addressed to someone waiting and listening a few feet from where she stood, or to herself, or the universe called in as an invisible third, as if her words would have no recognizable bearing upon what was dividing them. Yet she was well aware of the suspense her deliberate preliminary silence was creating as a frame for the ultimatum.

‘He’s wonderful,’ she breathed, ‘and so beautiful.’ And still she did not turn. She had paid her tribute meditatively, and as if he were her own discovery; as if she were defending him from someone incapable of seeing him as she had seen while pretending to listen to his little tales; as if she and she alone were qualified to estimate his worth, with the recognition of which, standing averted there by her window, she was set apart, unable, while she still dwelt on it, to face one who was incompletely appreciative.

Watching her thus, Miriam felt her own spirit leap to the touch of an incredible hope, and as her inward eye took in the vista of a future from which she was excluded and into which the rich present flowed and was lost, she found words on her lips, arrived before she could consider them, the abrupt destination of a journey that in every direction of lightning-swift thought and feeling seemed interminable and yet was so rapid that she spoke almost into the echo of Amabel’s words:

‘Then marry him, my dear, yourself.’

‘I would! I would to-morrow!’ cried Amabel and gathered up her kimono and began to dance. Not in her usual gliding, mannered style, but childishly pirouetting in the room’s clear space. Light-heartedly *dancing* towards the impasse of marriage with Michael. Sophisticated, cultivated, coming from a way of life and of being of which Michael, who read no fiction and had no social imagination, had not the slightest inkling. Ready, for Michael’s sake, to bury all that she was in Jewish orthodoxy, to disguise herself for life. And for Michael too, such a marriage, on the religious side, would be more complex than either of those he had already contemplated. Still ... with his horror of assimilated Jewesses

...

At the end of a wild whirl, Amabel stopped dead. 'I'd love his children,' she declared breathlessly, to the universe, or to herself, for now she was ensconced, oblivious, at the very centre of her own being. And as the flying draperies came flatly to rest against her lightly poised form, she whispered to herself: 'I can see their beady eyes.'

'Beady,' echoed Miriam, 'yes, beady,' and herself thrilled to the pictured future from which she was shut out. Amabel, Michael, and their children, on some unpredictable background. Their grouped beauty would have the power of lighting up any imaginable interior. Swiftly she took leave of Amabel incredibly newly found, incredibly newly lost. Michael's possible saviour. It was a good-bye that was unlike any salutation that had ever passed between them. An almost casual good-bye to Amabel left standing still too much adream to come forward for the shared farewell that was both retrospect and anticipation, Amabel grateful for a swift departure from the scene upon which had emerged between them a possibility that hung by so much less than a thread.

With careful carelessness, lest, by an instant's loss of poise, she should presently close the door upon the newly opened perspective, Miriam made her way downstairs to the unsuspecting Michael.

Seeing him, as she turned the last corner, hung up, enduring, without either his newspaper or his bag of grapes, propped against the marble slab with one heel hooked to the rail underneath it while she approached with her incommunicable message not only of salvation but of a salvation on a scale magnificently beyond anything she herself could ever have offered, it seemed that an eternity must pass before this amazing message could be made to address him from within his own consciousness, and she

dreaded the burden of the immediate irrelevant hours and of those others which must follow them. For now, indeed, she must keep her hand on Michael.

The buzz of conversation filling the hall, though for a moment the sound had been welcome, was more oppressive, now that she was seated in the midst of it, than the silent glare of the staircase and the long corridor. Though composed of a multitude of voices, it was a single, rhythmic, continuous sound: beastlike. It was the voice of some great primitive beast, deeply excited by the surrounding glow, and sending forth, towards the brighter glow upon the distant platform, through its vast maw, ceaselessly opening and shutting, the response of its aroused, confused perception, half challenge, half salute.

Hundreds of times in the past, she had been in the midst of this sound, without noticing its peculiar quality. But never before on a Sunday. Transferring it, in imagination, to a week-day, she found its character changed. Therefore the chill, observant detachment coming upon her as they entered the hall from the street and that still was with her in spite of her promising experiment, meant only that her being was in revolt against this flouting of Sunday's rich quietude, the closing of its long vistas. For although the storm-dark sky had brought on the lights before their time, so that it seemed to be evening, and Sunday, turning towards the new week, no longer quite Sunday, there was enough pale light coming in to mark the time of day.

The gathered orchestra was tuning up. Through the shapeless vast continuous voice of the beast sounded the

abrupt assertions of the instruments preparing for the controlled statement that presently would sound out across the hall. Subdued preliminary rat-tat and rumble, cheerful tootings, the warm blare of a trombone, reedy flutings and liquid flutings, the intimate voice of a violin, two pure solo notes breaking through the confusion of sound with a promise cancelled by an experimental flourish, were followed by a stillness before which the universal voice was dying down, leaving only single voices here and there, very audible and individual.

But the presence of the conductor was having no effect upon this curious numbness that made everything so remote and indifferent. Without raising her eyes from the darkness across the chair-back in front of her, certain that if they were to turn to the familiar spectacle of the distant platform they would find its glamour gone, she pictured him standing motionless against a rising background of orchestra, his white face stern between the gentleness of soot-black beard and soot-black wavy crest with plume, so far, in place, confronting his audience with his silent demand for silence.

As the scattered sounds began to fall away, something within her rose to repel this strange, cold trance which now she recognized as a continuance of the deadness that had fallen upon her on that second evening at Bonnycliff, as if for good. It had been driven away by the return to London and to Amabel, the beginning of spring and the moment up in the clouds, and was now asserting itself as central and permanent, and sternly suggesting that the whole of the past had been a long journey in a world of illusion. Supposing this were true, supposing this cold contemplation of reality stripped of its glamour were all that remained, there was still space in consciousness, far away behind this benumbed

surface, where dwelt whatever it was that now came forward, not so much to give battle as to invite her to gather herself away from this immovable new condition and watch, from a distance, unattained, the behaviour of the newly discovered world.

To prove to herself that she could ignore the metamorphosis, act independently while it went its way to no matter what final annihilation of every known aspect of her external world, she lifted her eyes to turn towards Michael with an appearance of sociability and to murmur something, anything, the first thing that should occur to her, and became aware that her lips were set and her eyebrows faintly lifted above eyes that had left the shadow and had not yet travelled far enough in his direction to call him into communication and were now drawn to a space that opened before her in the air between herself and her surroundings, while the enterprise that had started them on their journey was being arrested by a faint stirring, far away below the bleakness produced by the icy touch of external reality, of interest and wonder.

Even now, with life stripped bare before her and all its charm departed, wonder, with its question, was still persisting. It seemed to call upon her for acceptance, for courage not so much to steel herself against the withdrawal of the old familiar magnetic stream as to push on, in spite of its withdrawal, to the discovery of some new way of being.

Leaving Michael undisturbed by a remark that in any case must be almost inaudibly murmured and would bring a response by no means inaudible, she turned her eyes at last upon the surrounding scene: the sea of humanity gathered in a darkness which all the importance of cunningly arranged illumination was powerless to disperse; the distant platform

foliage-fringed, the grey, grimed boards of its unoccupied portions, which to-day she noticed for the first time, pallid beneath the lights clustered above, whose radiance, falling upon the white-breasted beetles of the orchestra, was broken by a mosaic of harsh shadows.

The tap-tap of the conductor's baton, falling into the stillness, startled her with its peremptory demand for attention and its urgent indifference to her need. But though there was no gathering of the forces of her being in response to the music now advancing upon her and of which she was aware only as a shape of tones, indifferently noting their pattern, the alternating prominence of the various groups of instruments and the varieties of tempo and rhythm, its presence was a relief. The process of following the pattern brought the movement of time once more into realizable being and, while she travelled along it, even to the accompaniment of music stripped to its bones and robbed of its penetrating power by this chill preoccupation with its form alone, she hoped that the fragment of courage with which, just now, she had urged herself forward, might be gathering force.

But the movement of time, because she was consciously passing along the surface of its moments as one by one they were measured off in sound that no longer held for her any time-expanding depth, was intolerably slow. And so shallow, that presently it was tormenting her with the certainty that elsewhere, far away in some remote region of consciousness, her authentic being was plunged in a timeless reality within which, if only she could discover the way, she might yet rejoin it and feel the barrier between herself and the music drop away. But the way was barred. And the barrier was not like any of the accountable barriers she had known in the

past. It was not any abnormal state of tension. It was as if some inexorable force were holding her here on this chill promontory of consciousness, while within the progressive mesh of interwoven sounds dark chasms opened.

The increase of this sense of unfathomable darkness perilously bridged by sound that had, since it was strange to her, the quality of an infernal improvisation, brought, after a time, the fear of some sudden horrible hallucination, or the breakdown, unawares, of those forces whereby she was automatically conforming to the ordinances of the visible world. Once more she raised her eyes to glance, for reassurance, at Michael seated at her side. But before they could reach him, a single flute-phrase, emerging unaccompanied, dropped into her heart.

Oblivious of the continuing music, she repeated in her mind the little phrase that had spread coolness within her, refreshing as sipped water from a spring. A decorative fragment, separable, a mere nothing in the composition, it had yet come forth in the manner of an independent statement by an intruder awaiting his opportunity and thrusting in, between beat and beat of the larger rhythm, his rapturous message, abrupt and yet serenely confident, like the sudden brief song of a bird after dark; and so clear that it seemed as though, if she should turn her eyes, she would see it left suspended in the air in front of the orchestra, a small festoon of sound made visible.

No longer a pattern whose development she watched with indifference, the music now assailing her seemed to have borrowed from the rapturous intruder both depth and glow; and confidence in an inaccessible joy. But she knew the change was in herself; that the little parenthesis, coming punctually as she turned to seek help from Michael who

could not give it, had attained her because in that movement she had gone part of the way towards the changeless central zone of her being. The little phrase had caught her on the way.

But from within the human atmosphere all about her came the suggestion that this retreat into the centre of her eternal profanity, if indeed she should ever reach it again, was an evasion whose price she would live to regret. Again and again it had filled her memory with wreckage. She admitted the wreckage, but insisted at the same time upon the ultimate departure of regret, the way sooner or later it merged into the joy of a secret companionship restored; a companionship that again and again, setting aside the evidence of common sense, and then the evidence of feeling, had turned her away from entanglements by threatening to depart, and had always brought, after the wrenching and the wreckage, moments of joy that made the intermittent miseries, so rational and so passionate and so brief, a small price to pay.

With a sense of battle waged, though still all about her, much nearer than the protesting people, was the chill darkness that yet might prove to be the reality for which she was bound, she drew back and back and caught a glimpse, through an opening inward eye, of a gap in a low hedge, between two dewy lawns, through which she could see the features of some forgotten scene, the last of a fading twilight upon the gloomy leaves of dark, clustered bushes and, further off, its friendly glimmer upon massive tree-trunks, and wondered, as the scene vanished, why the realization of a garden as a gatherer of growing darkness should be so deeply satisfying, and why these shadowy shrubs and trees should move her to imagine them as they would be in morning light. And why it was that only garden scenes, and never open

country, and never the interiors of buildings, returned of themselves without associative link or deliberate effort of memory.

Driving through her question came the realization that the 'green solitude' recommended by Hypo and spurned because every imagined leaf and grass-blade had looked so dreary when thought of in the presence of his outlook on life, might yet be hers perforce. His adroitly chosen words now offered their meaning, free from the shadow of his oblivions. For him such a solitude might be just one of the amenities of civilized life, very pleasant and refreshing and sometimes unspeakably beautiful, pathetically beautiful, a symbol of man's sporadic attempts at control of wild nature, in a chaotic world hurtling to its death through empty space.

Presenting itself independently of his vision, it opened its welcoming depths. Inexhaustible. Within it, alone, free from the chill isolation that had returned to her spirit this afternoon, she would somehow sustain, somehow make terms with what must surely be the profoundest solitude known to human kind. Twilight, trees and flowers, the first inhabitants of a future into which, until this moment, she had cast no investigating glance.

All this week, since the moment up in the clouds, she had lived suspended in a dream to which no thought could penetrate. Here, shut away from life's ceaselessly swarming incidents, her mind was moving forward to meet the future and picture its encroaching power, its threat to every stable item in her existence, to life itself.

With these thoughts, plunged grim and astringent into her relaxed being, came the impulse to confide in Michael, and, with this impulse, fear, driving the blood from her cheeks. To tell him would be to tell herself, to see herself committed, not

only to the agonized breaking-up of her physical being, but to the incalculable regrouping of all the facets of her life. Glancing at him, she was arrested by his serene beauty. Yet this serenity might be only apparent. Rich Hebrew beauty in repose. From brow to beardpoint, courteous attention, serene. But already, if she could see his eyes, she might read in them weariness of a 'so-prolonged music,' and if she could see into his mind she might find therein the pattern of a chess problem. Swiftly recalling her glance, she subdued her risen smile to an uncontrollable beam that presently became the expression of her thankfulness that the grimmest features of the possible future should first have presented themselves while she was shut away at so many removes from the life of every day. In the vast remove of Sunday; back, within this spacious neutral enclosure, in the past with Michael, who had so punctually returned to be with her at this moment; lifted, by the stimulus of the slightly poisoned air, at least into the illusion of floating free from all attachments. She had regarded them, had already faced them provisionally. For the first and last time. For when they next presented themselves they would be changed. Some of their power would have dissolved. Or perhaps they might be even more powerful?

'*What is it?*' His too-audible whisper revealed him turned towards her, smiling his response to her half-smile; released from boredom and anxious to share her imagined mirth.

Her voice, murmuring within the sonorous farewell of the finale, a reminder that the interval was due, seemed to be speaking the end of a sentence that was begun in the past, and to convey, simply by being audible, all she had to tell him. And when the music ceased and he repeated his inquiry, in the midst of the first crackles of outbreking applause, strange and sad, a division between them, was the fact that he

was as far as ever from the sense of her wordless communication. And the words she now dropped casually into the space between their seated forms seemed a repetition of news about an acquaintance in whom neither of them was particularly interested and passed beyond him and became a stentorian announcement to the whole world, carrying away from her a secret that was received with indifference, flung back and left with her, an overwhelming reality.

His silence drew her eyes to his face, turned her way but not regarding her, regarding only what she had told him, silently and therefore with deep emotion. For nothing less could bar, for him, the way to speech. In a moment he would turn and pay tribute, from the depth of his Jewish being to the central fact, for him the fact of facts; and to herself as its privileged, consecrated victim. What else could he do? What had it to do with him, or with any man on earth? But emotional tribute, respectful, impersonal, racial tribute from him who had never failed to put the whole of his mental and moral power at the service of every situation she had encountered during their long friendship, would leave her more isolated with her share of grim reality than the indifference of the surrounding world.

Through the buzz of conversation and the stir of people leaving their places, came his questions, gently, in his gentlest tones, one by one, steadily. But though his face was calm his clasped hands trembled and he still looked gravely ahead, away from her. People passing out broke into the to and fro of question and answer. But he knew, now, all that there was to know. Even his natural curiosity had been satisfied. And when once more they were alone and the empty seats on either side gave them fuller freedom, she was

seized with a longing to cancel their interchange, somehow to escape from its cheerlessness.

‘Enough of my affairs,’ she said and tried to find comfort in listening to her own voice as if it were that of someone else, someone free and unattained. ‘Tell me what it was you wanted to consult me about.’

‘After what you have told me,’ he said, trying by slow speech to control the trembling of his voice, ‘that which I would have said is less than nothing. I have even partly forgotten. I must however tell you,’ his dark eyes came half round, grave and judicial, ‘that I think in all circumstances it is of the greatest improbability. But if it should be true ... Oh, Miriam, now, at last, marry me. As brother. At once.’

He had not looked her way. He had set his low-toned outcry there before them both and left it, as a contribution to her private counsels, and mercifully had not seen how, even while this revelation of the essential Michael struck at her heart, the muscles of her lips were uncontrollably twisted by amusement over his failure to recognize that the refuge he offered from what indeed might be a temporary embarrassment as well as a triumphant social gesture, was a permanent prison; over his assumption that she might be scared into flight, disguised as a Jewess, from the open road, down into Judaea. But now, at once, whilst still his outcry lingered on the air, she must somehow make him aware of the silent tribute of her kneeling spirit.

She began to speak of friendship, gently, meditatively, an invitation to think aloud in the manner of their converse long ago, quoting, without acknowledgment, Alma’s suggestion that the best investments for later years are friendships made in youth. Contemplating the theme in order to find phrases, she discovered the reason for her instinctive recoil from

Alma's theory and remembered feeling the same repulsion when Jan had said that no one need be without friends in a world where there was always someone at hand to cultivate, and when Hypo, talking of the jolly adventure of living, proclaimed that in order to be interesting one must be interested. He meant, of course, mutual flattery alternating with mutual fault-finding. But the objection to them all was the same, the strange motive: friends as a kind of fur coat.

What she was saying about friendship being filled out by every experience of friends separated by circumstance, about every meeting being therefore richer than the last, although it brought a false note into her voice because she was certain that this could apply only to those who were facing the same kind of universe, was finding welcome. Perhaps it was true, in the long run, of all human relationships. So long as they were not compulsory. Drawing a releasing breath, she dropped her topic and felt the division in her mind close up at the summons of something pressing forward, tingling pleasantly through her nerves, waiting to be communicated with the whole force of her being. What was it? Thought presented Amabel, and during the second spent in banishing this unwary suggestion and its countless company of images, the inner tide receded, dying down to a faint, decreasing pulsation.

In the hope of clearing a pathway for this obstructed urgency, she embarked, since speech must not cease, upon a series of inconsequent remarks, compelling his collaboration in keeping going this effortless inanity while the field of her consciousness fell silent and empty. To be filled, as the moments flowed through this motionless centre, only by an awareness of the interval between the two parts of the concert as a loop in time, one of those occasions that bring

with peculiar vividness the sense of identity, persistent, unchanging, personal identity, and return, in memory, inexhaustible. Surely he was sharing something of this sense? Feeling how, in this moment of poise, while they submitted themselves to the ritual of inanity, the rhythmic beat of life made itself felt not only physically, but spiritually, imposing its unbounded certainty, making little of the temporary darkness of events, the knots and entanglements of life and growth through which it passed?

But when she glanced she saw upon his face only a gleefully beaming recognition of the manœuvre with which, in the old days, in good moods, she had sometimes evaded conversation. The beam was so vivid, so much like the joyous irradiation of his student days, that it called from her an uncontrollable answering beam, gleeful, dangerous, unkind. Quenching it she prepared to improvise a tiresome, precise topic, turning away a grave face as she began at random with the idea of music as a solvent, in the formal tone of one about to launch a challenging generalization. Fortunately, like most men, he had no ear for artificiality of tone. The tones of his own voice did not fall into any one of the stereotyped shapes within which most Englishmen are wont to hide their varying embarrassments.

But his attention was merely marking time, waiting until her gratuitous generalizations should have run their course. It was too late, the damage was done. The moment she ceased talking to herself, she would have to face his reproach. Sooner or later. Though now she was reaping the reward of her self-imposed contemplation, finding in her theme the beginnings of so much interest that she turned with a store of impersonal strength, its rewarding gift, to ask him to agree that heated conferences should be automatically held up (as,

in monastic life, are useful occupations) while the gathered members closed their eyes and listened to the meditations of Beethoven or of Bach. A group of people squeezing by, one by one, to regain their seats, broke into her inquiry.

Assuming, for their benefit, an expression of judicial gravity, he felt for her hand. Unable to repulse, unable to welcome the seeking hand, she looked away beyond him, as if oblivious of his manœuvre, seeking help, and was prompted to use the full force of the pang, always to be hers in seeing him suffer, to enhance the simulation of interest with which she would pretend to discover, far away amongst the audience, an old friend known to them both—and saw a straggler belonging to the returning party, a voluminous lady now moving in from the gangway, and thankfully rose to her feet. Michael, too, was compelled to rise.

Lifted by this compulsory movement into the free flow of air from a near doorway, she felt tensions relax and drain deliciously away, leaving her receptive to the intimate communications of the rescuer, now squeezing apologetically by: two-thirds of the way through a life that had been a ceaseless stream of events set in a ceaseless stream of inadequate commentary without and within. The motionless unchanging centre of her consciousness, bowed beneath the weight of incommunicable experience, announced its claims without achieving freedom from its hunger. Yet it was on behalf of those belonging to her, and not on her own behalf, that she was determined, as the life-moulded, available edge of her bent, conversational profile almost audibly announced, to sustain the ceaseless flow of events, the ceaseless exchange of unsatisfactory comments; haunted meanwhile, in the depths of her solitude, by the presence of youth still waiting within, while bodily youth

mysteriously decayed, and by the gathering, upon her person, of cumbrous flesh. Unable either to impose and make it comely, or to check its outrageous advance.

Settled once more in her place, refreshed by pure air and by the lingering presence of the lonely, middle-aged girl who had just gone by, she was aware of Michael only as an embodied commentary on what was in her mind, and could hear the indignant inflections of his protesting voice: 'Simply an elderly woman who has played her part. Why should she be dissatisfied?' Swiftly withdrawing from this old battleground, she collided with the subject of the mysterious urgency to communicate, when Amabel had emerged in answer to her thought's vain effort to seize it, standing now clear in the forefront of her mind: the journey through extended darkness that had been the central reality of her Bonnycliff experience.

Here at last was priceless material for interchange. Its impersonality would soothe him, and she was eager to know how he would regard it.

'What a waste of time it is to try to discover what is on the tip of your tongue.'

'Possibly, in certain instances. I cannot say.'

'It puts a barrier across the path of what is trying to emerge.'

'What you call barrier may be some sort of aphasia.'

'Which is the result of being strung up.'

'Possibly. But without effort there can be no mental process. And this state of having no mental process is frequently good. One cannot afford these efforts on all occasions. More: it is good deliberately to encourage absence of thought, to conserve the forces for when they shall be needed. In Holy Russia, for example, amongst the

intelligentsia who are driven to live, by reason of deprivation of political freedom, entirely in abstractive life, it would be most-good.'

'M'm. But I mean it requires more effort to control thought than to let it go on talking. For instance ...'

As soon as she reached her story, he attended, in the way he had followed the Hibbert lectures, with an eager, watchful interest, his sceptical mind in wait for a flaw. Quietly presenting point after point, she made him realize that the strange journey had extended further than the length of the small room and had yet brought her to the window high in the wall, actually and not imaginatively, because she had seen, as she hovered there, the unknown detail of the woodwork and the pale glimmer, beyond the window, of moonlight or of dawn, and known she could go no further because the window was closed. And told him how, as the flood-like darkness through which she had driven, face downwards, as if swimming, had expanded before her, sadness had turned to wonder as the thought came that here was the confirmation of her conviction of the inner vastness of space. And that this was less wonderful than the moment up at the little window and the certainty that it was possible to float also in the outer vastness. Drawing a swift breath, to speak again before he should have time to break in, she explained that there was nothing uncanny in the experience, that during the whole of it she had felt its quiet reality.

Out on the further side of her story she grew conscious of her voice as she insisted on this aspect, the scientific aspect that could be perceived and measured, expressed in words and handed about. But the burden of its incommunicable essence was with her still. And even the surface detail might seem to him evidence only of illusion, explicable in terms of

psychological theory, and the story, once told, never convincingly to be repeated, would have been told in vain. Life would flow over it, draw over it veil upon veil until it was forgotten even by herself. For it had not, in its hour, proclaimed itself as something to be for ever effortlessly remembered. It had stood aside, just now, when she had told him all the rest.

He was sitting hunched forward over his clasped hands, head raised, eyes set unseeing on the far distance, below furrowed brow. Resting, perhaps. Simulation of interest while he wandered elsewhere, waiting for cessation? But to whom else could she have confided this lonely experience? Not to Amabel, for Amabel must not know of a loneliness she would interpret as failure. The moment up in the clouds had been a triumphant social moment, belonging to all the world, but not to any one likely to remain in her life. Yet though she had told her tale in vain, reward was here, if she could remember to return in thought to what she had just discovered, and find out exactly what kind of experience it is that returns of itself, effortlessly. Glancing up while she made her mental note, she saw the orchestra returning and heard, at her side, Michael's voice gravely agreeing as to the inner expansibility of space. 'In this single point I see nothing impossible and it may be also possible to achieve a certain expansion of the consciousness at certain moments. But it grows very warm in here again. We must talk of this elsewhere. You shall tell me once more this remarkable experience.'

She was glad to fall in with his suggestion of escaping before the music began again. But when hand in hand they turned into Portland Place and she felt streaming towards her, through the saffron haze that closed its long vista, the magnetic power of the tree-filled park where so much of their years together was stored up, she clasped his hand more firmly, pulling on it to change their pace from the easy stroll favourable to reminiscence, to the steady forward march of friends towards a separate future, and broke the silence, within which the current of their thoughts, stimulated by the shared adventure of emergence into fresh air and golden light, had inevitably turned backwards, by asking him what he thought of Amabel; conversationally, and with a touch of the rallying briskness they both disliked, so that he should believe the question asked merely because between them speech was better than silence. But while her conspiratorial eyes searched the distance and her whole being held its breath and became a listening ear, she felt, tingling through her hand, the thrill of the pain he suffered in believing her to be deliberately dissociating him from this moment of life renewed in escape from enclosure.

‘She laughs too much.’

‘She is young.’

‘That is no reason. She is not a *child*. Tell me rather of your sister in Canada.’

‘Harriett? Left Canada ages ago. Went to Cuba and grew pineapples, and they all learnt to ride. I think they liked the life there and never heard why it came to an end. Harry hardly ever writes. And her letters are just a sort of shorthand, and exclamations. She feels details are useless because the life is so utterly unlike anything we know. So she thinks, not allowing for imagination. Says the Americans are

really different. Like another race. They're in New Orleans now. She keeps the family by running an apartment house, which she describes in one sentence: "Eighteen roomers, my hat, can you see them?" Well, I can. But not the rooms, nor the town, nor the weather, nor the look of the countryside, if any.'

'That is bad. And the little Elspeth, who is your godchild?'

'Dreadful. I've done nothing for her since I held her at the font, feeling so proud of the loveliness of her little sleeping form that I realized something of the frantic pride of parents. I tried writing to her after she began to go to school. In her answer, in pure American, she wrote elevator in two words: "ella vater," and the shock of hearing her speak American, and of realizing that she would grow up into an American girl, prevented my writing again. They all seem so far away. And yet no further than Sarah and Bennett in their suburb. In another universe.'

'That is a gross exaggeration, believe me.'

'We all have different sets of realities.'

'That, believe me, is impossible.'

And again, demanding no price for truant contemplation, the heavenly morning received her. Turning, in the fullness of her recently restored freedom, towards the light as towards the contemplative gaze of a lover, she felt its silent stream flood her untenanted being and looked up, and recovered, in swift sequence, and with a more smiting intensity than when she had first come upon them, the earlier gifts of this interrupted spring: the dense little battalions, along the park's green alley, between tall leafless trees, of new, cold crocus-

cups, glossy with living varnish, golden-yellow, transparent mauve, pure frosty white, white with satiny purple stripings; the upper rim of each petal so sharp that it seemed to be cutting for itself a place in the dense, chill air; each flower a little upright figure and a song, proclaiming winter's end. Then tree-buds in the square seen suddenly, glistening, through softly showering rain. Then the green haze of small leaves: each leaf translucent in the morning and, at night, under the London lamplight, an opaque, exciting, viridian artificiality. And it was with power borrowed from this early light, and from the chance of stillness as perfect as its own, that these memories were smiting through her. No sound in house or street. Away in the square, the small song of a bird, measuring the height there of unimpeded air. And within this light and this stillness was the reality that disappeared in the din of the drama. Yet almost no one seemed to desire the stillness in which alone it could be breathed and felt.

The door, opening. Being slowly opened by someone holding the loose handle to prevent its rattling. *Amabel*—moved to come downstairs at this unlikely hour—coming, amazingly, as if summoned, to share this perfect moment. With scarcely a sound she is gliding down the length of the other side of the room, to reach the window-space and silently blossom, just within the line of my vision when I turn my eyes from the window. *Amabel knows* immortal moments.... They draw her. And she knows how surely life clears a space for them a few seconds. But it is enough.

She remained gazing into the open—for it was possible that *Amabel*, reaching the end of the table, would whisk herself across the window-space and land, crouching, at one's side and, for a moment, look out towards the light. Into whose brightness had come a deeper warmth, while the

house-fronts across the way had an air of confidence, as if sure of healing for the sadness hidden behind their experienced walls; from the sense of which, in general, one's thoughts sheered selfishly away, courting forgetfulness. Yet the inhabitants of these houses were doomed to pass their days without meeting Amabel. Without being able to raise their eyes and find her where she had paused, exactly opposite, beautifully posed in the full light. She had brought herself, and not any special tribute, to this heavenly morning, though of course she was joyously aware of it and of herself as its particularly favoured guest.

Drawn thither by the rising within her of a contemplative smile born of a vision of Amabel upstairs, alight with her plan—dressing with swift tiptoe movements, arms raised, arms extended in graceful flourishing gestures, each one of which served, besides its own purpose, that of luxuriously stretching the whole of her elastic muscles, each flourish a rapturous greeting of the day, until at last she stood for a fraction of a second before her mirror, not to seek its help, but gaily to survey, and triumphantly to salute, herself poised in readiness to depart and dawn, head upflung as a preliminary to the assumption of the graceful tilt, shoulders thrown back, leaving balanced the curves of the body confined by arms straightly downstretched so that the hands, palms downwards and turned a little outwards from the wrists, assumed the appearance of small paddles with which she propelled her lightly balanced form, in the delicately swaying movements her feet seemed to follow rather than lead—Miriam's gaze shifted from the window and found an Amabel transformed.

In place of the chic French morning frock of chequered cotton, with lace tuckers at neck and sleeves, those at the

sleeves frilling gaily out just above the elbow, was a filmy gown of English design, pleated where it should have lain flat, disguising, instead of following, contours, and having loose sleeves that began by destroying the curve of the shoulder and ended, destroying the curve of the arm, just below the elbow. Rising from this transforming gown, the firm pillar of her neck supported a face whose pure oval, usually outlined by the silky dark curtains, was broken by the emergence of a small cliff of white brow. From her grave face, turning slowly this way and that to show itself at all angles, shone an expression of serene enlightenment.

‘Marvellous, Amabel.’

Amabel’s gay trill, directed towards the window, ended on a meditative coo, revealing her nimble wits seeking, unobtrusively, conversational material that would serve to employ her deep excitement without sacrifice of the delight of being entrancedly observed.

‘I did it for you,’ she said with her eyes on the opposite wall, and tilted her face, suggesting other toilettes, and drew her lips delicately back, partly revealing both even rows of teeth in a ‘mischievous’ smile, and then, as if remembering, grew very grave, held her head steadily upright like an Englishwoman, and assumed an expression perfectly conveying the brooding, provisional graciousness of the kind of Englishwoman who is always alert to ignore everything to which this graciousness does not apply. They gazed at each other, while still she held this pose, rejoicing together over an achieved masterpiece.

‘It’s sweet of you, Amabel; because of course it makes you look years older. And perfectly lovely. You know it’s rum, and not at all rum when you come to think of it, because I see

now why I always wanted you to have a forehead; which I knew would also suit you.’

Amabel turned towards this promising opening with a movement almost too eager for her dress and bearing, and at once corrected it by falling into a graciously attentive pose: floppy-sleeved elbows on table, chin propped, a little sideways, on hands laid flatly one above the other, eyes and lips set, to match the intelligent brow, in an expression of approving expectancy.

‘You see ...’ but indeed she was listening as well as contemplating her own metamorphosis; for her spirit, chuckling its recognition of their unvarying opening for serious remarks, almost broke up the stillness of her face. ‘Women’s faces misrepresent them. No one really knows, of course, who starts fashions, though heaps of them must originate in blemishes or old age. (Dog-collars, for instance, to hide scars, and mittens to disguise shrivelling hands which give away even an enamelled face.) But whoever started fringes ought to spend eternity hunting for a packet of Hinde’s curlers. But it’s not only the misery of the fringed, not only the incalculable nervous cost of curled fringes for straight-haired people in a damp climate, but the results of never having the brow properly aired, and of never seeing it, or having it seen, without a sort of horror. Of course every one knows Frenchwomen are intelligent and that the eighteenth century was the beginning of a period that was very stimulating to the intelligence. But allowing for the exciting time they lived in, can you think, remembering their portraits, of any women more radiantly intelligent and enlightened-looking than those eighteenth-century Frenchwomen with mountains of powdered hair above expanses of white brow? They were intelligent, and a woman

who has a furze-bush to her eyebrows may be intelligent. But the point is that they *looked* intelligent, and this fact must have influenced them, as well as their friends the philosophers. The spectacle of themselves, met in mirrors, must have influenced them. To-day, the average man (almost any sort of man with a more or less decent forehead, and particularly those who early begin to lose their hair), surveying himself in the glass, perceives, whether or no he is conscious of it, at least the appearance of intelligence, a luminous bluff, quietly presiding over the various kinds of sound and fury below; while the average woman confronts a thicket, whose effect is to concentrate attention upon the lower part of the face, leaving the serene heaven of the brow in darkness. The fringe, as a factor in environment. A whole library could be written.'

Amabel's admiring agreement left them tantalizingly hand in hand, at this unavailable time of day, at the opening of hours of contemplative interchange that properly belonged to the far-away evening. Already it was nearly nine. Twenty heavenly minutes had passed since she sat down to breakfast and now she must rise and feel the day seize and begin to devour her; while Amabel, also getting to her feet, leisurely, without compulsion, was turning to salute the same day with outstretched arms ... and revealing, seen thus in profile, upon the lovely little cliff of brow, just before it met, without any weakening curve, the soft ridge of her hair, the slightest little bombe, wise and childlike.

'Listen to me, Babinka. You are to wear your hair like that when we meet Hypo. You must.'

She slowly turned and stood, meditative, hesitating, finger to lower lip, eyes rounded in childish dismay. But there was no time, no *time* for a scene of this kind.

‘Promise; don’t forget.’

The sense of urgency reached her. ‘Mira,’ she said swiftly, dropping her childish pose for one of embarrassed girlhood, smiling face averted, eyes downcast; ‘this occasion is *not* going to be easy for your Babinka.’

‘Why on earth, Amabel?’

‘In the first place,’ and now she spoke slowly, strolling gracefully along the window-space, ‘he is a very great man.’ Her profile showed her brow lifted a little anxiously above eyes down-gazing as if in dismay at the recognition in her path of an uncanny obstacle which refused to be set aside. ‘In the second place, I like not at all my impression of him from what you have told me, and from these books into which I have looked. In the third place, I do not know what is the best pose to take with this kind of Englishman.’

‘Why pose for him?’

‘For every one, one must have some kind of pose. For men, particularly, or one would too greatly embarrass them.’

‘But if you dislike him, why trouble whether or no you happen to embarrass him?’

‘Because it is to myself that I owe not to embarrass.’

‘M’m. I know. But just for this one evening, Babinka, don’t be French—by the way, he’ll see through any sort of pose.’

‘That I do not mind. If the pose is good.’

‘If you must have a pose, don’t be French. Be Irish if you like, but not too much. And *don’t* be in awe. Except in the sense that everybody ought to be in awe of everybody, it’s simply fantastic, do believe me, for *you* to be in awe of Hypo. And you and me together. Think. We’ll take the evening in our stride, as a parenthesis. You see? We shall be there and not quite there; just looking in, on a play.’

‘Ah,’ she smiled, but wistfully and gazing ahead, not looking this way, privately contemplative, looking *wise*—‘if this were possible.’

‘Amabel, you’re simply horrifying me. *You*. If it’s not possible for us to be altogether *there*, and quite elsewhere at the same time, we’ll put it off.’ Her face came round now, dim, with the light behind, but vivid, tense with the effort of holding back the pulsation of emotions at strife within her. ‘It would be monstrous for either of us to be under the spell of the occasion. There isn’t any occasion and it hasn’t any spell. He wrote, and on a post card by the way, note that: “We must meet and talk, bring your Amabel.” But as there’s now no need to meet and talk, and as by this time he will have had my letter explaining that there is nothing for him and me to discuss, and no plans to be made and no green solitude, thank heaven, needed, and as, even if there were, we could hardly discuss in your presence’—Amabel’s trill broke out and she slowly advanced, tiptoe, hands stretched downwards, paddling her through the thin indoor air, face outstretched for a kiss—‘we can easily put him off, unless we feel we can make it into a meeting between the representatives of two countries, incomparable and incompatible. But if we can’t represent our own country——’

‘We *will*,’ squealed Amabel gently, sinking to her knees, gazing adoringly upwards for a moment and then turning away her head, her face tense again and staring into space as if a desperate resolution stood there visible. ‘Your Babinka is still a little frightened.’

‘Get up, Amabel, I simply must go this moment. But remember, you need not have any plan or take any line. It will just be *us*. And the intelligent eye, blinkered in advance with unsound generalizations about “these intense, over-

personal feminine friendships,” and the clumsy masculine machinery of observation, working in this case like a hidden camera with a very visible and very gleaming lens, will both find themselves at fault.’

And still she hesitated, disquietingly, standing still, with bent head, her inward eye considering her many aspects, grouped for her inspection and each, in turn, being set aside.

‘In any case, Amabel, after what I have told him about you, which of course you don’t know, do, please, to please me, let him have the shock of your bumpy forehead.’

But though Amabel’s laughter, genuine, but leaving uncertain which of many possible images had evoked it, carried them as far as the steps, her engrossment with her problem was still perceptible, coming between them, set between them until next Thursday should have come and gone.

CHAPTER II

‘I see. You go to all these serious-minded meetings and lectures as young men go to music-halls; only that your mirth has to be inaudible.’

‘Until we get home.’

‘Until you get home, yes ...’ His lowered eyelids, giving to the fleshily curving smile the expression of the more sensuous representations of Buddha, prophesied the redeeming grey-blue beam that in a fraction of a second would accompany the jest being sought behind those closed shutters—‘You bottle it up, carry it home. And then uncork and let fly. Well, I’m glad *someone* is getting entertainment out of Lycurgan meetings. But, you know, you don’t *know* how fortunate you are, you modern young women with your latchkeys and your freedoms. You’ve no *idea* how fortunate you are.’

Here, if one could tie him down and make him listen, was an outlet into their own world, far away from the formal life of men, yet animating it. Both she and Amabel, as seen by him, had run away from certain kinds of enclosure. But there was no question, there, of good or ill *fortune*. No deliberate calculation, either. Just refusal. His picture of what they had run away from would be as ill-realized as his vision of their destination. He ought to be made to pause over the fact that he still found, on their behalf, strangeness and newness in just the things that for them had long been matters of course,

had been matters of course ever since the first rapture of escape.

It suddenly occurred to her that perhaps much of his talk was to be explained by the fact that he had never known that rapture. Had always been shut in and still, in spite of his apparent freedom, was enclosed and enmeshed? If this fact were flung at him, he would freely admit it, with an air of tragic hilarity, while overtly denying it, with a conspiratorial smile to emphasize his relatively large liberties, in order to use the admission as a point of departure for fresh insistence upon their neglected opportunities, while, hovering high above the useless to and fro, would hang the question, sometimes accepted by Amabel and sometimes wistfully denied, as to whether men, however fitted up with incomes and latchkeys and mobility, can ever know freedom—unless they are tramps.

But he had moved on, possibly after a second's investigatory pause during which he would have collected evidence from facial expressions, and was launched on the new social world, the world he everlastingly canvassed and discussed and yet lived in so partially, conforming all the time, most carefully, to the world upon which she and Amabel had turned their backs.

Ceaselessly unwinding itself, hurrying along the level set by his uniform reading of occasions, this unique evening that was to have compelled him to recognize the existence of an alternative attitude towards reality, was to be no more than a wearisome repetition of fruitless experience, its familiar features more than ever vivid in the light shed by Amabel's presence, its pace increased by the weariness which kept one far away, obediently letting it follow the shape of Hypo's

unvarying technique and pile up for him his unvarying false impressions.

Into the rising tide of discomfort flowed the stream of Amabel's silent communications: her delighted capitulation to his charm, the charm of the grey-blue glance and of the swiftness of the mental processes reflected within it; her amazement over his method, so acute that one could almost hear her trills of horrified laughter; her shame and disappointment, made endurable to herself by a seasoning of malicious glee, over one's failure to handle him, over the flagrant absence of any opposition, to him and his world, of themselves and their world, the serene selves and the rich deep world that were to have confronted him, even though only indirectly, with the full force of their combined beings. And here one sat, divorced from her, weary and alone, not only allowing oneself to be led by the nose, but actually encouraging his collection, in cheap, comic pictures, of the externals of their existence.

And yet this attitude of his, insolent when seen through Amabel's eyes, represented nothing more than his refusal to take people as seriously as they took themselves, and his determination to see life in terms of certain kinds of activity.

Enlivened by excursion, her mind moved rapidly from picture to picture thrown up during an interval of whose brevity she was fully aware, although, now that she returned upon her last articulate thought, the silence about her seemed to be waiting. 'Which self?' she said aloud, and then remembered that she had not spoken and drew from the air the echo of his last remark and said hurriedly: 'Sometimes we bring back treasures,' and raised her eyes and saw Amabel turn her head aside and caught, beaming from her smiling profile towards the darkening window, the

benediction she would have received fully if they had been alone.

‘What do you do with them?’

Turning, she encountered his eyes on their way from Amabel’s averted profile, visible to him only as the unrevealing angle of a jaw, and saw their searching beams become, for her own benefit, an amused smile—intended as a commentary upon the observed manœuvre and at once veiled by a swift dropping of the eyelids, as if for an irresistible savouring of private wisdom, and then returned transformed by a direct gaze, simulating hopeful interest above the deepened wreathings of the Buddha smile.

Coldly, she said: ‘We consider them, sometimes into the small hours.’

‘Ideas, facts, points of view——’ she heard him begin, in an ingratiating tone carefully permitted to vibrate sufficiently to register mirth renewed by the accusation of sacrilege. But her attention was divided between the suppression of the desire for some impossible demolition of the occasion and the spectacle of Amabel returned, her face a little self-consciously meditative, the remainder of her emotion in process of being disposed of by a slight drawing together of the brows. Or was this slight frown the outward sign, at last emerged, of an endurance that had been at work almost from the beginning of the evening? Endurance, amongst other things, of being, as a lovely spectacle, more or less, if not entirely, ignored? And now if she were to raise her eyes and see one’s question, would she avenge herself by dropping them, with the little lift of the eyebrows that meant: ‘We are not amused’?

Although, according to his acquired code, the arrival of coffee must not be allowed to make any break in his

discourse, he did not miss the opportunity it afforded for a parenthetical staging of the small burlesque that was his chosen device for dealing with sudden demands for unusual activity: the investigating glance, dismayed recognition of the necessity for action, a hesitant gesture, suggesting uncertainty as to the exact method of procedure, followed by capitulation in the form of neat swift movements whose supposed banality a subdued smile, as of private hilarity in finding himself possessed of the appropriate technique, was intended to redeem.

‘... impelled to inquire—Black for Miriam? Black for Miss Amabel? Yes. Austere black for everybody—earnestly to inquire when, if at all, do you sleep? You, Miriam, *ought* to sleep.’

Surprised and stung by the sudden, public discrimination, by its implied featuring of Amabel’s youthful immunity and its repudiation of the envy and admiration he had so often expressed in regard to her own independence of sleep and food, she forced herself to concentrate upon his question—already, as it fell, bringing release from the burden of endurance and, in the interval between it and its unexpected sequel, dissolving her mind’s fixed image of the room in a series of distant views competing for her attention—in order, by responding to that alone, by making him realize something of the enchantment rising in face of a query that for him was just a way of being charming, she might also make him, and perhaps even Amabel, believe that she had not taken in his concluding words. But while she prepared to respond—keeping her hold upon the material from whose outspread wealth was emanating a disarming joy that must not be allowed to prevent her adoption, for this occasion, of his own manner of address, eyes gazing ahead, guarded from

distracting contacts, in order the better to contemplate and the more tellingly to present the subject of his discourse—a sudden intruding realization of the advantage shared by him at this moment with all who, in sitting at the end rather than the side of a table, have the longer vista for the impersonal gaze, had taken her eyes on an involuntary tour, during which, meeting his own, they encountered the reinforcement, by a would-be authoritative glance, of the remark that had just left his lips. Composing her features to a mask, as if her mind, browsing far away, were not merely unattained but also quite unaware of no matter what message coming from without, she carried off the look she had received and read, clearly revealed within its blue-grey depths, the full, absurd explanation of this tiresome evening, while taking in, from the vast distance wherein, now, she was indeed ensconced, the way Hypo's momentarily pointed, personal gaze restored itself to beaming sociability and turned, with what remained of its energy, a trifle too eagerly, in the manner of the Englishman who, believing himself to have scored a point, wishes both to hide his satisfaction and to evade a retort, upon Amabel who now, as far as he would be able to see, was delighting in the role of onlooker and suggesting—by leaning a little across the narrow table and radiating, this time for his benefit, a half-amused and endlessly patient veneration—that one had something to say and should be encouraged to say it.

And now she must speak. But the revelation of the motive of the gathering had raised a barrier between herself and whatever it was she would have said. It could be regained only at the price of falling into a state of being whose external aspect would look like the torpor of imbecility and, since they were not alone and he could therefore not openly

attempt, by means of satire or with a show of mock despair, to shock her back to the surface where nothing could occur but the futile conflict with his formulae, he would turn, with the smile with which he was wont at once to claim a victory and to invite the witness thereof immediately to collaborate in a fresh departure, altogether towards Amabel. But since the occasion had originated in his careless misreading of her second note and must therefore end in embarrassing explanations, one might as well abandon it at once and get away, regardless of havoc, into whatever it was that had seemed so good. Let them wait. Let the whole evening, as far as it concerned herself, crash irretrievably and leave her quite alone. Let them turn, despairing of one's thick, apparently interminable silence, entirely to each other.

Sleep. 'You, Miriam,' ran his message, 'booked for maternity, must stand aside, while the rest of us, leaving you alone in a corner, carry on our lives.' But before that, while the evening, its origin unexplained, was still only a disappointment and farce: 'When do you *sleep*?' This time, instead of luminous perspectives, the remembered words brought only a thought already shared with Amabel and whose restatement would become just one of those opinions people carry hugged about them like cloaks, and suddenly fling down, remaining, if they are in the presence of those who hug, with equal tenacity, other opinions, defensive and nervously on the alert, behind a mask of indifference, while their statement, taken up and presented afresh from a different angle, is bereft of its axiomatic, independent air. But at least it would indicate preoccupation, separate Amabel from him and bring her in as a collaborator.

'It doesn't,' she said cheerfully, into the midst of the beginning of their interchange, 'require a surgical operation

to rouse you when you wake, soon and suddenly, from the marvellous little sleep you have if you have been awake until dawn. You realize sleep, instead of taking it for granted, because, before dropping into it, you had got out to where sleep is, to where you see more clearly than in daylight.'

That was not so clear as the way she and Amabel had agreed to put it last week: 'Real sleep is being fully awake.' And no responsive wave was coming across the table. Looking up, she found her, though still in the same attitude, withdrawn. Downcast eyes revealed, above the smile left useless and embarrassed upon her lips, some kind of disapproval which could not be registered without destroying her pose, or which had already been registered, and seen only by him, been meant to be seen only by him, before the eyelids dropped behind which she was now savouring not only the emotions attendant upon having made her mark, but those also of being, or allowing him for her own purposes to suppose she was, in league with him.

'Sleep,' he said, withdrawing from Amabel an investigatory eye, 'is—we don't know *what* it is. We only know that whilst we're at it our little thought-mechanism, poor dear, is unhooked and lying about in bits. Very good for it, so long as it's been busy while it was hooked up. But sleeping only at dawn, however charming, is not a habit to be *cultivated*. And life, Miriam,' his eyes came round, 'is a *series* of surgical operations.'

She remained aware, as she seized and fled away with this last, incredible sample of the treatment she had escaped, of his voice beginning again, keeping going, in the way of voices all over the world, the semblance of interchange beneath which the real communications of the evening had flowed, silently and irretrievably to and fro; of its rather

excessively cordial and interested tone, at once betraying and disposing of the satisfaction he had experienced in describing her to herself as reduced to her proper status, set aside to become an increasingly uncomfortable and finally agonized biological contrivance whose functioning, in his view, was the sole justification for her continued existence.

She began to consider the possibility of reminding Amabel of an imaginary engagement, breaking up the sitting and thus making him a present of the remainder of the evening.

‘But *certainly?*’ Amabel was replying to something he had said, in the interrogative tone which she used to rebuke a superfluous inquiry. He was trying to draw her out.

Imagining she wished, just as if she were a shy English girl, to be coaxed by questions into believing herself to be interesting. Confused by an unfamiliar type of opposition, he had lost hold of his usual conversational technique, his way of asking questions by making statements and embroidering them until he was interrupted, and had asked her something point-blank. And she had responded, with her head at its most graceful angle and a smile that still lingered and, in a moment, below the eyelids that were lowered to conceal a conflict of emotions, must either turn into one of those tuneful little laughs, a private recitative that left the bearer in doubt as to its origin, the laughter Michael had objected to without troubling about origins, or become the accompaniment of further speech. All the evening she had been on guard, in unfamiliar territory, with nothing to do but look after her poses. With no chance, excepting just that once, a few moments ago, of emotional release.

‘All you young women,’ came Hypo’s summarizing voice, deliberately glowing, deliberately familiar, ‘in a long, eloquent, traffic-confounding crocodile of a procession. Yes.’

So he had begun at once on the suffrage, and had remembered being told, weeks ago, about Amabel's passion for the campaign.

'Not *all* pink,' she said, breaking in incisively, and saw his hand pause for a fraction of a second on its way to the ash-tray and his attention gather to test the nature of this ebullition from one who, rebuked and reminded, should now properly be engaged in salutary, dismayed realizations, leaving the way clear for him to test the quality of this young woman who was probably destined to share the 'green solitude,' to socialize it, keep it impersonal and unexacting during his occasional visits and, possibly, one day herself supply incidental romantic interest. 'There will be mothers and aunts, don't forget, and even grandmothers. A real army. With banners. Amabel is going to carry a banner.' Lifting her elbows to the table so that her left hand, with cigarette between its extended fingers, should interpose and hide them from each other, she quenched the husky, opening words of his swift response with the sound of her own voice, full and free: 'Tell him your impressions of Mrs Despard, Amabel.'

'No,' he said, and the meditative downward curve of his tone was still able to create suspense, even though she knew him to be intent on avoiding solitude for himself and, for her, the opportunity of contemplating, at leisure, the evening's revelations just as they stood at this moment, unmodified. As funny, as truly comic as the story of the man who woke from sleep, recognized his own station slowly moving off, leaped from the train, fell, scattering over the platform, amongst the waiting passengers, an armful of books and then saw the

train come quietly to a standstill, was the revelation of the needlessness of his tactics, from the summoning of the meeting to the moment, just gone by, when a hansom appeared from nowhere at the kerb and Amabel, just as she was prepared fully to blossom, though still, to all appearances, remaining gracefully upright upon her stalk and refraining from bending in the direction of either of her neighbours, was unceremoniously dismissed. He would, of course, be unaware of the base temptation assailing her during this last item of the exhibition, for him so satisfying, of his power of dealing with the situation he believed to exist: to avoid, when presently they met again, telling Amabel the truth, to let her imagine that this dismissal was the elimination of an undesired third, the achievement of a lover's solitude rather than a temporary removal of one who promised protection and possible entertainment in the retreat whose provision was now to be discussed.

For him, nothing but his sense of her responsibility in writing to him in what he took to be parables, mitigated the absurdity of his headlong strategy. But far more threatening to the well-being of any further association would be his sense of her being now in possession of a sample of his attitude, either real, or deliberately assumed for her benefit, towards the lover he had believed booked for maternity. For he must know, even he, with his determination to keep sex in its place, while admitting that he did not know what this place ought to be, to keep it impersonal, because he feared personalities, must certainly know that nothing could excuse the flaunting of bogies in the face of a postulant mother. Whatever he really believed, or was training himself to believe, he was confronted now, in this dismal, regardless street, with an evening in ruins and herself as a witness of

enormities. Yet, though a moment ago she had felt that nothing he could devise in the way of a fresh departure could shift her determination to dismiss him and, by leaving him to dispose of its remainder as best he might, to repudiate the whole evening—here, already competing with her purpose, was interest in what he might be going to propose.

‘*No*—let’s go to earth round the corner, in your Donizetti’s, and drown our disappointment in a cup of their execrable coffee. For I am disappointed, you know, quite acutely. You had lifted me up into a tremendous exaltation. Miriam, you see, is allusive in a way my more direct, less flexible masculine intelligence doesn’t always follow; and when you said you had come down from the clouds, I thought you meant you were experiencing the normal human reaction after a great moment, not that you had been mistaken, but that ...’

Long before he had finished speaking, her elbow was cupped in his hand and they had turned and were walking side by side up the street and, now that they were no longer confronted, the roar of the traffic almost obliterated his words, relieving her of the need for response and likely to keep them wordless and separate until they were within the doors of the forlorn little retreat whose name, as well as its exact locality, he had so astonishingly remembered. Doubtless his mind was still at work and a plan already encircled this fragment of a wasted evening. But the taut web of events was broken and they were alone together within a gap in its ceaselessly moving pattern.

Eternity opened, irradiating the street whose lights and shadows and surrounding darknesses always seemed more harsh and bitter than those of any other London street she knew, and bringing suddenly back, to flow into the evening-

end, only the harmonies of their long association. Within the uproar of the traffic echoed the characteristic haunting little melody of his voice, sounding its pathetic notes of determination and of hope: small and compact, diminutively sturdy, like himself. But it was only in moments such as these, only when making simple statements simply, that it seemed his very self. And although 'normal human reaction,' containing more than one questionable technicality, could not be called a simple statement, coming from him it was just an innocent comment leading to a full stop; and 'great moment' admitted the existence of timeless experience independent of evolutionary development. So long as he remained silent, she could believe him conscious of all that he denied, aware, as perhaps indeed, with his mind off duty, he really was aware, of the element within the vast stillness pouring in through the ceaseless roar of London, not themselves and yet in communion with them and, itself, the medium of their temporary unity, and to remain when they were within the little backwater in the evolutionary process whose frosted glass doors were now just round the corner and in a moment would be opening to admit them.

Images competing to represent the presence whose invariable price was some sort of stillness, jostled each other in her mind as they exchanged the uneasy northerly direction for the comfort of going westward along the Euston Road, along the northern boundary of her London world.

Escaped from the resounding corridor; feeling away behind her the open garden spaces right and left of St Pancras Church; and, away ahead, the park and the tree-filled crescent lining the Marylebone Road; moving in the direction where the unchanged air already seemed easier to breathe, she realized her fatigue. Each part of the day had

produced continuous, exhausting demands and she could see, as they turned into Donizetti's and made their way to the marble-topped table in the corner, again offering the invitation of its emptiness exactly as it had done last year when she had contrived to help him to save his unusual situation, nothing at all with which to fill the space that for him was a desert into which she had led him by her inconvenient lack of directness. For although it was he who had chosen this retreat, she felt, once within it and on her own territory, responsible for his well-being and therefore under the necessity of immediately producing audible communications.

'If you had walked with me a little further north,' she began, and felt the topic, the only one immediately available, become as comfortably at home as she was herself and as desirably remote from the science-beaten highways of his imagination. It expanded in her mind as she spoke. She would state, in clear terms, bearing down his ironically beaming scepticism, the invariable uneasiness she felt in going north, express, parenthetically, her regret in being therefore deprived of Scotland (a contribution in his own vein), and then, if, after a diplomatic compliment for her curious sensibility, he should begin with his rational objections and interpretations, cover the sacred tracks and amuse him with an account of Selina Holland's economical week in Edinburgh: 'a beautiful city one *really* ought to see,' of her solution of the problem of luggage and cabs by wearing 'two toilettes, one above the other, not in the least inconvenient when travelling by night,' and be prepared, if he were not sufficiently impressed by this example of feminine ingenuity, to humble herself by confessing that if the necessary three pounds had been at her disposal she

would admirably have followed Selina's example, wearing three dresses and going to an inevitable temporary death in the north for the sake of seeing Selina's 'city set on a hill.' But their voices collided.

'I've quite an unreasonable liking for this dreadful little haunt of yours, Miriam. It's almost the irreducible minimum in little haunts, isn't it? But Miriam, I'm coming to believe, has a *way* with irreducible minima.'

'If you get hold of the end of a string ...'

'I see your point, and I hesitate'—his plump, neat hands were clasped before him on the table and his sightless, entertainment-seeking and, for the moment, entirely blue eyes were moving from point to point, searchlights, operated from a centre whose range, however far it might extend, was constricted by the sacred, unquestioned dogmas ruling his intelligence, he was devoting the surface of his attention to steering clear of offence, of boring and being bored; steering his way towards making one pleased with oneself and therefore with him—'between concluding that you don't want to risk electrocution—one must, you know, keep one's metaphors up to date—and wondering whether, against one's principles, one has to invent, for Miriam, a special category.'

'Everybody is a special category.'

'Even for an inexorable individualist, isn't that a little _____,'

'Excessive? Not more than the individuality of individuals. Within society. Within socialism, if you like. But socialism, I believe now, is not something that has to be made to come, but is here, particularly in aristocratic England, as plain as a pikestaff. But it's a secret society, with unwritten laws that can't be taught. Inside these laws, the individual is freer and more individual than anywhere else.'

‘Socialism won’t come of itself. It has to be written about and talked about—everywhere. Now the Lycurgan, if you like, is trying to be a secret society. That’s what we’ve got to bust up.’

‘But it couldn’t be written about unless it existed. And talking about it makes people suspicious. And makes one begin to doubt. Anything that can be put into propositions is suspect. The only thing that isn’t suspect is individuality.’ His swift glance towards the next table revealed his everlasting awareness of neighbours-as-audience, and his search, even here, for a sympathetic witness of his tolerant endurance of a young person’s foolish remarks, or for escape into some interesting aspect of his surroundings. His glance shifted to a point further down the narrow, crowded little corridor, rested for a moment and returned lit by the kindly beam that is to be seen shining charitably from the eyes of the one, of a party of two, who sees a third bearing down upon them and wishes to appear, to the approaching onlooker who is not yet within hearing, as the easily dominant partner in a friendly contest.

‘You shall be the individual individualist, Miriam,’ he said, sitting back and addressing, with a smilingly indulgent air of finality and in a tone slightly above his earlier, conspiratorial undertone, partly herself and partly the centre of the widened space between them, whence his eyes, provisionally halted there, turned now, and as if he had just become aware of him, towards little Donizetti; the arrived, temporary third member of the party, standing drawing himself sturdily upright from a barely perceptible courteous inclination—not leaning forward with paternal solicitude, hands upon the table-end to support his stout frame while she murmured her small order, to which he would listen as if it

were something that was to call out the utmost resources of his establishment—his air of readiness to serve them sternly mitigated by the expression of reproachful, anxious suspicion with which he was wont to regard any male appearing in her company. It was joy, as always in the presence of an escort upon whom his scrutinizing eyes could be trusted to remain fixed during the whole of the brief interview, to gaze affectionately at this friend who, when first she had dared to venture alone, driven by cold and hunger, into the mystery of a London restaurant just before midnight, had rescued her from embarrassment and fed and cherished her.

Returning from watching him as he plodded sturdily down the narrow aisle, she caught upon herself Hypo's privately investigating glance and read therein his summary of her absence: that she had fallen into a trap, awaiting the socially servile and the empty-minded alike, had reacted to a small interruption, not only with an easily distracted attention but also physically, turning and looking, something which, according to his acquired code, one doesn't do.

'Donizetti's a darling,' she said fiercely, working off the wrathful misery consuming her at the spectacle of the irrevocable ill-breeding of the two of them in dividing up their personalities sur le champ, and making private notes in the course of what ought to be an act of homage. 'One reason why I love this place which in so many ways is both devastating and heart-breaking, is because I never have to deal with cheap waiters with lost-soul faces. Because Donizetti always serves me himself, rushing up and waving them away if they approach, they have left off coming my way. That's why we had to wait so long. He must have been a peasant, it suddenly occurs to me.'

While he listened to her hurried words, without apparently finding in their course anything that could be taken up and used at all effectively, his amiability grew a little weary, its expression hovering perilously on the verge of fatuity when her welcome departure from what he was regarding less as a tribute to Donizetti than as a rather boastful confidence, came to his rescue.

‘More probably, you know, the son of a small Ticino innkeeper, trying his luck over here.’

‘A peasant, because men of that stratum when saluting or conversing with a ‘lady and gentleman,’ always, if you notice, apparently ignore the lady. It’s manners. Not, of course, in sophisticated circles, not if they have come to be urban policemen or waiters in smart restaurants, who are all attention to Madame, while taking their orders from Monsieur.’

‘M’yes. You’re an observant creature, Miriam.’

‘No one less. Say, speaking your dialect, which of course may be applicable, that I’m too egoistic, too self-centred to be observant. But can any one really know what they have really observed until they look back? And if one hasn’t a trained mind, methodically observant, one sees only what moves one, rather than what confirms, or fails to confirm, some provisional prejudice with a grand name.’

Coffee arrived while he was stating his determination not to be drawn by glancing, his amused smile held firmly in the place of president from point to point about the room, and was served by a woebegone young lost soul whose weary, plaintive ‘haff-an’-haff’ still echoed in her mind as Hypo, having sipped his coffee and set it down, inquired with an almost passionate emphasis why she was not dyspeptic.

‘You *ought* to be dyspeptic, living as you do, still only just above the poverty line, you know, and feeding casually for years on end. Yet you remain unravaged and, apparently, unresentful. You queer one’s criticisms.’

‘I don’t really resent, even when something happens to remind me of the things I seem to be missing, if any one *can* really miss things—I mean I still believe that things come to people. Whenever I am reminded of things I should like, playing games, dancing, having access to music and plays, I feel that if I were to make efforts to get these things the incidental prices would rob me of what I want more. Fighting and clutching destroys things before you get them; or destroys you. Perhaps it’s my lack of imagination. Low-pressure mentality, as you once politely explained.’

‘That was excessive. You’ve come on no end. You are one of those who develop slowly. I admire that.’

‘I don’t know. There are so many directions one can move in. You see, there are so many societies. Each with its secret. And whenever *one*, whatever it calls itself—because, mind you, even the different social classes are secret societies—seems likely, or is said to be seeming likely, to get everything into its own hands, I feel, no matter how much I admire it, that something is going wrong. And since, except in spirit, one cannot join all the societies with equal enthusiasm, one cannot whole-heartedly join any. Because all are partial, and to try to identify oneself with one is immediately to be reminded, even reproached, by the rightness of the others. Besides, the people inside the societies suspect you unless you appear to despise the other societies. Which in a way you *must* do if you are going to *do* anything. You must believe that you, or your group, are absolutely right and that everybody else is walking in darkness. That is what makes

life so fearfully difficult if you have got out of your first environment and the point of view that belonged to it. I'm willing to be electrocuted. But only altogether, not partially. Only by something that can draw me along without reservations.'

'I believe you capable of devotion, Miriam. It's one of your attractions. But you evade. And you're a perfectionist, like most young people. But all this admirable young loyalty and singleness of purpose must attach itself somewhere, or fizzle wastefully out.'

'It is the same with people. Men or women. No man, or woman, can ever engage the whole of my interest who believes, as you believe and, of course, George Calvin Shaw flashing his fire-blue eyes, that my one driving-force, the sole and shapely end of my existence is the formation within myself of another human being, and so on ad infinitum. You may call the proceeding by any name you like, choose whatever metaphor you prefer to describe it—and the metaphor you choose will represent you more accurately than any photograph. It may be a marvellous incidental result of being born a woman and may unify a person with life and let her into its secrets—I can believe that now, the wisdom and insight and serene independent power it might bring. But it is neither the beginning nor the end of feminine being. It wasn't for my Devon-border grandmother, who produced twenty-two children. *Yes*, and listen: She was an old lady when I first met her. I *really* only met her once. I was going upstairs, always in any case an amazing adventure. But listen. On the half-landing was this new granny. Up till then, a grandmother had chiefly meant a tall thin someone who had spent, and was still spending, a rather bony existence looking all the time into the abyss of hell and hoping, by

strict righteousness in all her dealings, to avoid it; and yet able to twinkle, sometimes seeming to try to twinkle me into the narrow path, perhaps because she thought this the best way of dealing with worldly church-folk. But the new granny, very plump indeed, and pretty, and whose ‘weeds’ made little bouncing movements—instead of dolefully hanging, like Grandma Henderson’s—as she moved lightly about, was all twinkle. Seeing her only with other people, I had noticed only that and her voice, which always seemed to be laughing, as if at some huge joke of which all the time she was aware and wanting to bring home to those about her; and yet knowing that this was impossible and not worrying about the impossibility and still unable not to go on twinkling all the time. I know it might be said that this was the result of her enormous wealth: her fifteen sons scattered all over the world. It wasn’t. When I came face to face with her on the half-landing, alone with her for the first time and so near as to be almost touching her, we looked at each other. She made no movement towards me and said no word. She was facing downstairs, with her back to the light that came from the high landing window and shone into my eyes’—he was losing interest, had just glanced, still preserving, but only on his lips and almost invisible behind the untidy frill of his moustache, the smile with which in public he simulated the appearance of the interested, provisionally critical listener, at a party of Cockneys audible behind her across the way. But the interest of her story, with its testimony, unnoticed as such until this moment, to a truth renewing itself at intervals all along the years, made her careless of his boredom—‘so that in getting on to the landing and feeling her silence and her stillness, I had to peer at her to see what was there, what this new granny was when she was alone. And we stood, I seven

years old and she sixty-five, though I didn't know this at the time, looking at each other. And I saw that I was looking at someone exactly my own age. And it delighted me so much to see someone thinking and feeling exactly as I did, and beaming the fact at me and waiting for me to take it in, and being no older at the end of life than I was myself, that I went on upstairs, knowing, after the look that had reached me through her smile, that there was no need to speak, and feeling eager to experience what I should have called, if I had had the words, the enrichment that had overtaken my lonely world through this recognition of identity.'

'There's a link, there's sufficient space for an easy, comfortable link between grandparents and grandchildren. A grandson is a renewal; in a new, unprecedented world. That's why, Miriam, one should have grandchildren and, meanwhile, prepare a world for them to live in.'

'Yes, I know; and I can see that new world in all sorts of ways. But it must also be the same world, to be real to me. It's finding the *same* world in another person that moves you to your roots. The same world in two people, in twenty people, in a nation. It makes you feel that you exist and can *go on*. Your sense of the world and of the astonishingness of there being anything anywhere, let alone what there seems to be turning out to be, is confirmed when you find the same world and the same accepted astonishment in someone else ...' 'Wherever two or three are gathered together'—by anything whatsoever—there, in the midst of them, is something that is themselves and more than themselves. Why not? Why do you object?

Looking up and away from the vision of Amabel, unexpectedly, at some distant point in an excursion of thinking aloud, breaking in with rapturous assent, she met

once more, in his eyes, his mind paused for a moment upon some diagram in his patterned thought, and felt again how wasteful for them both was this fruitless conflict. Yet although there seemed to be a sort of guilt attached to the dragging in, from other contexts, of material arising in a world he did not recognize, it seemed also less evil than agreeing, or pretending to be persuaded into agreeing and so becoming a caricature of himself, and in the end, loathsome, even for him.

‘What we’ve got to go on to isn’t in the least, thank heaven, the same world. Life, especially speeded up, modern life, if we’re to get anything *done*, doesn’t, dear Miriam, admit of intensive explorations of the depths of personalities. I doubt if it ever did, even in the spacious days when quite simple people got much more of a show than any one can get to-day. People used to sit confronted, in a world which appeared to be standing still, and make romantic journeys into each other. That sort of attitude lingers and dies hard. But to-day we are on the move, we’ve got to be on the move, or things will run away with us. We’re engaged in a race with catastrophe. We can win. But only in getting abreast and running ahead.’

‘Running where?’

‘Away from the wrong sort of life-illusion, Miriam. If we don’t, any one who chooses to look can see, plainly, what is upon us.’

He was stern now, his lips compressed and eyes fixed on a distant point, as if to refuse; to dismiss any further, tiresome questioning of the self-evident.

‘As plain as the nose on my face.’ And away, out there, the lovely, strange, unconscious life of London went on, holding the secret of the fellowship of its inhabitants. If these should

achieve communal consciousness, it would never be the kind he represented and seemed to think the world might be coerced, by himself and his followers, into acquiring. It would be something more like Amabel's kind of consciousness.

'Amabel wants a new world, but she likes people, most people, just as they are.'

'Your Amabel's a pretty person. Women *ought* to be reformers. Keeping the peace and making the world habitable is eminently their job. But they're held up by a fatal tendency to concentrate upon persons. Hallo!'

Darkness and cessation, everywhere but above their table and the lit doorway, abruptly announcing midnight and the end, had surprised from him this sudden cry that brought to her—as she heard sound through each of its two notes, one above the other and the last cheerily up-curving in the manner of an expansive greeting, not only his boyish delight in seeing mechanisms obedient to the will of man, but also his glad welcome for the soundless call coming from without—only an enclosing vision of the grey and empty street.

The revealing cry echoed in her mind as she stood alone for a moment between the frosted doors and heard, in the tone of his good night to Donizetti, the genial affability, whose glow when a train is at last about to move, warms the farewells of a securely departing traveller.

The eager availability with which, humming a little tune, he had turned, once the street was reached, towards the future—towards the wealth of interests awaiting him and which seemed to her to hover, vividly bright and alluring, in every quarter of the invisible sky save the one hanging above the region towards which she was bound—betrayed itself in the sound of his voice as he inquired, putting into his

question a carefully measured portion of his good cheer, the way to her lodgings.

‘I live nowhere,’ she said, planted, half-confronting him, with her eyes on the distance whose hoarse murmurings feebly competed with the near, enfolding sound of his voice, weak and husky, yet dominating the interminable depths of the darkness, ‘I live *here*. So, good night.’

‘Nonsense, Mirissima. We’ll walk together.’

In silence they crossed the top of the street they had walked up in a far-off era of this graceless evening. Every step of their way was known to her and was filled with a life that in this midnight hour, transformed by his presence into a darkened gap between day and day, seemed to stand just out of her reach, pleading in vain for recognition and continuance. Counter to it, kept clear by his nearness, ran the stream of her life with him, restored, now that it was so conclusively ended, in clear perspective from its beginning and, surely, remembered by him in so far as his cherished future, for ever beginning, for ever playing him false, allowed him an occasional retrospective glance.

Looking back as they came within the influence of the high trees whose tops disappeared into the upper darkness, she paused upon a memory of one of their earliest agreements, an impersonal unanimity holding them both, in that far-off moment, upright within a fragment of eternity and now substituting, in her mind, for the silence within which, marching side by side, they were so far apart, the sound of the remembered theme. They were now well within the region of the tall trees lining the stretch of pavement, a hundred yards or so as seen with his eyes, but in reality an illimitable space wherein there always came upon whatever was engrossing her as daily she passed this way to and fro, a

subtle influence, modifying it, setting it a little aside and toning down its urgency. Even at night, with the trees colourless and only half visible save where lamplight fell upon their dark stems and lit their lower leafage to an unnatural green, the powerful magic came forth that separated this region from the world of the streets. Surely he must be aware of it, must feel it streaming towards him through the stillness whereinto were projected his ponderings, or the pangs of his endurance, whipped up by the promises surrounding him, of the tailing-off of a wasted evening. Under its influence, that was giving her strength to throw, across the interminable distance now separating them, a bridge upon which, as soon as he had recognized it, they might meet and greet one another, he could not fail to respond.

But when the little theme began to go forth upon the air, it sounded rather like one of his nondescript hummed tunes, bereft, in her hands, of its confident purposefulness. As it grew, taking its own shape and recalling how, poised, as she had been when first she heard it, in undefined happiness, it had set a cool hand upon her heart and freed her spirit to wing joyfully forth beyond the confines of familiar life, she felt that her singing not only failed to reach him but, by suggesting a spacious untimed wandering, was increasing his impatience in being carried out of his way.

‘Where *are* your lodgings, Miriam?’

Standing still once more, and aware of him brought to a pause in the open, where the trees no longer stood above them and the high blue light of the nearest standard lamp fell coldly from the middle of the roadway upon the desecrated pavement, she braced herself against the truth of their relationship, the essential separation and mutual dislike of

their two ways of being, remembering how in earlier days he had mysteriously insisted that a relationship can be ‘built up.’

‘Good-bye,’ she said and turned and swiftly crossed the wide, empty roadway, feeling as she reached the far, opposite pavement, which still was just within the circle of her London homeland, strength to walk, holding back thought, on and on within her own neighbourhood until, stilled by the familiar presences of its tall grey buildings, and the trees detachedly inhabiting its quiet squares, the inward tumult should subside and leave her to become once more aware of her own path, cool and solid beneath her feet; so that when presently she encountered Amabel, the events of the long evening, if, by that time, in her own mind, they were already irrelevant and far away, might be left, by mutual consent, shelved and untouched until they should come forth to fulfil, one by one, their proper role as lively illustrations for the points of intensive colloquies.

CHAPTER III

Regret for what she had sacrificed in leaving her place at the corner of the Tansley Street balcony to come to the Nursery, was giving way to the desire to identify the quality of this little man from the north. It was already obvious that every one present, and several, she knew, had come anticipating endurance, was captivated in one way or another, and when his second question fell into a stillness whose depth revealed attention, she roused herself to consider the nature of the influence so steadily imposing itself.

This compact little man, his features dim in the on-coming twilight whose soft radiance poured in on the shabby office from the wide high window behind him, came from the north. And though the emanating quality might turn out to be rooted in someone else's thought, carefully grasped and ably presented, there was something in it that was personal, coming from the man himself. Something that set him apart from all the London Lycurgans she had heard so far. The discovery was cheering. For others might visit the Nursery from remote places, bringing unexpected goods, perhaps as valuable as those provided by the Big Men. Perhaps even more valuable.

Taking her pleasantly by surprise, a wave of affection, accumulated unawares during the meetings held in this gloomy room, rose within her and flowed not only

backwards over the eventful evenings supplied by the well-known figures, but also forward to embrace the less exciting occasions lying ahead. For these little meetings, she now realized, held a charm peculiar to themselves, independent of the fare provided from behind the table and entirely lacking in the large gatherings of the Lycurgan proper, though Wells condemned even these large meetings for their too local, too enclosed and domestic atmosphere. Seeking the origin of this charm, felt, she was convinced, even by the most superior members—though it would be disastrous to suggest its existence to any one of them—she concluded that it arose partly from the smallness of the gathering and partly from the provisional nature of the surroundings, giving to each meeting the character of a chance encounter, on neutral territory, of people who hitherto have met only amongst others, upon backgrounds soaked with personality and tradition, and who now, poised in a vacuum and reduced to their native simplicity, must conspire to reach an understanding. Even Shaw, shooting up upon the chairman's last word, Jack-in-the-box, magical, electric amidst the shadows of this battered room, had presented his beliefs with a grave simplicity; so that they were more formidable than when they came, festooned with his disarming wit, from the Lycurgan platform. And if the test, so nobly encountered by them all, of appearing bereft of the stimulus of their familiar background, public, limelit, crowded, reduced the big Lycurgans to simplicity, it also left the little audience fully exposed to the operations of the speaker by eliminating the sense, never quite absent from an adult Lycurgan meeting, of being present at a show.

Each of these distinctions, as it presented itself, had a familiar face, recognized as having been glanced at,

hurriedly, from the midst of preoccupations, and banished lest its contemplation obscure, even for a moment, the design being offered by a great Lycurgan mind. Only now, only in the presence of this substitute for a god, who was revealing the quality of a small gathering of ordinary mortals just as it had been revealed at the local meeting when Mrs Redfern's Messiah failed to arrive, did they group and present themselves as a whole. For in a sense those earlier Nursery meetings, addressed by the Leaders, each distilling, for the benefit of the gathered infants, his own particular blend of the essences of Lycurgan socialism, had been shows, however modest. Fragments of the great show and, as isolated fragments, revealing here, more clearly than amidst the distractions and rivalries of Sussex Hall, the divergencies of the several minds, leaving one in possession of neatly sorted samples of socialism, disquietingly irreconcilable.

But this nobody from the industrial north radiated a quiet confidence. He was as self-contained as the saffron-robed old Hindu whose high-pitched, fluting voice, sad, seeming to echo through him from the vastness of space, had for a moment reduced the seething ranks of the Lycurgans to a unanimous handful: 'We are an ancient shivilization. We are ruled—by a bureau-crashy. Worsh than that—by a foreign bureau-crashy. Worsh than that—by a bureau-crashy that is always shanging.' And the cosmos reflected in the personality behind his acquired specialist knowledge, unlike that of Shaw or of Wells, or even of Sydney Olivier, though his at least had depth as well as surface, and stillness within its movement, was probably habitable. For he handled his argument as if it were self-existent and the property of every one, rather than a cunning device and a reproach to every one who had failed to discover it. His points emerged of

themselves, unspoken yet almost audible in the silence following the rounding off of each of his statements—delivered in a pleasantly meditative undertone—by a question aimed, upon a livelier note, directly at his audience.

The stirrings and whisperings invading her attention from the back row into which had slipped, a moment ago, several late arrivals, were heightening her sense of his way of being, a way that seemed itself a fulfilment of what he was pleading for, and a settlement of the teasing problem by transforming it, in the part of her consciousness it ceaselessly occupied, into a matter of temperament. His temperament was socialism in being. Conscious where the Oberlanders were unconscious, he saw the whole world, just as they saw their small, enclosed Lhassa, as a society. And, just as they did, regarded its unwritten laws as the only sacred laws. Therefore he was a reformer, bent on changing only the unsacred, secondary laws, the written rules of the club whose only justification was the well-being of the members; whereas the Lycurgan intellectuals, some looking at life only through the telescopes and microscopes of scientific research, and others through the stained-glass windows of the various schools of psychology, were competing with each other in a game of social betterment that had suddenly become a scrimmage in which rules were no longer respected.

Turning to discover the source of the increasing stir in the back row, and in turning, aware of herself as an object exposed to the quiet radiance flowing from the speaker, she saw, in a swift series of dissolving views penetrated by this same radiance, her own career as a member of the Lycurgan; saw herself not only drawn hither and thither attentive to mind after mind in her search for an acceptable doctrine, not

only, when temporarily impressed, using borrowed opinions as weapons, but finally using the Lycurgan spectacle as a continuous entertainment and feeling that if it were dowered with the unifying something whose presence she had felt at smaller gatherings, it would cease to be interesting. Yet she had had moments of passionate conviction, and upon these she could look back without feeling that the society would be better off without herself and those like her who were eagerly looking for arguments wherewith to floor all comers and who would immediately be driven off by the prospect of doing, year in and year out, some small, obscure task dictated by the chosen exponent. She saw the interior of the stuffy little room in the East End where she had spent the whole of a day's holiday joyfully folding circulars, sustained only by the presence of other workers, an occasional cup of cocoa, and the excitement provided by the coming and going, with the latest news, of other Lycurgans who also were working for Webb. And recalled an evening's canvassing during which she had felt willing to make almost any sacrifice if she could be certain that soon the suspicious people in the mean tenements would find themselves belonging to a vast world-wide society, rather than on guard against everything and everybody; and the strange moment of hungry affection for all the people she had visited, friends and enemies alike, whom she had seen while they talked with her, or in their way of getting rid of her, as they were to themselves, in isolation, apart from the dense atmosphere of family life and from the world in which they struggled so bitterly to maintain themselves.

And nothing short of conviction could have urged her, lying in bed with a high temperature, to get up and go down through an east wind to vote at the decisive meeting; only to

discover that even amongst these emancipated intellectuals fair play was not a matter of course. Hope lost its foundations with the spectacle of the Leaders deserting their guns and denying their principles in their frantic attempts to destroy each other. The one calm person on the platform, the only one who made any attempt to restrain the combatants, was a woman.

And yet, she reflected, turning fully round, women are refused the suffrage because they are supposed to be ruled by their emotions. Her eyes reached the centre of the disturbance at the back of the room, from whose dimmer twilight shone out, distinguishing them from their neighbours, the glowing eyes and flushed cheeks of three young women whose expressions, different and alike, each revealed a restive, vain desire to escape, from emotions rioting within and excited neighbours besieging from without, back into a vanished clear vista at whose end had gleamed a bright indefinite goal. She remembered with a pang of dismay that the march of the militants on the House of Commons had been fixed for to-night and realized, in the midst of the warm flush rising to her own cheeks with the thought of the prison cells awaiting these girls to-morrow, that at this moment Amabel, certainly amongst the arrested, would be waiting for her at home in a far more abounding state of exaltation than either of these could attain, one of whom was betraying, by a forced smile directed at random, and by a continual insufficient compression and recompression of her tremulous lips, that she was scared as well as excited, while her companion on her right, responding to an eagerly whispering neighbour, glanced about collecting incense, and the one on her left, drawing back from a whispered conversation with someone turned

towards her from the row in front, was now gazing fixedly at the lecturer in a vain attempt to suggest that being arrested was all in the day's work.

‘This cannot come about of itself. It can be brought about. But only by means of concerted effort. Do we feel such an effort to be worth while?’

For the first time, his voice was tinged with emotion. Was there to be a rising tide? A few more tracts of quiet statement, each ending with a challenge more insistent than the last, and then a rousing appeal for activity, and the familiar experience of finding one's interest shifted from the theme to the spectacle of a speaker in full blast, and finally the vision, arriving at the end of so many Lycurgan meetings, of the entire assembly dispersing to stand on soap boxes at street corners and the sense, in the midst of one's admiration, of something lacking in them all. Which Amabel had shared, or she would not so delightedly have agreed that the Lycurgans were a Primrose League without a primrose—though she had said afterwards, looking away and speaking very gently, as if to herself, so as to exclude from what she said any element of retort or even of criticism: ‘Most of those they are fighting for *haven't* any primroses,’ following up the English jest, because at the moment she was not with someone who needed to be flattered all the time, with a typical movement of her own mind, irrelevant to the issue but so sincere that one refrained from insisting, also irrelevantly, that most of those who were fighting were fighting against something incompletely defined rather than for anything at all.

Amabel's socialism was out-and-out. She stood for the poor and outcast, not because they were poor but because they were people, belonging to the club. She would have no

objection to a stockbroker on account of his calling. But why was she a suffragist? During the whole of their earlier time together she had upheld the Frenchwoman's point of view. On one occasion she had expressed 'affection' for the old-fashioned feminine disabilities and declared herself horrified by the efforts of the Lycurgan Women's Group to get at the truth about these celebrated handicaps, though certain of their discoveries had impressed her. But she believed in exploiting feminine charm and feminine weakness, believed in controlling and managing men by means of masked flattery, scorned most Englishwomen as being caricatures of men, and pitied those who either lacked, or did not know how to use, feminine weapons.

To the accompaniment of the little man's now relatively animated discourse, whence now and again an emphasized word or phrase dropped into her musing a reminder, like the sounds coming from round about them in the house when she and Amabel sat talking their way along a promontory of thought, or silently contemplating a scene or person one of them had set up for inspection, that life was going busily on its way, she considered the ranged fragments that were all she knew of Amabel's relation to the movement.

It was she herself who had offered her tickets for a meeting, rejoicing in having something to offer, and feeling that she might be entertained and feeling at the same time a shamed sense of her own lack of interest in a meeting composed entirely of women. Amabel had glanced at the tickets, with the little moue that meant both amusement and disdain, and had laid them aside and immediately become animated and charming in the manner of one who wishes to cover the traces of a blunder or, by flinging blossoms on its grave, to indicate where it lies. But she must have gone to

that meeting, though she never mentioned it. For, soon after, she was an active member of the society. Perhaps one's responses were too slight to call forth any connected account of her experiences at the many meetings she must have attended before she became one of the banner-bearers in the great afternoon procession. Once she had described Mrs Despard with devout adoration until one could see her; see her silky white hair and the delicate mesh of her old lace and could recognize the characteristic quality of the English gentlewoman of her period, the disciplined moral strength concealed behind the gentle facade, within the fragile network of nerves and the delicate structure of bones and sinews, and supporting her now that she compelled herself, in old age, to break through the conventions of a lifetime and fight for a cause seen, in the light shed by her long experience, as necessary to the civilization of which she was a representative.

And Amabel had said one night, suddenly, that she wished Israel Zangwill, who really was a peach, would leave off being facetious. Both these items had made their appearance irrelevantly, at the far end of long conversations, revealing her ensconced within the events of which they were salient, detachable fragments. But she never tried to draw one in, until the big procession made numbers desirable.

Either she regards me as disqualified for any kind of mêlée, or she wishes to keep me as an onlooker at the drama of her own adventure. Of course she is worthy of an audience, if only because she so readily becomes one herself, so long as the show has her approval. What she so rejoicingly exploits is not only herself, but what she impersonally represents; moving, in all her exploitations, from self to selflessness. Willingly dedicated? She is what a

man can never fully be: the meeting place of heaven and earth. Is that why men delighting in limelight and mirroring audiences are always a little absurd?

Lovely she was, worthy of throngs of spectators, swinging gracefully, steadily along in bright sunlight, the rhythm of her march unimpeded by the heavy pole of the wide banner whose other pole must have been carried by someone walking with the same steady rhythmical swing; at whom I never looked, seeing only Amabel, just ahead of me, a single figure worthy to stand as a symbol of the whole procession, gravely jubilant, modestly proud. She seemed to invite all the world to march with her, to help and be helped. Certain in the way a man so rarely is certain, whole where he is divided, strong where he is weak. Deeply ensconced within her being, and therefore radiant. And it was she, and others here and there in the procession, particularly those the general public was not prepared for, matronly, middle-aged, and obviously gentlewomen, who gave it the quality that shamed into so blessed a silence the pavement-scoffers and the gutter-wits; and who were so deliberately ignored by those of the newspaper men who still went on with their misrepresentations to support the policy of their employers. And it was the sight of Amabel and these others that brought so many male pedestrians to the point of overcoming their British self-consciousness and stepping into the roadway to march alongside.

Since then, Amabel has said nothing of the progress of events until she told me of to-night's march.

Someone switched on the light, an apparition, banishing the June gloaming, driving the expanded being of every one back upon itself and revealing the face of the lecturer. It was deeply lined by some sort of endurance, and something in the

modelling of the rather narrow skull, something about the expression of the whole head seemed to cry aloud the limits of the man's imagination and to classify him with those who adopt, and devote a lifetime to expounding, a doctrine thought out but not thought through, and therefore doomed from the outset. But his state of being sociably at home and at ease and available, in the midst of a self that had become identified with a belief without losing its pleasant individuality, had the power of freeing, within his hearers, the contemplative spirit, and moving them to assemble for its operation their accumulated experience, modified, so long as it was examined in his presence, by the influence of his personality. Even those who were interested in following his discourse from point to point must feel the reflective process going on within, a troubled accompaniment to his serene expressiveness; and the few authoritative intellectuals who by this time had approvingly or scornfully identified his school, must be discomfited by the self-effacing simplicity of his address, his failure to use an opportunity for display.

He was something like that outsider who had come to take the Three Hours service at All Saints'.

The incident had sprung forth unsummoned from its hiding-place in the past where all these years it had awaited the niche prepared for it partly by yesterday's evening on the balcony, which had taken her unawares back into the time when going to church, even at the risk of being upset by the parson, was still a weekly joy, and partly by the influence of this man whose spirit was an innocent reproach to feigned interest. Just as for this last hour she had sat unparticipating and yet glad to be present, so, on that far-off day, she had sat and knelt and stood, singing, without experiencing any emotion that in the opinion of a sound churchman would

have justified her presence. But not without uneasiness. The gladness she was now remembering had arrived during the moment after the unknown parson suddenly broke off his discourse to appeal, in his everyday voice, quietly, to his congregation, to every member of it, to cease attending to him as soon as anything he said should rouse a response, or a train of thought, and to spend the remainder of the time in private meditation.

And because this man knew all about the difficulty of occasions, how most of them are ruined by being belaboured in advance and insisted upon during their progress, she had listened to him for a while. But must soon have left off listening. For there was no further memory of him. Another's self-effacing honesty had recalled him and there he stood, a comfort and a reproach.

Recalled by this central figure, the whole of that far-off midday stood clear. She was walking across the common to church, alone between those who had started early and those who were going to be late, feeling strong and tireless and full of the inexhaustible strange joy that had come with this sixteenth year and that sometimes seemed to assert its independence, both of Ted and of the ever-increasing troubles at home. To-day as she walked, suitably clad in her oldest clothes, quietly through the noon stillness under a rainless grey sky, it seemed to have the power of banishing for ever all that came between her and what she wanted to be whenever she reached down to the centre of her being. And then, half-way between home and church, as she watched the flower-dotted grass move by on either side of the small pathway, she felt an encroaching radiance, felt herself now, more deeply than she would on the way home from church with the others, the enchanted guest of spring and summer.

They were advancing upon her, bringing hours upon hours of happiness, moments of breathless joy whether or no she were worthy, whether or no she succeeded in being as good as she pined to be. And as the grey church drew near, bringing her walk to an end, she had realized for the first time, with a shock of surprise and a desire to drive the thought away, how powerfully the future flows into the present and how, on entering an experience, one is already beyond it, so that most occasions are imperfect because no one is really quite within them, save before and afterwards; and then only at the price of solitude.

Sitting far back in the church with the soberly dressed forms of the scattered congregation in front of her, all more than usually at home and in touch with each other within this special occasion which drew only those who really wanted to come, she had felt for a moment the warm sense of belonging. For she, too, had wanted to come. But these people were gathered to feel sad and she tried in vain to experience sadness, being aware only of the welcome unusual deep quietude and of the lovely colour of the drapery over the altar frontal, pure violet deep and fresh, glowing in the sunless grey light, drawing the eyes into its depths, foretelling the Easter blossoming of this same scene into flowers and sunlight. And even the Good Friday hymns, beautiful in their sadness, moving slowly in minor key over only a few tones and semitones, and the punctuating of the intervals of silence by the Words from the Cross brought only a sense of pathos from which, Easter having happened for good and all, joy could not be excluded.

And she had sat unlistening, aware only of the flowing away of the occasion, and stood singing, lost in the eternity which singing brings, and knelt, taking down with her

amongst the enclosed odours of dusty hassocks, old books, and the scent, against her face, of warmed kid gloves, the profane joy against which it was useless to strive.

And just as on that day the quiet, exceptional little parson had made her realize that she would never be able completely to experience the emotions of orthodox Christianity, so, this evening, it was a modest and sincere little Socialist who had confirmed her growing conviction of being unable to experience the emotions that kept Lycurgan socialism on its feet. Throughout his discourse, as her mind wandered about on its own territory, she had had the sense of being confined by him, within the room where the others were building up a clear relationship with the world and using their minds as repositories for facts supporting the theory they had accepted in regard to it, in a private confessional wherein at last she was fully perceiving herself disqualified.

The rising of the chairman to open the discussion set her free to banish herself without offence and hurry home empty-handed to become, for the rest of the evening, Amabel's admiring audience. But when she emerged from the secrecy of the ancient by-way into the lamplit clarity of Fleet Street, where only an occasional upper window teasingly represented, with its oblong of yellow light, the vociferous competition to define and to impose definitions, she desired only rest.

Watching the stout morocco-bound volume disappear into Amabel's handbag, she pictured her sitting in her quiet prison cell undisturbedly reading the whole of *The Ring and*

the Book, with all her needs supplied and honour and glory piling up against her release, and felt almost envious.

‘Yes,’ and again Amabel shook off the invading influence of to-morrow. ‘Yes! Mira, it was truly rather wonderful as well as really funny.’ This time she had only partly turned away from the centre round which her thoughts were collecting, and two manners of presenting what she was about to impart, one gleefully meditative and the other gravely romantic, competed together in her voice and bearing. ‘She and I rolled out of the meeting ... led the way ... arm-in-arm, down the street.’ Her eyes appealed for mirth, delighted mirth over an intense clear vision of the defiant law-breaker, the smasher of outrageous barriers, to set enhancingly beside the one she knew was also immortal, the picture of Babinka poised on the edge of her bed in pale delphinium-blue kimono, retrospectively rapturous.

‘The two policemen appeared from nowhere, took our outside arms in their great paws, and there we were!’

‘Arrested.’

‘I politely asked my bobby if I was arrested. “That’s right, miss,” he said!’ Cascade of laughter, not quite so trillingly triumphant as it must have been when she provisionally told the story to the Baileys downstairs. A little broken, devitalized now that the adventure was over and had once been recounted, by a growing apprehension of its uncontrollably approaching results.

‘He’s a peach,’ she went on, meditatively. ‘Told me his wife belonged to the militants and we’d win if we kept on making trouble!’ Smiling into space, she wistfully recalled, in the remoteness of the quiet, familiar room, a great moment irrevocably gone by, and turned her head and sent a sweeping glance across her domain. In a moment her eyes would return

and the to and fro of their voices would resume the task of reviving each detail of the adventure while still it was fresh in her mind. Meanwhile for an instant, Amabel was alone, in her presence, for the first time. For this investigating glance was not the one which meant that she could not wait while one took in something she had said, nor the one which meant that she had lost interest and retired on to some presently-to-be-communicated item of her store of experience. It was a genuine investigating search for a reminder, amongst her scattered belongings, of something she might have forgotten.

Watching her thus, temporarily removed, Miriam felt the blood rising to her cheeks before the shock of discovery. Deep down in her heart was the unmistakable stirring of a tide of relief, and her eyelids, as soon as she became aware of it and of how, to-morrow, its cool waves would invade and heal her, had dropped their screen, and fear, lest Amabel's returned glance should have read upon her features something of the embarrassing revelation, brought her to her feet and improvised swift statements, spoken aloud as if she were thinking on Amabel's behalf, but just half a tone too high and a shade too emphatically, about the detail of getting to Vine Street police court at nine in the morning.

Even when the door swept open, revealing Amabel cloaked and hatted, not coming in, waiting, a silent summons, upright and motionless, her bag in one hand and the other upon the door-knob, Miriam remained alone, deep in her renewed solitude, and her hands, though now become conscious of what they were doing, could not at once cease their lingering, adjusting movements amongst the things on her dressing-

table, begun automatically while she stood, ready to go but unwilling, hastily and inattentively and as if the movement of external events could close its reopened avenue, to leave the little roomful of morning light restored to her in its original peace and freshness at the heart of the universe. Her continued movements, of whose exasperating effect, suggesting mis-timed, meditative preoccupation, she was uncomfortably aware, were yet sustaining; for now they had become, since she was caught in the act of making them, the reinforcement of her unspoken response to Amabel's silent assertion, conveyed by her manner of waiting, a taut patience ready to snap but also ready to pass into forgiveness if not tried too far, that the placid ripples of a quiet existence must allow themselves to be swept into the tide of her world-changing drama.

It was a tug-of-war wherein she felt herself pulling on both sides, but Amabel, to-day for the first time, was pulling on one side alone, and awareness of this new feature in their intercourse kept her for yet another instant serenely engaged in making leisurely little movements; for too long.

‘Mira! *Not this morning!*’

As if she—who, while Amabel floated about at leisure, with the whole day before her to fill as she pleased, just managed, with the little store of strength drawn from a few hours of troubled sleep, to get away to work leaving everything in confusion—stood every morning tiresomely adjusting the objects on her dressing-table. It was a statement of opinion, a criticism hitherto kept in the background.

Down, down, down the long staircase, with Amabel, better known and more beloved than any one on earth, a stranger and hostile, a young girl in a cloak, going, breakfastless and

sick with excitement, to pay for effectively stating the desire and the right of women to help in the world's housekeeping.

CHAPTER IV

Some kind of calculation is at work, a sort of spiritual metronome, imperceptible save when something goes wrong. It operates, too, upon sentences. A syllable too many or a syllable too few brings discomfort, forcing one to make an alteration; even if the words already written are satisfactory. Perhaps every one has a definite thought-rhythm and speech-rhythm, which cannot be violated without producing self-consciousness and discomfort?

The whole process is strange. Strange and secret, always the same, always a mystery and an absence from which one returns to find life a little further on.

When the new volume arrives in its parcel, one has to endure the pang of farewell to current life that comes at the moment of going away on a visit. Everything in one's surroundings becomes attractive and precious. In their midst, threatening like a packet of explosive, lies the new book. The next moment, everything is obliterated by the stream of suggestions flowing from the read title, bringing the desire immediately to note down the various possible methods of approach busily competing for choice. To open the book is to begin life anew, with eternity in hand. But very soon, perhaps with its opening phrase, invariably during the course of the first half-page, one is aware of the author, self-described in his turns of phrase and his use of epithet and metaphor, and, for a while, oblivious of the underlying meaning in the

interest of tracing the portrait, and therefore reluctant to read carefully and to write about the substance of the book rather than to paint a portrait of the author and leave his produce to be inferred. Presently there comes a weary sense of the mass of prose extending beyond this opening display, and the turning of leaves and reading of passages here and there; the appearance of alien elements, of quotations and gleanings of facts; at last the rising of a crowd of problems, at the centre of which stands the spectre of one's own ignorance. Nothing to hold to but a half-accepted doctrine: that the reviewer should treat a book as a universe, crediting each author with a certain uniqueness and originality rather than seeking, or devising, relationships and derivations.

Then the careful reading from beginning to end, sometimes forgetfulness of one's enterprise in the interest of the text, and sometimes increase of panic to the point of deciding to return the book and, nearly always, whether one feels capable or disqualified, reluctance to spend any more time on it, to sacrifice an indefinite portion of one's brief leisure shut up and turned away from life.

And then the strangest of the experiences—the way, if one feels sure of one's opinion, one meets, in the interval between reading and writing, a clear and convincing expression of an alternative point of view, so that when one comes to write one must either include it and indicate its limitations, which are not always obvious, or leave it silently presiding, undisposed of. Just as strange is the way one meets, after enduring days of being tormented by some special difficulty, in a conversation, or in a book or newspaper, something that clears it up; just in time. And, if there is no special difficulty, but only uncertainty as to method, keeping one uneasy when one is alone, and absent-

mindful when with others, one wakes one morning seeing exactly what to do and with phrases, ready-made for the turning-points of the argument, saying themselves in one's mind; again, just in time.

And yet, each time, one passes through the same miseries, forgetting.

She gathered up the scattered sheets. They seemed alive, warm, almost breathing within her hands. She felt sure, and knew that to-morrow also she would feel sure, that the idea of reviewing this particular book in the form of what now appeared to be a kind of short story, bringing it down into life and illustrating its operation there, was good. Perhaps this was a turning-point, leaving panic behind. In future she would read each book calmly, ignore the difficulties encountered on the way, set it confidently aside and wait for the 'subliminal consciousness' to throw up an idea. But even as this pleasant prospect presented itself she suspected it of being too smooth and easy and wistfully feared that some disturbing price must each time be paid, that only through engrossment and effort could the path be cut through which a solution would emerge.

But at least, henceforward, there would be each time a different solution, a fresh, delightful, though arduous adventure, worth having and paying for in time sacrificed and leaving, when it was over, something alive within her hands, with a being and substance of its own that owed nothing to her but faithful attention. And never again need she take the easy way out that, a few months ago, had seemed difficult enough: catalogue statements, 'is ... is ... is ...' helped out by paraphrases of the preface or the conclusion.

Repeating her laboriously acquired creed, ‘Beware of verbs “to be” and “to have” and of “which”’; begin article with adverb; pile up modifications in front of verb to avoid anticlimax; keep gist of sentence till end’; she became aware of the sudden coolness of the air against her forehead, drawing her attention to the faint happy dew of release broken forth there, and lifting her eyes towards the outer night and the familiar, supporting cliff of house-fronts across the way, whose tops, now that she was no longer in her attic, she could not see. Its upper windows shone dark, or sheeny-blue where gleamed the reflected light of street lamps. Most of the french windows along the balconies were sociable golden oblongs, lace-screened. And that upper window, away to the left on a level with her own, was again lit and uncurtained. The solitary was still there, had doubtless been sitting there at work every evening since she came home from Flaxman’s. But after those first evenings before Amabel had settled in the house, the whole of her consciousness had flowed, as soon as her work was done, backwards towards Amabel’s room down the passage.

And now all the forgotten wealth of this shut-in, skylless prospect was her own again as it had been on that first evening when her little bureau had been brought in and set down in the window-space and Mrs Bailey had cheerily agreed to banish the bedroom crockery to make room for her own moss-green set. To-night, it was as if the intervening loop of time had closed up and vanished, as completely as the time with Selina had closed up and vanished, when she escaped from Flaxman’s. But the second loop was weighed down with stored wealth, inexhaustible, an income for life, and beyond.

There was still something pressing for notice, laying a numbing finger upon the recalling of Amabel who, with her departure, had vanished so utterly. Something that had touched her mind when first she looked up, before her eyes had noted details. Looking within, she saw the skyless cliff, grey in fading light, heard Mrs Bailey's departing voice, warm and kindly with the pleasure of her return, took in the perfect position of the ramshackle little old gas-bracket, just above and behind her left shoulder as she stood close to the bureau absorbing the sudden stillness and the sense of solitude and enclosure; nothing visible through the window but the stationary cliff. No changing sky, no distracting roadway, and inside, all her belongings gathered within the narrow strip of room, surrounded by other rooms and part of another London cliff. This evening of freedom renewed was joined without a break to that first magic evening, whose promise it had fulfilled.

Her thoughts moved on to the moment of waking on the first morning in this room, richly at home, deep in the sense of Sunday leisure and the sense of people all about her in the house, but not impinging; the gradual realization of the freshness of the air pouring in from the squares, in place of the foul reek of the cat- and garbage-haunted waste ground at the back of Flaxman's and, presently, as she lay steeped in bliss, the attack on her nostrils from within the house: not the mingling of stale odours perpetually rising through the confined dust-laden air of the Flaxman tenements, but, stealing up from Mrs Bailey's vast, cheerful kitchen and carrying through keyholes and the creaks of doors its invitation to breakfast, the savoury smell of frying rashers.

The tuneful booming of St Pancras clock called her back to listen and brought before her eyes the tree-filled space

across which it reached the stately old streets. Eleven. And her article must be posted in the morning. Copied before breakfast, with morning clarity to discover ill-knit passages. But it lay there, alive, with its mysterious separate being. The editor would approve. Hypo would approve. 'Bright of you, Miriam,' he would say.

Not until the door stood open did she ask herself whither, so eagerly, she was hurrying. Before her lay the passage, in economical darkness. Ahead, behind its closed door, Amabel's room, silent and empty.

CHAPTER V

Still without a word, the wardress pulled out for her the chair that was set at the end of the long bare table nearest the entrance, stalked away, and disappeared through a door and along a passage opening just beyond the far end of the table, at which stood another chair. There, presumably, Amabel was to sit, smiling, a triumphant prisoner. But it would not be easy to converse across the long, drab waste. This was the prison salon, its social side, a bleak space furnished entirely with this table, running almost its whole length, and the two kitchen chairs, and giving on to the courtyard through which she had come. There was nothing here, and had been nothing, since that low archway at the entrance, wherein one could find refuge, nothing anywhere but stern angles and, to-day, cloud-dimmed daylight. A challenging atmosphere, isolating and throwing one, bereft of support, back on oneself. The street, left less than two minutes ago, might have been a hundred miles away; the archway, the blunt beauty of its low curve, in another world. But it was the woman, much more than the surroundings, who had effected the translation.

Her atmosphere was totally unlike that produced by other women in uniform, servants or hospital nurses, who always suggest a distinction between themselves and their office, an unbroken consciousness of a personal life going on behind their appearance of permanent availability. This woman

seemed undivided, as if she had been born in prison uniform and had never done anything but stalk about, a gaunt marionette and, like a marionette, because of its finality, because of the absence of anything to appeal to, a more horribly moving spectre than is a living being. No appeal. That, her mechanical non-humanity, was what made this woman so perfect a representative of prison life.

Stone walls do not a prison make; but this woman could make a prison anywhere.

Reappearing, she slowly advanced, pacing rigidly, mechanically, along the side of the table nearest to the courtyard whose grey light upon her face revealed an expression of watchful cunning, gleaming from her cold eyes and drawing her thin lips into a kind of smile. Half-way down, she stopped and looked towards the little corridor, along which advanced another figure, again a procession of one, but moving still more slowly, as if sleep-walking, eyes wide on vacancy, or as if drugged, or mad.

Two paces, and the figure emerged from the passage and, reaching the chair, placed a white hand upon its back and swung with a single graceful movement——

It was Amabel! Unrecognizable in the large ill-made dress of chequered cotton, her hair hidden beneath a clumsy cap of the same material, set, as if to accentuate pathos, a little dismally askew, but now, since the gaze of the eyes beneath it, in becoming direct, had moved from incredulous amazement into a mingling of reproach and scorn, taking the part of an ironic commentator.

But why all this drama? And *why*, in the presence of the wardress, this tragic, martyred air? It was not only the prison dress, it was also partly her desire to make an impressive entry in the character of a prisoner that had made her

unrecognizable. After all, she was in a sense a hostess and oneself a visitor expecting to be welcomed. But the entry she had devised apparently precluded speech.

‘I didn’t recognize you,’ said Miriam, angrily aware, as she spoke, of hanging herself in the proffered rope, impatiently waiting for Amabel to cut her remorsefully down.

‘No,’ breathed Amabel tonelessly, and glanced apprehensively at the wardress, now standing a little averted. Assumed apprehensiveness, deliberately calculated to add to one’s embarrassment by suggesting that at the first sign of spontaneous interchange the marionette would turn and annihilate the two of them. A series of remarks passed through Miriam’s mind, each unsuited to the occasion as Amabel wished it to appear, each revealing herself as insufficiently impressed. She remained silent, watching Amabel’s face for a change of tactics.

‘It was kind of you to come,’ said Amabel, isolating each word by a little pause, as if speech were a difficult, long-forgotten art.

‘I wanted to come,’ said Miriam, wondering with the available edge of her mind what kind of truth lay behind her words, whether she had wanted most to see Amabel or, most, to achieve the experience of visiting an imprisoned suffragist; while the rest of her mind remained tethered and turning round and round in the effort to decide whether after all Amabel was staging her drama wholly for her benefit, or whether it was part of a week-old campaign against the inhumanity of the wardress.

‘I shall see you again before long,’ she added lamely, acutely aware of the difficulty of projecting emotion across the long waste of table, and saw Amabel register, by a

perfectly normal glance of disapproval directed away from their colloquy, sideways towards the observant, long-suffering universe, impatience with her failure to play a suitable part.

Which of them had laughed first? It was impossible, in the midst of this swift to and fro of Tansley Street items, to remember. And it was really hostess and guest who were now separating, facing each other, across this exaggerated precautionary distance, grimacing at each other while the wardress, who had turned and beckoned, moved to the open door. But even as Amabel kissed her hand and smiled her smile, her bearing resumed its former tragic dignity and she turned and crossed the small space between her chair and the door, where she became, on passing the rigidly motionless form of the wardress—whose look of cunning watchfulness was now in-turned, leaving her eyes sightless and herself unapproachable—a forbearing suppliant, head bowed and eyes down—gazing, as if patiently waiting until it should please the tormentor to relent and respond.

CHAPTER VI

‘Dst Miretta,

‘I don’t perhaps catch your drift. But I think you’re mistaken and I don’t share your opinion of yourself. The real difference between us is that while you think in order to live, I live in order to think.

‘Yrs, H.’

Trying again to recall the drift of her letter, she succeeded little better than she had done this morning, remembering only that the mood dictating it had been the result of his unexpected little note whose contents had revealed him glancing, from the glowing midst of a pause in a stretch of satisfactory work, out across his world and immediately discerning herself, temporarily prominent amongst those who stood, when not actively engaged in the tasks so mercifully keeping them out of the way until they were wanted, turned towards him in admiration and support. Within that ‘exalted and luminous moment,’ he had been moved to knit up the broken mesh of their relationship by selecting her for the role of reflector of his joy in achievement. Sanguine and kindly, her superior in kindness and in freedom from vindictiveness, impersonally friendly and reluctant quite to lose her, he had sent a greeting during a mood wherein he felt at peace with all mankind.

That he should assume this information to be a sufficient gift of himself, enough to feed her interest and to hold her turned his way, was largely her own fault. For although from time to time, under the spell of his writing, she felt that from him alone was coming a clear, vital statement of mankind's immediate affairs and that all human activities should cease while he said his say, she was haunted, even in the midst of the miracles of illumination worked by the theories guiding his perceptions, by the insufficiency of these theories to encompass reality; and found herself growing, whenever the spell was broken and criticism awakened by the sudden intrusion and zestful exploitation of some new-minted textbook term, increasingly impatient of the scientific metaphors tyrannizing unquestioned within so much of his statement. Therefore the thought of him immersed in work brought now a sort of anxiety, a sense of a vast number of people being overcome by his magic and misled, ignoring the gaps in his scheme of salvation—which, naïvely, under pressure from without, he would sometimes attempt to fill with concessions whose very phrasing betrayed at once his lack of interest in what was in question and his desire somehow, anyhow, to convert to his plan those who remained so obstinately and, for him, so mysteriously, indifferent to it—and believing themselves satisfied with a picture of humanity travelling, a procession of dying invalids, towards the ultimate extinction of all that is, or, at best, towards a larger, better-equipped death-chamber, an abode which he so amazingly failed to see would be, for those inhabiting it, as much a matter of course as that in which their ancestors had suffered and been extinguished.

It was her fault. She had played him false, had kept in the background the completeness of her intermittent repudiation

of his views, for the sake of his companionship, for the sake, too, of retaining her share in the gaieties of his prosperous life. But here an element entered against which she was powerless: the love of backgrounds, the cause of endless deceptions and the basis of an absurd conviction—that these backgrounds belonged more to herself than to the people who created them. Yet, even here, was mystery and uncertainty. For these backgrounds, thought of without the people to whom they belonged, faded and died. And this would seem to mean that places, after all, were people.

Vanity, too, had helped. If it were vanity to hope that she herself might be instrumental in changing his views. Yet she knew that she would gladly sacrifice his companionship and all that depended therefrom for the certainty of seeing his world of ceaseless ‘becoming’ exchanged for one wherein should be included also the fact of ‘being,’ the overwhelming, smiling hint, proof against all possible tests, provided by the mere existence of anything, anywhere.

Recalling herself from this unfailing mental pasture, she turned to him again. Within his limits, he was innocent and whole. He saw his ‘job,’ and gave to it his whole strength. No one else, considering the human spectacle, saw so clearly as he and in so many directions or on so large a scale what was going on. No one else had a greater measure of intellectual force. But Newman had predicted the force and brilliance of the modern mind and called it Antichrist. Chesterton believed that clear thought was incomplete thought. It was certainly cheerless thought. Beginning nowhere, it ended in a void.

Being versus becoming. Becoming versus being. Look after the being and the becoming will look after itself. Look after the becoming and the being will look after itself? Not so

certain. Therefore it is certain that becoming depends upon being. Man carries his bourne within himself and is there already, or he would not even know that he exists.

Why, instead of writing whatever it was she had written, had she not sent just a statement of that sort, upon a post card? He would have dismissed it as 'cloudy'; and, meeting him, she would have no words ready with which to confound the silencing formulae he carried about, like small change, and could put his hand upon at will. But anything would have been better than responding, to his zestful sketch of himself, so thoroughly in the masculine tradition, and which any 'sensible' woman would indulgently accept and cherish, with something that had been dictated by a compensating complacent vision of herself as the Intimate Friend of a Great Man; but without the justification so amply supporting his complacency, without a single characteristic to qualify her for the role, or a sufficient background of hard-won culture to justify a claim to it. His rebuke, though addressed to a non-existent person, the meekly admiring follower he desired rather than an opponent facing the other way, was well earned. But his manner of administering it, insufferable.

Even this morning astonishment had preceded wrath, and now, after a day's forgetfulness, repudiation of deliberate formal offensiveness still called aloud for suitable action. She regretted having kept the note for even a single day instead of casting it forth at once, posting it back on her way to work, so that he might have received it by this evening's delivery at Bonnycliff. It was too late, now, to reach him even to-morrow morning. But it must be banished before the depths of night should present it in the morning as a long-harboured possession. To-night it was still new, an aggressor, material for prompt destruction. But not to be honoured so

far. He should destroy it himself and should be told to do so in a manner leaving no doubt as to her opinion. A simple return would have left her reaction uncertain.

With a pang of relief, she welcomed the arrival of a phrase and wrote serenely, sideways across the wide space left below the compact lines in the centre of the card: 'I have no waste paper basket. Yours, I know, is capacious. M.'

Returning from post, she found her room flooded with the first radiance of afterglow and filled with rain-washed air promising the fragrant freshness of night in the neighbourhood of trees, and bringing a vision of early morning, waiting beyond the deep brief space of darkness. Both darkness and early morning once more peace-filled. Once more her room held quietude secure, and the old in-pouring influence that could so rarely and so precariously be shared. Here, in the midst of it, everything seemed immeasurably far off and even thought seemed to exist and to express itself in another world, into which she could move, or refrain from moving. Her being sank, perceptibly, back and back into a centre wherein it was held poised and sensitive to every sound and scent, and to the play of light on any and every object in the room. Turning gently in the midst of her recovered wealth, in the companionship that brought, even with movement, a deepening stillness, she saw upon the end wall the subdued reflection of London light, signalling the vast quiet movement of light about the world. It held a secret for whose full revelation she felt she could wait for ever, knowing that it would come.

Was it just the posting of that letter together with the presence of this perfection of clear light after rain that had so vividly restored her sense of the sufficiency of life at first hand?

Turning back to face the window, upon a deep breath at whose end she knew she would be invaded by an army of practical demands calling for the attention she could at this moment joyously give, she found, advancing ahead of all other claims, the remembrance of the little store of letters. As if, before she could begin upon the arrears of sorting and mending and tidying, so long forgotten and now promising delight, she must rid her room of an alien presence.

Why not send them all back?

‘Beyond space and time.’ Springing before her mind’s eye in their place upon the written page, the words no longer had power to move her as they had done on that morning when the unexpected letter had announced its arrival with the sound of the postman’s knock, and the hammer-blow upon the door had struck to the centre of her being and sent her on flying feet down the stairs and across the hall to the letter-box, and back to the room with the letter in her hands at whose address she had not even glanced, knowing it was for herself. But they reminded her that indeed she had been transported beyond time and space, that her being, at the moment of reading, had become an unknown timeless being, released from all boundaries, wide as the world and wider, yet still herself. And when her breathing was even again and her surroundings motionless, she had turned to him in boundless gratitude.

And now she found herself regarding the experience as overwhelming evidence for direct, unmediated communication. Before this particular and quite unexpected letter had arrived, she had heard from him a hundred times and now and again been deeply moved as she read. On this occasion, some part of her had read the letter as it lay in the box and she had experienced in advance the emotions it

aroused, the transfiguring twofold emotion of belief in his love and joy in the admission, at last, of a faith akin to her own. But now it seemed likely that this admission, which she had taken for the expression of a conviction persisting, in spite of his facetious protests, deep down in his consciousness, was merely a figure of speech.

Hitherto, this one letter had irradiated all the rest, both those preceding it, appreciative responses to her own and written, gravely, almost in her own style, and those that followed: brief impersonal notes, sent to bridge intervals between their talks. Now, it seemed possible that this central letter might have been devised to meet her case, might be the culmination of a carefully graduated series.

‘Writers,’ he had said, ages ago, ‘have an immense pull when it comes to love-making. They are articulate and can put their goods alluringly in the window.’ She remembered repeating this to Mr Hancock and the way, looking back along a past which she knew held a broken romance, he had said with the note of respect for his subject that throughout her association with him had been balm for the wounds inflicted by the modern scientific intellectuals: ‘They are very fortunate.’ It was on this occasion, just before the announcement of his engagement, that she had said, aware of him still standing conversationally near, on a sudden impulse and without looking at him: ‘First love is not necessarily the best.’ That, too, was a quotation, though he did not know it and answered simply and sincerely in his unofficial voice, the voice that still encircled and held her, while it sounded, in a world whose values were unchanging: ‘I hope that may be so.’ Sad; uncertain and sad in the midst of his grave, deep happiness.

And now she was for ever excluded from that world, and the world she had entered was closing against her and the one she had inhabited with Amabel was breaking up. Ahead, nothing was visible. Joining company with this sense of the isolation of her personal life came a deep, disturbing apprehension, imperfectly realized when the pain of parting with Hypo had fallen upon her in the midst of the ceaseless events of life with Amabel. Pain had been numbed, and loss set aside by the cultivation of the idea that what was lost had never been worth having. But even after she had suggested this final judgment to Amabel by saying, suddenly and irrelevantly from the midst of a communion wherein she had felt that the admission, overdue, would enhance their unity, 'He is just a collector of virginities,' and Amabel, applauding the formula, had expressed at the same time, in voice and manner, genuine surprise over what she regarded as slowness in arriving at the self-evident, his presence had remained, haunting the outskirts of her consciousness, and now, picturing him as for ever turned away, she was invaded by a kind of spiritual panic.

Yet, even in the midst of it, she could not regret returning that last letter. To her dying day she would stand by that repudiation. But the others she would presently destroy herself. They, at least, were worth destroying.

Had Amabel, always more interested and curious and less contemptuous of him than she professed to be, really read those letters when she dropped and broke the bog-oak casket? The suspicion, temporarily forgotten, had dawned and hovered, neither accepted nor rejected, at that vanished moment, now so vividly returned, when, relating the incident, Amabel had wound up by regretting that it should have happened to 'this particular magpie-hoard.' The apt

expression, although disconcertingly revealing an opinion privately cherished, and produced only under the urgency of events, had distracted her attention from the disaster and so powerfully reinforced Amabel's presence, its way of filling the room and bringing with it, like a tapestry screening all that had existed before she came, the whole of their shared experience, that the broken casket, become an obstruction to the movement of the evening, had been put away, and forgotten.

But now the event itself, no longer obscured by Amabel's handling, came forth with a startling question: How had the casket been broken? How, in the first place, had it at all come into her possession?

She had appeared at the door, in the evening, the moment one had come in, holding the casket in her hands. Looking contrite, she had explained, hurriedly and breathlessly and without pausing for comment or response—her way of disposing of matters that entailed a momentary breaking of their interchange—that she had managed somehow to drop it, and then had come her striking comment: that she would rather have damaged anything than *this particular magpie-board*. Was that her way of confessing that she had examined the contents of the box, as indeed she must have done?

But how had it been broken? Supposing her coming in, curious, and taking it up from where it used to stand on the top of the bureau, how could she drop its solid little form? And, if she did, would that be enough to break it?

Where was the casket?

A search revealed it lying hidden in the bamboo wardrobe behind things fallen from their hooks. For the first time, she examined the break. It extended, below the hinges and determined by the outline of the carving, in an irregular

curve across the back. It would be possible, by holding the two parts as far from each other as they would go, to shake out the letters. The double lock, though loose, was still secure.

She faced an inconceivable conclusion. True. Untrue. Her own mean suspicion. Again she looked at the box. It was old. It had held grannie's bog-oak bracelets, chain, and brooch more than half a century ago, and might be older than that. But it was strong and sound. Along the break the wood was firm and clean. A fall, since the contents weighed next to nothing, could not break any part of it.

It had reached the floor from a height, violently. It had been deliberately and forcibly flung down?

While the imagined picture held her eyes, she felt, striking through her uncertainty and bearing down her anger, its heroic appeal, the appeal of Amabel's determination to drive through veils and secrecies. She put the casket away, trying for forgetfulness. But the little box, itself, reproached her. Mended, of course, it could be, and the break would not even show.

She felt Amabel watching, indulgent, as with a child, but essentially amused and contemptuous. She was so easily moved to solicitude. Like Sarah. But, unlike Sarah, her solicitude was for people only, and not also for the things they held dear. Sarah cherished the beloved belongings of others more than her own and would deny herself in order to restore or replace them. Amabel was a tornado, sweeping oneself off one's feet and one's possessions from their niches.

Perhaps, in the end, things, like beloved backgrounds, are people. But individual objects hold the power of moving one deeply and immediately and always in the same way. There

is no variableness with them, neither shadow of turning. People move one variously and intermittently and, in direct confrontation, there is nearly always a barrier. In things, even in perfectly ‘ordinary and commonplace’ things, life is embodied. The sudden sight of a sun-faded garment can arouse from where they lie stored in oneself, sleeping memories, the lovely essences of a summer holiday, free from all that at the moment seemed to come between oneself and the possibility of passionate apprehension. After an interval, only after an interval—showing that there is within oneself something that ceaselessly contemplates ‘forgotten’ things—a fragment of stone, even a photograph, has the power of making one enter a kingdom one hardly knew one possessed. Whose riches increase, even though they are inanimate. But, if greatly loved, are they inanimate? They are destructible. Perhaps the secret is there. People cannot be destroyed. Things can. From the moment they come into being, they are at the mercy of accident.

With Amabel present, casting her strong spell, my hold on things was loosened. They retired. Perhaps to their right place. ‘Set your affections on things above, not on things of the earth ... for we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.’ Catholic Amabel, without taking thought, is one of those who represent what lies behind Paul’s eager moralizings. Yet she worships beauty, every sort of beauty, with a hushed devoutness. And surely beauty is a thing ‘above’?

She is a sort of vengeance on restricted affection, a consuming fire for ‘treasures,’ selecting for destruction amongst my few possessions, only cherished things. The little scissors, fine and sharp, pathetically precious as having been Michael’s botany scissors in his student days, borrowed

and somehow swept away amongst Amabel's carelessly handled belongings. The Liberty brooch, its subtle green and blue enamels gleaming out from the pewter-coloured metal, radiating always the same joy. 'Lovely. Isn't it lovely?' Looking gravely at it, she had agreed. And when its pin came off, she had gathered up the brooch with the swift, maternal solicitude of one taking a broken doll from the hands of a weeping child, to keep and get it mended. Where is it now? If I live to be two hundred, I shall grieve whenever I think of it. And the moss-green ewer, a daily joy. That destruction, almost witnessed, brought me anger. Impatient anger over the needlessness of the headlong plunging, up the stairs, in a foot-impeding kimono, with the filled jug. Slap-dash, as Mrs Bailey had said, resentfully taking up the drenched stair-carpet. But Amabel went to no one with her cut and bleeding hand, dealt with it alone in her room, coming back only to have the little bandage tied and be forgiven.

Headlong. Urgent to know. Urgent to rescue and help.

It is easier to imagine her at large in the universe than in her home of which I know so little. In her letter, just those two pictures: of herself and the cousin, supporting each other in coming down to breakfast in kimonos; sitting, in the midst of garden beauty, stitching 'for dear life' at the cousin's trousseau. As long as they live, they will remember those sittings in the June garden. And it will be when they are thus alone that Amabel will tell her prison stories. In open sunlight, surrounded by sunlit flowers, or in a shadowy summer-house whence with sheltered eyes they can look out across garden distances. The cousin will ask questions, dispute points and break up the record, weaving into it fragments of her own affairs and remembering it, in the way of busy, talkative people, scrappily and inaccurately.

Told as Amabel, listened to silently and believingly, had told it, it became experience and, in retrospect, increasingly a personal experience. Looked at now, coolly and critically, most of it remained obviously true. It was certainly true that someone had fainted in the Black Maria, after a foodless, exciting day in the stifling police court, and had had to 'stay fainted' until she came round. And certainly 'the worst' occurred in the inevitably verminous reception room where, still foodless and untended, they all remained, with only just space to stand, for hours. A Black Hole of Calcutta. But prisons are not accustomed to receive, on a single occasion, an army of criminals. They were not, perhaps, kept waiting until nearly midnight, but they must have had to wait at least until the resentful, contemptuous wardresses, their number not increased to deal with this influx of tiresome females who had 'no business' to be there making extra work, had finished their usual duties and were free to attend to them. It was true, too, that they were weighed in their chemises and, on their departure in their outdoor clothes, in order to prove that they had put on weight. No one could have invented that. Also that they were bathed in dubious water, and had had their clean heads washed, before getting at last to their cells and the grey cocoa.

'Enter the chaplain,' the unfortunate male who had to pray for Parliament to the accompaniment of giggles from the lady prisoners, and call, on each one of them. His hearty 'Good morning!' Amabel's freezing grande dame bow. Silence, the poor man's pastoral urbanity glissading down the ice-wall of her detachment. His eyes searching the bare cell for a topic, discovering the big red volume, the one visible link between them and the world they both knew. Taking it

up, fluting: ‘Ah ... Robert *Browning* ... a little *beyond* me, I fear.’

Did Amabel glance in his direction when she murmured: ‘So I should have supposed’?

Towards the end of the fortnight, hearing her wardress, in the corridor, speak kindly to a *cat*, she wept.

CHAPTER VII

There he stood, unchanged. On each day of the long interval he had been seen by an endless series of incoming patients, standing thus, at his best, tall and slender in profile against the window whose light fell upon his benevolently handsome head, bent and thoughtful, suggesting the stored knowledge and experience awaiting the anxious inquirer; concentrated meanwhile upon the letter in his hand. As the door went wide and the parlourmaid stood aside for her to pass, the quiet joy of finding the well-known picture unaltered and the effective pose still able to arouse, as well as admiration, a secret mirth, was dimmed by regret for a lost refuge. The past she was vainly approaching lay as far away as her former self, inaccessible behind the transforming events of fifteen months.

While before her within the well-known room there opened unexpectedly a strange, uncharted region beyond which he stood, for the first time a little formidable and challenging, she reminded herself that she was here not on her own account but as Sarah's representative. Sarah's need alone had brought her back and, even supposing him still to have a right to her confidence, this visit was not a suitable occasion for confession and the regretful, unstinted absolution with which it would be met. For Sarah's sake she had ignored the barrier raised for ever by their last, decisive meeting. For Sarah's sake, she must carry through the

interview, treat with him on a fresh footing, as a relative calling on a physician, impersonally.

But as the parlourmaid receded and the door, moving back over the thick carpet, clicked gently to, she found herself enfolded by the familiar stillness, spacious and deep and, apparently, even to-day, even in the face of their division, to last until at some point during her transit from door to chair he saw fit to swing suddenly round. But on this occasion, Sarah's occasion, he could hardly greet her with his old device of mirth repressed and waiting for her first word before breaking into the voiceless laughter which was his chosen defence. Standing there with Sarah's fate in his hands, he would reveal himself in a new light. She would see him as he was seen by the relatives of patients gravely ill. Indeed, he was already so revealing himself. For although she had now passed the point in the journey at which, usually, he came to life, he still retained not only his air of professional gravity, but also his motionless pose, letter in hand. She found her breath coming quickly and the weight on her heart, lifted a little since she had written to him, pressed down again, darkening the room and showing her the near objects isolated in a sad individuality. Just ahead stood the chair, the seat of the condemned, soaked with memories.

‘I've seen your sister.’

The meditatively murmured words were addressed to the letter in his hands and, still, he did not look up or turn her way. Instead, dropping the letter, he moved swiftly to the mantelpiece upon which were ranged, exactly in their old positions, the dreadful little framed female faces looking reproachfully or soulfully forth from between their heavy cascades of waved hair, and said, in the same low tone, into a jar standing at the far corner: ‘Did you hear from her?’

Compelling her quivering nerves to sustain the interval before knowledge should fall upon them, she told him she had been away for the week-end and, with the sounding of her voice, felt herself in company with all who in this room had spoken cool-sounding phrases while waiting for judgment from which there was no appeal. Upon her last word he swung round. With outstretched hand, for the first time only one hand, he took her own and steered her into the patients' chair with a steady withholding grasp which might be either a call to endurance or a relic of the embarrassment of their last meeting, and was seated, fully facing her, professional, knees crossed, elbows propped, met finger-tips making of his hands a little hutch.

'I went to see her,' he began, his eyes searching the various distances of the room, in the even, leisurely, rather high-pitched narrative tone that seemed to summon, for the purpose of linking to it the incident he was about to record, the whole of human history, and that always in the past had turned her imagination upon the spectacle of social life as he appeared to see it: whole, all in one piece yet graded, in classes and professions sacredly distinct from each other and united, for him, by mutual respect and an unquestioned common aim. But to-day his assembled humanity was a vast dim background upon which appeared the figure of Sarah, sick and suffering and cut off from access to first-class advice and first-class treatment, save amidst the inevitably detestable conditions of a hospital ward, and now, at last, after years of puzzled advice and heroic endurance, set suddenly within the full beam of medical enlightenment. And when, after the characteristic little pause always punctuating the Celtic sing-song of his narrations, he brought out 'on *Saturday*,' as if even the days of the week called for

respectful emphasis of their individuality, she saw lifted from that distant figure its heaviest shadow, the shadow of tragedy that might have been averted.

‘I was there,’ he said gently, ‘for an hour or more.’ Again, the careful, witness-box pause. But if a case is hopeless, an hour is not required? Not a whole hour of the time of an overworked physician?

‘We went into everything and, I think’—his hands separated and one of them, followed by his averted gaze, moved to the writing-table, and the tips of the outstretched fingers came to rest, pressed down upon its edge, momentarily clearing the circle of her attention of everything but a single thought: that any doctor worthy of the title, in pronouncing an opinion, flinging, across the dark gulf between effect and cause, the bridge of a fragmentary creed, becomes self-conscious, embarrassed, pleasantly, by the presence of a witness of the exploit and, unpleasantly, by his own sense of insecurity—‘we’ve found the way out.’

In the stupor of relief that fell upon her, relaxing the taut network of her nerves and leaving her seated as of old, infinitely at ease and at home within the friendly enclosure, she waited for his facts, the ‘medical facts’ she had for so long scornfully regarded as misreadings of evidence isolated from the context of reality, inertly going their way until another group of facts, equally isolated from reality, brought about a fresh misreading. But the facts she was now to hear, drawn from the realm of Sarah’s being and regarded from the point of view of Sarah who, in spite of her experiences, still unconsciously endowed all specialists with omniscience, would carry conviction borrowed from the hope that Sarah’s faith might introduce a power that would carry all before it.

Without looking her way, still with his eyes upon a distant point, he had risen as if to seek something, but actually, she realized a moment later—returning from a solitary excursion into bitter self-reproof for not having long ago thought of consulting him on Sarah’s behalf—to drop, from the midst of apparently trivial preoccupations intended to minimize its impact, the most alarming of his communications.

For how could nursing-home and operation be afforded? She felt her face grow drawn and the teasing and nowadays so easily provoked little fever patches of fatigue burn again upon her cheek-bones as her thoughts turned to Bennett and the difficult years since the rescue of his floundering brother, and Densley’s voice went on, carrying its messages into her mind more directly from its place in a near corner of the not too large room than if he had spoken, confronting her, across the narrow space lying between them a moment ago. But when for an instant it paused and the words ‘serious operation, radical, a cure if it succeeds,’ were beating to and fro with the beating of her heart, she wanted him close, eye to eye, to read his thoughts and *know*. But she had no strength to rise.

His hand came down upon her shoulder and gently pressed. ‘She has a hundred-to-one chance, my dear. If she were my nearest relative, I’d send her to it with an easy mind. She has a sound constitution, a sound nature, and the fact that she has endured all she has gone through and remained as I found her, speaks volumes for her character. I *admire* that sister of yours, my dear.’

Coming into view, he let himself down into his chair and faced her, with his smile, radiant, quizzical. He had said his professional say, administered the grim, spiritual purge and

the tonic, and would now deal, cheerily, with immediate necessities.

‘Yes,’ she said, calling home the thoughts that a moment ago were pouring into the empty space ahead of her and now lay tangled in her mind. ‘So do I. We are utterly different, belonging to different sides of the family.’

With his mouth open for his voiceless laughter, he was relapsing into a mood easily to be afforded by his unthreatened security, handing out a challenge to aggression in her own style, to trappings on his logic and regardless excursions into ways of thought running counter to his own; as if, with Sarah’s affairs happily settled, nothing remained but an opportunity to resume.

‘I told you they were frightfully poor,’ she said, and listened hopelessly, pictured the world of nursing homes, most of them cheaply run dens of extortion, speculative investments exploiting the worst fears and the most desperate human necessities—uncomforted by the idea of Densley as a blessed mediator, tempering the gale of expenses all along the way. For, however tempered, they would be beyond Bennett’s already over-strained means.

‘Have ye heard,’ he said lightly, as if about to change the subject, ‘of the Florence Nightingale Homes?’

And again he was on his feet and speaking from a distance. ‘There’s one in the street here. Your sister’s room is booked. She’ll have the services of one of the best of the few men qualified to undertake this operation. I shall be her medical attendant and the total inclusive cost, my dear, will be one guinea a week.’

Remaining hidden in the background, he was aware of her reviewing him afresh, seeing him as a worker of incredible miracles, and was savouring to the full, in this room that had

been the scene of so many conflicts and drawn battles, the moment she needed for recovery from the stupefying blow. But in an instant and before the welter of her emotions could be made to subside and leave a clear channel for the heart's ease that could not fail somehow to express itself, he was returning to his chair, speaking as he came.

‘Tell me, *why* did your good brother-in-law give up medicine?’

He really wanted to know, was really interested in every human soul he met. With Sarah's affair settled and nothing more to be said about it, he was now, having, as always, appointments waiting one behind the other, dismissing it from his mind and, wishing her away, using this hang-over, left in his mind as an item of interest, to wind up the occasion. Standing up, still faint and weak, she looked at the far-off landscape of Bennett's arduous life and saw there feature upon feature that would appeal to him, call forth his admiration and his refusal, even in the face of so much apparently wasted effort, to admit any shadow of failure. But the impossibility of launching out into all that, even of handing over a significant item, while still his own wonder-working remained untouched between them, kept her dumb until she looked across and found him waiting, with twinkling eye and mouth half open, only to meet her glance and then await her answering smile, before going off into the silent, gasping laughter that showed him still relishing her amazement over his thoughtful conjuring. He did not rise and there she stood, alone, glad of the sudden, convenient flush upon her cheeks as an equivalent for what she knew he would now allow her to say.

‘Bennett?’ she brought out, clutching at Amabel's manner of conveying ‘Do you really want to know?—well, if you *do*

——’ and saw him settle his shoulders in his chair, elegantly, not in weariness, but as if at the beginning of a sitting; and again, as during that half-hour after she had left this room, for good, more than a year ago, she regretted, seeing it from the point of view of daily personal intercourse, the life she might have shared with him. For, to-day, it stood clear in her mind as he saw it: no professions or assurances, deeds rather than words, and their results to be recognized in conspiratorial laughter.

‘His career,’ she said, refraining from accepting his tacit invitation to stroll about the room, ‘was shattered by a ne’er-do-well relative.’

‘He’d have made a good medico.’ Light, as he spoke, fell upon the distant picture of Bennett plodding sedulously along his encumbered way. Just the handing out of the fact and its reception by one who *felt* the lives of others, seemed irrationally to lighten both Bennett’s burdens and the task of contemplating them. What an outpouring, item by item, might she not have known, in association with Densley, of all the hidden miseries so pressing upon her, whenever her thoughts turned to her family, that she had grown hardened to avoidance of the spectacle and, lately, it now crushingly occurred to her, had even forgotten her old aspiration: to make money, and help right and left.

‘He began late, you see, first having to provide the wherewithal for his training and then, in the midst of it, was obliged—felt himself obliged—to rescue his relative by parting with his capital. Of course since then things have been difficult. He started a small, precarious business in the City, and married, when our crash came, the girl he would never have aspired to unless the crash had come.’

‘He married well, my dear. The right girl. A man happy in his home life can face the world.’

‘He married, poor dear, the whole family.’

Silence. Was he, with his exceptional capacity for interest in people he had never seen, examining this item, away there in his chair, with a view to further questions, or recognizing that only an elaborate narrative, for which there was no time, could fill it out?

‘It must be late. I’ll go home and read my week-end letters ... Sarah’s letter,’ she finished gently, and felt, piercing through the glow of her gratitude, the chill of returned apprehension on behalf of Sarah: ‘a hundred-to-one *chance*.’

Springing lightly to his feet, ‘There’s one more thing I’d like to ask you,’ he said, looking round the room. ‘How have you managed to get so pulled down?’

Although the sitting was surely now over, the unexpectedly invading urgency that had prompted her to respond in detail to his questionings was still unsatisfied. There was still something, just out of reach, waiting to be apprehended. And when he began yet again and seemed now to be going leisurely towards the expression of his borrowed dogma as to the evils, for women, of intellectual pursuits, she assumed a listening attitude, hunted swiftly for what had occurred to her since last they discussed the subject, found, rising to the surface of her mind, the useful indictment of the limitations of abstract reasoning, and the glowing certainty that the deranging and dehumanizing of women by uncritical acceptance of masculine systems of thought, rather than being evidence against feminine capacity for thought, is a

demand for feminine thinking, and retired to the background of her being, where, she found, like a third person looking on and listening while she talked, some part of herself had been piecing things together and was now eager to discuss the situation, so unexpectedly created, with herself alone. But Densley's voice, emerging from its meditative sing-song, interrupted the colloquy, from which she turned with a vision of Oberland before her eyes, to find him saying, in the despairing tone of one contemplating a vexatious unalterable phenomenon: '*spend* themselves so recklessly!'

'You would rather they posed, elegantly, on pedestals, breathing incense; in the intervals between agonies.'

'Western women. Take the Japanese Butterfly; and consider the splendid sons the little lady produces.'

Proof even against the shock of this amazing blindness, the wordless colloquy that had thrown up the suggestion of Oberland—useless, since it would mean waiting for the winter—still went on. But now it was pulling her up, marking time, keeping her watchful for something yet to emerge, and she felt relieved as well as annoyed in perceiving his inattention while she reminded him of the stern ethical training ruling the life of the Butterfly and, possibly, the root of her charm.

'What,' he said, gravely and simply, 'are you going to do to get the better of this seriously run-down condition?'

She felt trapped. Knocking at the door of her mind, his gravely spoken words released and confirmed her intermittent conviction of being vaguely ill and getting, progressively, a little worse.

'I know,' he pursued quietly, 'it's useless to suggest that you should cease burning the candle at both ends as well as in the middle.'

She now realized that she had told him, borne away by the relief of telling, too much as well as too little. With Amabel away and half the night no longer spent in talk that had often been renewed at dawn, with easy, empty August not far off and holiday waiting in September, life had become more manageable and had, again, beneath it, enriched by all that had happened, its earlier inward depth. The state Densley was considering was the result of the past year and could now gradually improve.

‘But in one way or another, my dear girl, you ought to pull up.’

Controlling face and voice against the onslaught of the emotions raised by a vision forming itself within, impossible to realize, yet dictating, as a move in its favour, that she should make him say, unenlightened, the whole of his say and give a definite verdict, she asked him what he proposed, what he would suggest if he were advising a patient regardless of circumstances, and waited guiltily; breathlessly watching this unconscious assistant who was to put the weight of an opinion in which she could not quite believe at the service of a scheme that could not be realized and that yet was sending through her wave upon wave of healing joy and making this grim, dim enclosure, from which he, poor dear, could not escape, the gateway to paradise.

‘Well, my dear, I should say, in the first place, rest; and secondly, rest; and, in conclusion, *rest*.’

‘I thought you were a *churchman*!’ Her intoxicated laughter carried her on to her next question, which already she had answered, so that his reply seemed like an echo:

‘Six months, at least, and the first part of the time to be spent resting, though not necessarily in bed.’ Her feeling of guilt vanished. No one but an invalid could be told to lie up

for weeks on end. Thanks to Sarah's need, she had unexpectedly and innocently become a patient provided with a diagnosis, and a prescription that in the eyes of both the worlds to whom explanation was due would be a passport to freedom.

'I see, a rest-cure,' she said judicially, to cover the sacred tracks and keep his thought-reading at bay. 'And only the other day I read somewhere that that big neurologist, I forget his name, the one who is always sending people to rest-cures, had himself broken down and gone into a nursing-home to take his own cure.'

'And don't ye think he's a wise man?'

'Well, I mean if a neurologist can't keep himself right, what is the value of his neurology? And if his science is unsound, why should one believe in the treatment based upon it?'

Resisting the flood of his inevitable laughter, her thoughts went their way, beating against the last barrier, and leaped, rushing ahead into the open even as they leaped, and stood still upon the blessed fact of her hoard, the thirty pounds saved towards her old age years ago at Mag's instigation and systematically forgotten until it had faded from her mind.

'Despise the profession, dear, if ye must. The question is, can they spare you? Could it be managed?' Meaning, can you afford it, you poor waif?

But the really strange thing, after all, was not that she had suddenly become an invalid under sentence in spite of herself, but that it had never before occurred to her that well or ill she had within her hands the means of freedom.

'I shall go away,' she said, 'but I don't promise to rest.'

His upflung hands came down upon her shoulders and held her exposed to his laughter and to the malicious,

searching beam of his eyes wherein she read his discovery of her strategy.

‘Thank you,’ she said, as he set her free, ‘and now I really *will* go.’

Not only gay and strong, but oddly tall she felt and, certainly, for his eyes, bonny, going to the door with his arm round her shoulders and his kind voice in her ears:

‘Bless you, my dear; my dear, dear girl. Come and report yourself when you get back.’

CHAPTER VIII

Now Lorna, come all the way up through the house to offer tea, framed in the doorway, all smiling friendliness as she took in the reason for refusal, seemed to be within the secret, sharing it. There must be some unvarying reason for the way servants, not only those one knows and likes, not only those rather carefully selected, as have been all of the long series appearing in this house, but just any servants, anywhere, seem to keep things intact. And more. While I was saying those few words to Lorna, everything remained with me, not only undisturbed, but perceptibly enhanced by her presence. Perhaps it is because one speaks to them directly, in language calling up the 'everyday' things that hold being rather than thought. With others, one must use words embodying special references, prejudices, ways of thought, a hundred and one hidden powers amongst which communications must be steered across to someone who remains, however well known, several times removed. But it is only to women-servants that this applies, and only to those amongst them who are aristocrats, unresentful of service because of their unconscious, mystical respect for life. Unconsciously respectful to their mysterious selves, and to others, so long as they are treated courteously, so long as there is no kind of spiritual gaucherie to shock them into administering reproof in the form of a deliberately respectful *manner*.

Wise, they are. It is much easier to understand why Wisdom, Sophia, is a feminine figure when one thinks of old-fashioned servants than when one thinks of modern women, assimilating, against time, masculine culture, and busying themselves therein and losing, in this alien land, so much more than they gain. With these bustling, companionable, ‘emancipated’ creatures (‘no nonsense about them’) men wander in a grey desert of agnosticism, secretly pining for mystery, for Gioconda. That explains the men who marry their cooks and, also, why somebody, some Latin sage, said that the only chance of equality in marriage is to marry an inferior. Meaning in culture, so that he may in one direction retain the sense of superiority without which he seems to wilt. Yet humanist culture, which so many of the nicer, though rather selfish and self-indulgent kind of men find so infinitely beguiling as to become devout, and even ecstatic, in referring to it, may be assimilated by women, at the price of discovering themselves depicted therein only as they appear from the masculine point of view, without so much loss of identity as they suffer in assimilating ‘scientific’ culture. But when they go under to it, they lose much more than do humanist men, who at the worst are unconsciously sustained and protected from birth to death by women who have not gone under. For male humanists, particularly scholars, are either unmarried, and therefore cherished by servants, or they marry women who will look after them rather than revel in the classics.

As she looked up from the half-written letter to shift the trend of her thoughts, her mind’s eye was caught by three figures emerging from the long line of servants who had ministered in the house during the ten years now, in spite of

their distant perspectives, outspread before her in a single brief span.

Mrs Orly's wheezy old Eliza, who used so much to admire my menu-cards, living in the half-dark kitchen, never leaving the house in which old age had come upon her, stumping slowly down in the morning from the high attic to the basement, toiling back up the many stairs at night; gaunt and green-faced and looking like a death's-head that day she told me she had walked across to the Park on a bank holiday, held on to the railings feeling as queer as a cockatoo, and decided never to go out again. Mrs Orly's pretty Janet, busily forgetful of her fair prettiness, somehow restrained from exploiting it, perhaps by being one of a large family of boys and girls, a chastening environment from the beginning (yet in the large Cressy family, all the girls, their mother conniving, were bound together in a conspiracy to exploit good looks), perhaps by a natural well-born proud modesty, somehow fostered in her home-life; always ready, whatever she might be doing and however tired she might obviously be—eyebrows lifted a little enduringly, corners of her pretty mouth a little drooping—to attend, welcoming a demand with confiding blue-eyed gaze, and to help, swiftly; getting wet through on a holiday excursion, drenched to the skin in her bright, best clothes, stricken down into fever and pain, passing into the certainty of death, passing through death, at twenty.

Just like her in swift, willing helpfulness was Mrs Orly's tall, dark Belinda. But less sure of life's essential goodness, going about her work with puzzled, protruding eyes, that remained puzzled even when she smiled, and slow, long-fingered, disdainful pouncings—as if one never knew quite how badly inanimate things might be expected to behave—

and bringing to mind, when portion by portion she cautiously got herself to her knees, the movements of a camel; always hampered in her speech by the need of making her lips meet over protruding teeth, always contemplative, as if regarding a spectacle that never varied; until the outbreak. She was a misfit in domestic service, should have been a grenadier, or a countess. Going through the hall to answer the door, she was a procession, capped and aproned, humanity in disdainful movement, in haughty right and left contemplation of a world that at any moment might have the bad manners to go up in flames.

Of course, when she went down with surgery messages for the workshop, Reynolds looked up at her with his permanently adoring, pious young bachelor smile, and matched her refined, withholding stateliness with his courtly manners and flowery speech. Made her hopefully begin to be arch. Scared, in the end, into being less yearning and courtly, he perhaps even left off looking up from his bench when she came in, perhaps left someone else to receive the messages and take, without ceremony, the cases from her hands. To her hurt dignity and stricken heart, the note, inquiring whether she had offended him, had seemed an inspiration of providence and had brought timid joy and palpitating hope. And then, like a thunderbolt, exposure. Cruel, unthinkable exposure to the whole household. Even while she waited for the sun to shine again, he must have been sneaking upstairs to Mr Orly. And the next day, Mr Orly expected me to be *amused* by his murmured story, and by his description of himself and Mr Leyton, helped by the sturdy Emma, late in the evening, somehow getting Belinda, in wild hysterics, up the long staircase to her room. And part of me was. I grinned, I suppose, because Belinda was so large. But her tortured

cries go up to heaven, for ever. Perhaps she has made herself a dignified life somewhere. With fastidious maiden ladies, an enclosed group, disdainfully contemptuous of the world.

And later, Eve. For years, balm. An inexhaustible reservoir of blessedness. Coming gently into the room, taking her time, as though aware that otherwise something would be destroyed, instinctively aware of the density of invisible life within a room that holds a human being; and so selflessly objective that one felt her to be an embodiment, an always freshly lovely and innocently reminding embodiment of one's best aspirations, and every moment in her presence retained the reality underlying the thin criss-cross pattern of events. She brought comfort for bad moments, substituting, for whatever might be making torment, the unconscious gentle tyranny of her image and the sense of her untroubled being; and, to good moments, so great an enhancement that one could share them with her in a beam she would receive and reflect, hovering for a moment before announcing her errand. So that her brief visit, when quietly she vanished, had been either a blessed interlude leaving one restored, or a punctual confirmation of lonely joy.

Of course she had to pass on, going away into marriage.

'Did you see poor Eve? No, you were away when she was here during Ellen's holiday. Poor girl, you'd hardly recognize her. Worn out. Her good looks quite gone.' In a year.

Shifting her gaze, she saw, set out on the leads invisible behind the closed door, Mrs Orly's melancholy aspidistras being washed free of house-dust by softly falling autumn rain and gathering, as affectionately she gazed at them, scene upon scene from the depths of the years before the retirement of the Orlys and the disappearance of the den and her passage-room downstairs, before the closing upon her of the

home-life of the house with the arrival of the Camerons and the transforming changes that had left only Mr Hancock's room as an untouched storehouse of the past. If she were to rise and glance through the door's glass panes, she would behold only Mrs Cameron's brilliantly flowering pot-plants standing in midsummer sunlight, representing the shallows of recent years.

It was as if, in allowing so much time to get to Sarah's nursing home and in deciding, on the way, to turn aside for the odd experience of breaking in at Wimpole Street on a Sunday afternoon, she had known that in the silent, emptied house these receding perspectives would draw near, lit by the radiance falling upon everything since she had left Densley's consulting-room to go forth into freedom. The intervening weeks had been an intensive preparation for their bright approach. Carefully, effortlessly, blissfully, during the free intervals of the crowded days, and in many zestfully consecrated extra hours, chaos had been reduced to order, each finished task a further step towards the blessedly empty future, and an increase of the sense of ease and power that had given her the measure of the burden of arrears daily oppressing her during the years while the practice had been reaching its present proportions, although her earlier intermittent conviction of insufficiency had long since given way to the constantly comforting realization of being a trusted pillar of support.

This sense of ease and power might have been hers all along, if she had been content to live, as so many working women whose paths had crossed her own were living all the time: entirely concentrated on the daily task, refusing to be carried away right and left, spending their leisure in rest and preparation for the next day. These strictly ordered lives held

serenity and stored power. But they also seemed to imply a drab, matter-of-fact attitude towards life. The world these women lived in, and the passing events of their daily lives, held no deep charm, or, if charm there were, they revealed no sense of being aware of it. From time to time, in the ceaseless whirl of her days in this populous house, she had envied them their cut-and-dried employments and their half-contemptuous realism, but now, looking back, she could imagine no kind of ordered existence for which she would exchange the uncalculating years, now triumphantly finished. Perhaps a little too triumphantly to be in keeping with the whole record. For these cupboards unreproachfully full of neatly ranged, freshly-labelled bottles, these drawers of stored materials newly sorted and listed, the multitude of charts and the many accounts, not only in order, but so annotated and tabulated that her successor would relievedly find herself supplied with a course of training, were not representative of herself. They were the work of a superhumanly deedy female and could be lived up to only by an equally deedy female who, if indeed she did live up to them, would lead a dreary life.

Ten years. One long moment of attention, more or less strained, day and night, since the day she sat, dressed in mourning, reluctantly and distastefully considering the proffered employment, on one of the high-backed velvet chairs in Mr Orly's surgery, wondering over the heaviness of the indoor London light, still further dimmed by the stained glass of the lower half of the large window, and drawn, while she hesitated, by the depth and spaciousness of the house as revealed by the stately waiting-room and the view from the large hall; already immersed therein before the interview was

at an end which had revealed the fine, divergent qualities of her two would-be employers.

Consulting the clock whose face for so long had brought the time of day to her mind in swiftly moving, stereoscopic scenes and was now only the measurer of the indifferent hours before time should cease, she found it was already a little past the time for admitting Sunday visitors to the nursing home. Grace Broom's letter must wait and her plan could still remain in the air.

On the hall table amongst the letters waiting for tomorrow, she found one for herself.

Alma. As the envelope came open, she recalled from where it lay, far-off and forgotten, Hypo's offer to lend his own secretary for six months to Mr Hancock while she reclined, following the sun, all over the Bonnycliff garden. The indifference she had felt towards this invitation that a year ago would have seemed to offer an eternity in paradise and now seemed like a sentence of imprisonment, had perhaps prevented her response from fully expressing the gratitude smiting through her when she received his incredible message, gratitude for thought on her behalf, for swift imaginative sympathy.

'Dearest,

'If you really won't come here for your six months, at least let us see you before you go. Say next week-end.'

Was this invitation from them both, equally, or chiefly from him? For the first time, the question seemed indifferent.

CHAPTER IX

Approaching Sarah's room, she heard, emerging from the endless silence into which, for herself, she had supposed it fallen, the voice of Nan Babington, and paused to savour the unexpected sound. Sarah's property. Sarah's quality, alone, had drawn Nan into their circle. Up went the voice, in a phrase that was like a fragment of a lilting song, and paused, on the top note. After all these years, during which the peculiar individuality of Nan's speaking-voice had remained a gathered treasure undefined, the secret of its charm stood clear: Nan set all her words to music. The little phrase, swiftly ascending in a sunny major key, sounded, with the words inaudible, like a brief, decorative, musical exercise. She would gladly have lingered for a while outside the closed door, listening, testing her discovery. But now Sarah was speaking; almost inaudibly.

Inundated, as she went forward, by a flood of memories, she saw, floating free of the rest, vivid pictures of Nan, surprising her, since, when they were before her eyes, she had not taken note of them, by their prominence and the clarity of their detail: her tall form, approaching elegantly along the Upper Richmond Road, very upright in a tailor-made of a subtle shade of green, so clear at this moment before her eyes that she could have matched it in a shop. For a moment she watched her coming, defying the leafless, chill winter's morning, bringing with her the summer that had

passed, the one that was to come. But the other picture was intruding, calling her to look for the first time upon a masterpiece hanging unnoticed in a remote gallery of her memory.

Nan's lovely, slenderly rounded figure, outlined, in smoothly-clinging, snow-white, sheenless muslin, throwing up the satiny gloss of her dark piled hair, against the misted green of the conservatory door as she stood, at the elbow of some forgotten accompanist seated at the grand piano, her head lifted for song, tilted a little upon the pillar of her lovely throat from which flowed so easily—through lips preserving undisturbed upon her face, by never quite closing for labials, the expression of a carolling angel—the clear, pure, Garcia-trained voice, slightly swaying her to its own movement. 'Sing, maiden, sing. Mouths were made for si-i-ing-ing.' A picture of Nan paying a call, seated, talking. Still very upright, still swaying a little to the rhythms of her voice, all deliberately colourful inflections and brief melodious outcries, falling effortlessly from the full flexible lips perpetually disciplined, by Nan herself, to smiling curves, the curves of a happy smile coming from within, from some kind of enchanted contemplation, and sending through her eyes its deep, continuous beam. 'Any one who chooses, my dear, can have a mouth with what you call curly corners.' It was Sarah, lying ill in there and being tunefully visited, who had collected and revealed the facts that had made Nan seem all artifice. The facts about the curly mouth and, when she had come upon Nan enchantedly hemming a sheet on a grey morning, after the tennis season was over and before anything else had begun, the facts about the becomingness of a mass of white needlework flowing downward from crossed knees above which the head of the sempstress, blessed by the

light falling upon it from the window and reflected upward from the white mass upon her knee to illuminate her face, is gracefully bent. And the facts about the opportunity yielded, on dull days, by long sittings at needlework, for training the face to remain radiant in composure. Stern secrets of charm, akin to those of Densley's Butterfly, but less disinterested. Had Garcia taught them all? Taught life as radiant song?

And Sarah's illness had produced this meeting, to which, confidently opening the door, she went forward, feeling herself already set upon the path of redemption from Nan's disapproval by her own delighted recognition of treasures gathered unawares and for ever laid up to Nan's account, and found not only Nan but Estelle also, seated at the far side of the bed. Between them, a little flushed and weary, lay Sarah, deprived by Sunday of the needlework that would have occupied hands unused to idleness, and would have carried off the excitement of a social occasion bereft, for her imagination, since she alone was its centre, of any compensation for the trouble taken by her visitors in coming so far. This was the old Sarah, emerged from the desperate struggle that had found her unself-conscious, spiritually strong and agile; growing well and, once more, rigid and shy. Miriam wished that the Babingtons could have seen her before the operation, serene, at leisure, escaped from incessant demands, escaped, under compulsion, into the first real holiday of her married life and seeing, from her bed in this quiet room, the world that hitherto had shown itself chiefly an antagonist in her struggle for the welfare of her family, for the first time as an item of interest; so that she had demanded, in place of the happily ending novels, so far her only means of escape into a restful forgetfulness, books of travel.

‘It’s Miriam,’ she said croakily, still almost in the voice of Grandma Henderson and, strangely, since she knew and, with her innocent frankness, had always admitted, the Babingtons’ general disapproval of oneself, with a note of relief; as if her labours as a hostess were now at an end.

It was so long since she had moved in Barnes circles that she could not be sure whether this simultaneous rising of the Babingtons was, simply, for the purpose of greeting her or, solemnly, to fulfil the law forbidding callers to overlap. Shaking hands, she felt the radiation, as in turn each sister smiled and looked her up and down, of a deep, almost deferential interest, and immediately suspected Sarah. Thankful for anything to set before her visitors, she had prepared them for this meeting by little staccato announcements wherein one would have appeared, without any supporting data, as something altogether out of the common; so that instead of being Mirry Henderson returned to pay a belated tribute, one must now be a discomfited witness of Sarah’s disappointment in perceiving their failure to be impressed.

‘She looks very *raiediant*,’ chirped Estelle, with her remembered, mysterious vestige of a Cockney accent, pulling her little coat to rights, head bent, lips pursed and chin indrawn for easier downward-frowning investigation. Sarah’s voice broke in upon the idea that Nan, too, might once have spoken thus and have been cured, by Garcia.

‘She’s had a nervous breakdown,’ said Sarah in the manner of one defensively displaying the points of a proud possession to those suspected of unwillingness to appreciate it, and then, unable to wait for the first point to get home: ‘She’s going away. For six months. Sit down, girls, you needn’t go yet. Sit down, Mim.’

Pulling up a chair to face all three, as the two resumed their seats, Estelle just subsiding, Nan distributing songful little phrases as she made a preliminary careful adjustment of her long skirt and the back of her neat little open coat before letting herself down to sit beaming upon the world, Miriam remembered having told Sarah who, also, had not seen her before her transformation by the mere prospect of release, that Densley had said her nervous machinery was out of gear and that therefore she supposed she had what they called a nervous breakdown; for which there was never anything to show. It had served as an answer to Sarah's anxious questions and had evidently impressed her and in some way modified her idea that nerves were mostly nothing, or just ill-temper. But it had not occurred to her that it would be necessary to produce, for others, reasons for her flight. And to the Babingtons, well versed in every kind of illness, it might seem a ludicrous claim. Relieved to see their faces grow sympathetically grave and interested, she decided that whatever a nervous breakdown might or might not be, it would henceforth serve as a useful answer to demands for specific information.

'Sarah's nice medicine-man is yours, too, Mirry, I hear,' said Estelle, in her remembered way of glancing about as she spoke, as if looking for something, so that one never knew to whom she might be speaking until, with her last word, she sent a direct glance through her twinkling glasses. Seen now, after the long interval, this manner told its story. Estelle lived alone, excluded from direct participation; looking on.

'Nan and Estelle are *charmed* with Dr Densley, Mim.'

Ah! *Here* was the topic, the source of the deferential interest. Sarah had been showing her off, in the way best calculated to appeal. She could hear her saying, in response

to the Babingtons' ardent approval: 'He's a *great* friend of Mim's,' and even going on to tell them of Densley's plan for a quiet dinner together before she left London, communicated when Sarah had first spoken of him with a delight reducing one to seventeen years, and to the ways of the old life together when one's status went up or down according to the presence or absence of an attentive young man. But when could Nan and Estelle have seen him?

Brought back by Sarah's voice, she found herself returned from regarding Nan and Estelle, alternately, in the character of persons uncritically enthusiastic in regard to Densley, and flushed as it occurred to her that this habit, revealed to her by Hypo, of thinking about people in their presence and leaving her thoughts in her face, must have been one of the many things the Babingtons had disliked in her.

'Rushed in, just now,' Sarah was saying; 'I told him yesterday you might be coming. But he couldn't stay.' Sarah's eyes, as she cunningly dropped this flattering item with a perfect imitation of a woman of the world boredly summarizing details, were downcast upon her clasped hands while she relished to the utmost what was for her an overwhelming triumph for the clan Henderson in the presence of the Babington clan, regarded in the past as having all that life could offer except the large house and garden which had been, at the worst of times, though then all unrealized, the Henderson asset.

'He's a nice creature,' she said, and hesitated, herself again translated into the past and sharing to the full Sarah's fond pride in the younger sister exhibited as destined to be a queen in Harley Street, before the eagerly interested eyes of the two who considered, as would any of their neighbours, the wife of a general practitioner in the suburbs as very well

placed indeed, and wondering whether Sarah's disappointment in learning that she was mistaken would be greater than her satisfaction if she should see, sharing the wonderful vision with the Babingtons, a sister who had chosen not to marry into Harley Street.

But this vision would be founded on a half-truth. She looked up therefore, with a non-committal smile, and accepted perforce the character of heroine of romance, warmly greeted by Nan in the manner with which she demanded, her singing face all joyously alight:

‘And where is she taking herself off to?’

‘I don't know.’

Into the astonished outcries coming from each side of the bed and taking her deeply back into the brightest days at home, into days whose joy had been too perfect to be dimmed by the perpetual overhanging shadow of disaster, came Sarah's voice, as nearly, as her state would permit, the clarion voice with which, childlike, she would announce the good fortune of others:

‘Nan and Estelle are going to Strath—— What is it, Nan?’

‘Peffer, darling. Zoozie *says*, it's rather chilly, at the moment, in the *chambres à coucher*.’

‘You must have hot-water bottles,’ proclaimed Sarah, not that her thoughts were engaged with obstacles to perfect comfort, but because, while her imagination went recklessly to work upon the social and domestic glories of a holiday in a Scotch hydro, she automatically grasped, in order to keep flying the bright flag of this entrancing topic, what was obviously a familiar fragment of the Babington household creed.

Miriam suggested, with genuine apprehension, imagining, added to the indefinable psychic chill of any area north of

central London, a definite physical chill, that perhaps hot-water bottles might not be available.

‘My *dear!*’ cried Nan, with an expression as near to contempt as was compatible with the preservation of the smiling curves, ‘they will accompany us. In our portmanteaux. I should never *dreeem*’—there, again, was the high, clear, forward note, the upper end of the little festoon, opening the face, beaming through the eyes, as she rose and stood, for a moment upright, triumphantly blossoming, and then bowed, in the manner of one receiving an ovation—‘never, never *dreeem* of going away without Mademoiselle H.W.B. Darling, we must go. Your dragon said only twenty minutes.’

‘We always take our hot-water bottles,’ murmured Estelle, rising and shaking herself, engaged, behind downcast eyes once more occupied with her garments, in quiet retrospective and anticipatory enjoyment of the perfect comfort of the circumstances within which, since she was not expected to shine, she could observe and thoroughly enjoy the surrounding dramas. And be a good friend to the actors, Miriam went on to reflect, seeing outwelling kindness transform her rather hard little face as Estelle turned towards Sarah, and thinking of Freda, and the untiring hard-working loyalty of these two friends without whom she would never have had the opportunities which had carried her to her bourne.

Returning to Sarah, engrossed with the spectacle of the sisters still going the round of their year, still leading, within an unchanged mental and moral enclosure, the lives they had led since they left school, she already could not remember whether she had stood, reduced, when alone with them, to childhood, silently contemplating the retiring figures that had

appeared so bright and salient and socially powerful upon the margin of her own and Harriett's profane, unsocial existences, and even now, as they disappeared round the bend of the stairs, represented a goodly heritage she and her sisters had been fated to forgo. A heritage keeping them cheerfully unaware of the passage of time, unaware, apparently, even of their advanced years. For Estelle, older even than Sarah, was almost old.

While she sat listening to the plans for Sarah's home-coming, all dictated by an ungenerous necessity, and helplessly noted the return, as Sarah talked, of the little pleat between her brows that during her convalescence had altogether vanished, she felt her own exhaustion return upon her, the fevered weakness that for so long had made every task an unbearable challenge and had given to the busy spectacle of life the quality of a nightmare. But to-day it was almost welcome. It proved that the mere prospect of escape had not cured her and it removed from the new cabin-trunk and the many other purchases she had incredulously made, still hardly able to believe they could be for herself, the shadow of reproach through which, each time she saw them, she had to pass on her way to the heart of their rich promise.

By the time she had convinced Sarah of her independence, telling her of the forgotten hoard in Mag's wonderful insurance company, although the lingering presence of the Babingtons assailed her with a faint nostalgic desire for shelter and security, her strength was returning and, with it, pity for all the confined lives about her. For Sarah's, thwarting at every turn her generous nature. For those of the Babingtons, who saw nothing of the world outside their small enclosure. For all those she was leaving in fixed, immovable circumstances. But what, even for those who

were nearest to her, could she do? And why, contemplating the rich void towards which blissfully she was moving, leaving Sarah to return to a life in which, after all, there was no possibility of joining her, should she feel a kind of truant?

CHAPTER X

Still he stood, entrenched on the hearthrug, with his hands behind his back and the light from the brilliant sky making plain every detail of his face and very blue the eyes fixed—save when he posed a question and they came to life falling upon her from a distance as she roamed about, or at close range when she halted before him—with sightless, contemplative gaze upon the quiet blue sea. And still he was holding something in reserve behind the amused comments and questionings wherewith he encouraged her anecdotes.

‘It makes me feel like a sort of visitor. But I can’t tell you how uncanny it is to see the new secretary doing my jobs. It alters them, makes them almost unrecognizable and at the same time gives them a sort of dignity I never knew they could possess, although, for her, they are lifeless, just a series of elaborate processes that have come into her hands. She doesn’t know the history, you see, either of a probe or of a patient. When she reads a letter from Mrs Smith, asking for an appointment, it is just something to be attended to, a detail in a ceaseless series of details. It doesn’t bring before her mind, and in amongst her emotions, the whole of the Smith family going through their lives, about which, you know, in one way or another, we get to know a great deal. She doesn’t, for example, wonder whether again, just as the first guests for a dinner-party were ringing at the front door, Mrs Smith, awaiting them in the drawing-room, sneezed her denture into

the midst of the glowing fire. Not that she would be likely, of course, to repeat such an achievement.'

'You know, Miretta, if you really *are* going away, you ought to write the first dental novel. Or there's a good short story in your Mrs Smith's adventure—which, by the way, must be unique in the history of mankind.'

'Yes. But it isn't only that she hasn't the history of the practice, laden with human documents, in her mind. These people don't *mean* anything to her. It is not only that each patient is tested and revealed before one's eyes from the moment of being let in at the front door to the moment of departing thence. The mere sight of a family account, with an ancestral address at the head which in itself is part of the history of the English spirit, or with a series of addresses, crossed out, one below the other, and of branching accounts, as children marry and set up for themselves; or of spinster and bachelor accounts, proceeding from elaborate filling operations to extractions and the final double denture, crowd up your mind with life because all these people are known to you. They all talk in the chair and reveal not only their histories but themselves from almost every point of view.'

'Angles of vision. Yes. You know, you've been extraordinarily lucky. You've had an extraordinarily rich life in that Wimpole Street of yours. You have in your hands material for a novel, a dental novel, a human novel and, as a background, a complete period, a period of unprecedented expansion in all sorts of directions. You've seen the growth of dentistry from a form of crude torture to a highly elaborate and scientific and almost painless process. And in your outer world you've seen an almost ceaseless transformation, from the beginning of the safety bicycle to the arrival of the motor car and the aeroplane. With the coming of flying, that period

is ended and another begins. You ought to document your period.’

‘Poor soul. She takes up the telephone receiver as if it might explode in her hands and, instead of being immediately in touch with someone she knows, speaks, timidly, to a stranger.’

‘You’ve been a great chucker-up, I admire that. But I’m not sure that you’re being wise this time, Miriam. What are you going to *do*?’

Whence this strange prophecy? Nothing she had written or said could have suggested that she was going away for good. Even in her own mind the idea had risen only in the form of a question to be answered in the distant future, at the end of her reprieve that seemed endless.

‘Nothing. I’m going away.’

‘Where?’

‘I don’t know.’

What could it matter, to him? Why this protesting attitude, and the many questions keeping her restively held up, keeping something in reserve which, amazingly, she did not wish to hear?

‘I’m simply going away, right away.’ Pulling up in face of him she saw, in his silent smile, his reading of her momentary satisfaction in including him in a general repudiation.

‘Don’t chuck your friends, Miriam. We *are* still friends, by the way? You’ll still hold me up, be interested in my work?’ For a moment he watched her thoughts. ‘Don’t,’ with a deepening smile, ‘chuck your friends. A *friend* advises you.’

Here was his quiet message. Smiting through the detachment that had kept her feeling she was watching the scene from afar, unable to be present within it, it brought her

back for an instant into this roomful of memories and took her eyes away from his face to find space and depth for their tribute to the past. But when they returned and she saw, still quizzically regarding her, his smile—which, it only now occurred to her, was the only smile he had and must therefore serve, as best it could, all his purposes—helplessly expressing his view of human beings, each one, wise or foolish, noble, base, or simply pathetic, a momentary puppet on the way to extinction, she could only go on watching him wait for a response that could not come because from him and from his words reality had departed and he seemed, standing there smilingly sustaining her silent contemplation, distinguishable from the many figures she was leaving behind, each, with the exception of Amabel, moving in a fixed orbit, only by the range and power of his imagination.

Footsteps, rustling a frilly dress, sounded within the far-off invisible doorway.

‘Susan! She’s chucking us! Chucking everything and everybody.’

As Alma drew near, bringing a little scene whose every movement would be a shadow of the one now ended, she felt, hearing his version of her statements and silences, as if he had taken her by the hand and set her beyond recall upon the invisible path.

CHAPTER XI

‘How is your sister?’
‘Getting on splendidly. Both doctor and surgeon are delighted.’

‘Oh ... *Oh*. I’m glad to hear that.’

Although Brenton, with an anxious face, and a wax model held gingerly by a lifted corner of his long apron, was now almost dancing with impatience outside the open door and Mr Hancock was just about to turn to him, she was moved, in order to amuse him, and herself to enjoy its implied criticism of orthodoxy, to tell him the story of the biscuits and thus remain, for yet another moment, encircled by the glow of his kindness, in the midst of the busy activities of the practice, by whose orderly turmoil surrounded they had so often taken counsel together.

‘As a matter of fact, she has no right to be,’ she said, in the smiling, swift, narrative undertone with which, in his surgery, while a patient mounted the stairs, they would exchange notes on the day’s occurrences, and thrilled to see him turn back with anticipatory smile, deepening as she swiftly outlined the scene, between Sarah, beginning to recover from her relapse, and both desperate and sceptical under the imposed starvation, and Mrs Bailey, moved by sheer goodness of heart to visit her lodger’s sick sister.

When it came to the smuggling of the biscuits—‘Oswego, you know, one of Peek Frean’s finest inspirations’—the lines

of his face relaxed into gravity and it was only in response to her combative insistence on the proven harmlessness of Sarah's rebellion, only as a retrospective salutation of their many drawn battles, that his smile returned and became his characteristic, conversational laugh: the abrupt 'have it as you like' lift of the chin and the breath thrice sharply indrawn between the smiling teeth.

'I'll be back in a moment. Don't forget that ten pounds.'

Making a note for the new secretary, returned refreshed and rather more confident from her first week-end, but still bewilderedly seeking her balance amidst incessant, overlapping claims, she opened the safe and helped herself to the superfluous funds, feeling as she did so a pang of remorse. For he certainly supposed her to be returning at the far-off end of the six months. Yet, while his half-jocular insistence on her acceptance of the holiday salary, not yet nearly due, had given her an opportunity of indicating the uncertainty of her return, she could not take it, could not, even for him, lay a finger on the unknown future.

She must stand therefore, in the midst of her empty room, a remorseful millionaire, and feel this last proof of his imaginative kindness renew from their deep roots her earliest impressions of him, and her sense, when he came, with quickly spoken reassurances, to the rescue of Mr Orly's gruff embarrassed attempts, forced upon him by his situation as senior partner, to gather in his mind and convey to her some idea of her manifold duties, of being not only at home and at rest, but of moving back, led by the accents of his voice, into the life left behind in the Berkshire from which they had both come forth.

And when he returned and again with an approving glance took in her wide unpractical straw hat and the successful

scabious-blue pinafore-dress, with its soft lace top and sleeves, that she had known he would approve, she felt as they shook hands and he wished her good luck, that although this was the end, his good wishes, still more to her than those of any one in the world, would somehow follow and bless her wayfaring.

Transcriber's Notes

This text is taken from: Dorothy M. Richardson, *Pilgrimage IV: Clear Horizon*. Virago Press, London, 2002, p. 269-400.

The original spelling was mostly preserved. A few obvious typographical errors were silently corrected. Further careful corrections, some after consulting other editions, are listed here (before/after):

- ... evening since he came home from Flaxman's. But after those ...
... evening since she came home from Flaxman's. But after those ...
- ... 'I was there,' he said gentle, 'for an hour or more.' Again, ...
... 'I was there,' he said gently, 'for an hour or more.' Again, ...
- ... trend of her thoughts, her mind's eyes was caught by three ...
... trend of her thoughts, her mind's eye was caught by three ...

[The end of *Clear Horizon: Pilgrimage, Volume 11* by Dorothy M. Richardson]