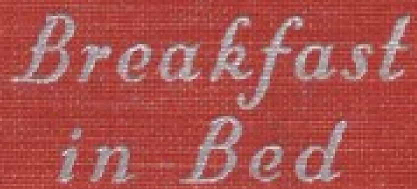
Breakfast
in Bed

SYLVIA
THOMPSON

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*By* Sylvia Thompson

THE HOUNDS OF SPRING
THE BATTLE OF THE HORIZONS
CHARIOT WHEELS
PORTRAIT BY CAROLINE
SUMMERS NIGHT
UNFINISHED SYMPHONY
BREAKFAST IN BED

# BREAKFAST IN BED

*By*

SYLVIA THOMPSON

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# Breakfast in Bed

## CHAPTER I

*6.00 A.M.*

Big Ben struck six; in the dark, in the fog.

At 59, Smith Square, the kitchenmaid's alarm clock rang out in the tin basin she stood it in to increase its noise.

At 59, Smith Square, Lady Nicholson (formerly Blanche Evelyn, daughter of Charles Evelyn, whose wife had been Alice Anquetil, cousin of Charlotte Anquetil, the friend of Queen Alexandra) went on sleeping. She slept the light but refreshing sleep of a nervous woman who had been careful for fifty-four years not to get overtired. She had woken once during the night, disturbed by an unaccustomed sense of windows shut (on account of the fog). But after taking a harmless sleeping draught specially prescribed for her by her doctor she had managed to sleep again.

In the room next door Sir Frederick Nicholson slept too; heavily, snoring at intervals, for the fog affected his bronchial tubes and made his usual winter catarrh worse. Last evening he had spoken in the House on Communist Propaganda in Our Schools, and returned home exhilarated to sleep the sleep, if not of the just, at least of the self-righteous.

Two streets off, at 11, Provost Buildings, Mrs. Cashmore (formerly Lily Blunt, daughter of George Blunt, whose wife was a cousin of Sally Jenkins,

who toured in the chorus with Pelissier) again lit the candle beside her bed. She moved carefully so as not to disturb her husband, bent to the cradle beside her, and lifted out the baby, who had begun again that intermittent clucking that might change, at any moment, into long angry screams. She settled back on the pillow, the baby's head in the crook of her arm, and began to suckle it. In the cot in the corner Edward turned over and Amy stirred. Mrs. Cashmore blew out the candle for fear they should awake. The baby's sucking became less desperate, grew rhythmic and contented, the rhythm marked by a reedy music of breath drawn in on one note and breathed out on a note an interval below. In the dark beside her her husband coughed, turned over, and coughed again. Lily Cashmore tried to make her mind "relax" as the sister at the Clinic told them to, for "Baby's sake."

At Flat 10, 180 King's Road, Chelsea, Clare Nicholson (daughter of Sir Frederick Nicholson, Bart., D.S.O., M.P.) woke holding her lover's hand against her lips. She lay still, remembering herself into life. In this dark she was in Mark's flat. She was expected at home this morning. To-day was Thursday. Last night she had run downstairs, crying, and out into the fog, and Mark had caught her in Flood Street and made her come back. Her eyelids were still hot. Always the same subject. But she was right. She switched on the lamp. Its light slanted on the little heap of her pearls, on her traveling clock, the yellow copy of *Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard*, the black porcelain cat which Mark's charwoman had given him for his birthday. Six o'clock. She looked at Mark. He slept gravely and solidly, like a little boy, his heavy forehead smooth, his nostrils faintly dilated, his underlip jutted out and pushed against the obstinate upper lip. His eyelids were pale in contrast with the bronzed matt texture of the rest of his face, and the dark eyebrows above them, and the black short curling lashes. She thought that he looked younger than twenty-six when he was asleep, and older when he was awake. His waking expression was vehement and mature. She bent over him, curving her body so that he lay in her shadow and shouldn't wake. She lay watching him for a long time. Then, very carefully, she turned and switched out the light. As she settled down again he stirred, and half asleep, or in his sleep, he moved closer to her, threw his left arm across her stomach, pushed his knee under hers and fitted his warm forehead against her neck. She could feel his hair against the lobe of her ear.

His warmth flowed through her, and beat in her, as if his heart were pumping her blood. His arm weighed on her. His breath came and went, warm and close on her neck. She shut her eyes. She smiled in the dark.

She slept with him.

*6.30 o'clock*

There was a button off the kitchenmaid's shoe. (Her name, Mildred King. Age sixteen.) She couldn't stop now to sew it on. She'd stayed in bed till twenty past, and Cook and Ackworth had to have their tea by quarter to seven. She safety-pinned the strap, combed her hair, rubbed rouge from a cardboard compact on her round pale cheeks, and powdered with the remains of some jasmine-scented powder that Miss Clare threw away.

She left her nice little room in disorder, the blue casement curtains still drawn, the bedclothes not turned back over the pretty unstained oak bedstead; last night's washing water still in the willow-pattern basin; and one high-heeled black suède shoe under the cretonne armchair, the other in the corner by the gas fire. Her hairbrush lay on its back on the rug, like a showy beetle with a forest of dirty legs. The electric light was left on.

She hurried downstairs, switching on the lights as she went. Down the chilly first staircase with its brown painted banister and hair-cord carpet. Across the lino past the sewing room and the housemaid's pantry, into the world of green Wilton and warmth from hidden radiators, and silence and white paint. She went by this forbidden route to give a good-morning pat to Brisk, the Sealyham, who slept outside her ladyship's door.

She tiptoed from rug to rug in the hall, stopped at the table to read an opened letter left there last night. (She thought there was no harm in reading open letters. But she would never take them and steam them when they came, like Miss Ackworth did; and when she did get a letter from Mr. Petre to Miss Clare they could none of them make head or tail of the handwriting.) The letter was on crested notepaper, otherwise uninteresting:—

> DEAR BLANCHE: I shall be delighted to lunch with you on Thursday the 19th. "Breckie" cannot promise to come as he has his cousin Alan Lumley coming home shortly from India. . . .

Mildred went along the broad corridor out of the hall, down two steps and into the kitchen. The pipes from the boiler next door kept the room warm. Mildred put her hand on the big pipe painted pale blue that ran diagonally across the wall opposite the gas range, and drew it back quickly. She put the kettle on to boil, went across the corridor into the servants' hall to uncover the canary before Rose got down. She didn't mind what Rose said—(Lazy slut, supposed to be down and at work at seven and never there

till ten past anyway. But Rose can tell her ladyship what she likes now, and it won't make any difference!)

She undid the tapes and drew off the green baize. The canary was up already, looking spruce but absent-minded. He took no notice of Mildred, and began practising his unvarying needle-thin song. She changed his water —"Won't Rose be mad!"—and heard the kettle hissing in the kitchen. She hurried back, took the kettle off, turned the gas off. Nobody ever knew if you heated the teapot first or not. . . . But Mother's like Cook—*fusses!* The milk was in the Frigidaire, the game pie on the bottom shelf—a small piece half cut and broken off. Mildred picked it out and put it, whole, in her mouth. She went back to the kitchen and poured out the two cups of tea. (All very well for Mother to go on at her for losing her job. It wasn't her fault if her ladyship was "cutting down her staff." And something was sure to turn up. What was the good of worrying . . .?) Garibaldi biscuits for Cook and Mary, ginger snap for Ackworth. . . . She took up the tray by the back stairs this time.

Cook was a mountain under the green and pink flowered eiderdown.

"Here's your tea, Mrs. Perrott."

Cook grunted and turned on her back. Her curlers crowned her brow with cosmetic thorns. Her face, red in the kitchen, was matt and pink in bed. Mildred saw that she had slept in the quilted purple jacket that her sister had given her at Christmas.

"Thank you, dear."

Mary was sitting on the edge of her bed in a blue kimono. Mary was calm, plump, warm-skinned, oval-faced. She had a bloom, a physical sweetness; she was like a golden plum ripened in the sun. She smiled at Mildred. The smile was a flower plucked from the bright border of her thoughts.

Mildred put the cup and saucer on the dressing table.

"Thank you, Mil."

Mary wore red leather slippers. There was always a smell of violets in her room. She used violet talc. She had a set of silver-plated brushes given her by Jim Taylor, her young man.

Mildred knocked at Ackworth's door. Ackworth shared the big room with Rose, her niece.

"Come in," from Ackworth.

“Come on,” from Rose.

Rose was nearly dressed. Trim, flat-chested, wavy-haired. A pinched Greuze. White cotton chemise and knickers she made for herself. Pink corsets. Black woolen stockings.

Ackworth had the face of a Roman Emperor framed by two pigtails. She said:—

“I hope you haven’t forgotten the sugar again.” Even in bed her voice had a crimped and cautious quality.

“No, Miss Ackworth.”

Rose, putting on her green print dress, said, “That’s lucky.” As Mildred went out she added, “I like your shoe.”

Mildred looked down. The safety pin!

“—And your cap suits you.”

Mildred put her hand up to her bare head.

“Oh Lord. . . .”

She was too embarrassed, with Ackworth sipping, and glancing at her with imperial irony from the bed, to answer Rose. She hurried into her own room next door to find her cap. Rose could always make her feel stupid and clumsy. But when Rose got downstairs she would tell her what Fred Basham said about her last night. (“Sister Skinny.”)

Blanche Nicholson was dreaming. She dreamed that Ackworth came in and woke her up saying, “The car is here, milady.” And she exclaimed that it was to-day she was going to Cannes and that her trunks weren’t packed, and she jumped out of bed in a state of agitation, which she knew must be bad for her heart, and hurried into Frederick’s room and began to explain to him just what it had meant to her, having had to dismiss Greene. “No woman of my age,” she said, “can be expected to change all the habits of life at once and not feel it!” And, “You won’t care if I *die*,” she said. “You won’t care!” But he hid his head, he wouldn’t listen, and crying and shouting, “I have to give up my maid, but you think nothing of indulging in patent cigarette lighters,” she snatched back the bedclothes—and found a newborn baby . . . Clare’s baby. . . . She knew it was Clare’s baby. And as she bent over it, embarrassed by its newborn rawness, she saw that its eyes were grey and serious and disconcerting like Mark Petre’s; and she thought, “Now

everyone will know—everyone will know—Frederick will be pelted with old vegetables at the next Election" . . . and she covered the baby up again, hastily, in case Ackworth should come in. But it struggled, it moved, it resisted her, clutching at the sheets, wriggling, bouncing, shoving out its head. . . . But its head, to her infinite relief, to the saving of her reason, her dignity, her last hopes for her future, was only the head of Brisk the Sealyham, and she pulled herself together and managed to say, quite quietly, as Ackworth hurried in, "It's only Brisk having a little game in Sir Frederick's bed."

She woke.

She said to herself, out loud in the dark, "Dear me, what a silly dream."

She lay still, feeling her heart beat . . . she heard her little clock ticking on the mantelpiece (The clock was given her by the Chamberlains as a wedding present.) The ticking of the little clock was a relief. She managed to smile to herself about the dream, although she was still troubled by the sense of wild disturbance that it gave her. . . . Such a queer mixture of things. . . . Dear old Brisk! And Frederick had got himself a cigarette lighter last week when he was in Liverpool (but she had been delighted with it, too. An excellent new design). . . . Lucy—of course Lucy could be very unpleasant, as all Roman Catholics can—was talking about Clare last evening, at the Wedmores', and saying that her brother who lived in Paris had seen Clare and Mark Petre together at the Orangerie—But Lucy enjoyed scandal, and liked to think the worst of people. Naturally in any other generation Clare's position as an attractive young woman of thirty, unmarried, would have seemed "odd." But nowadays no one thought anything of it. One had to realize that things had changed. "Lucy is old-fashioned. . . . Clare has her writing and her friends, her artistic interests. . . ."

Lying in the dark, Blanche Nicholson told herself that Clare wouldn't anyway enjoy "that kind of thing."

Blanche had never enjoyed it herself. She believed it was fashionable just now to pretend that women of good family enjoyed it as much as men. But Clare, she told herself, wasn't like that—Clare was too fastidious. She remembered Frederick's phrase about Clare: "Clare's all right! Half the time these girls don't know what they're talking about. . . ."

Blanche felt sure that breeding and early influence counted.

The dream faded out.

She must try to get a little more sleep. She wondered if her throat felt a little sore. Or if it were just dryness. An annoying sort of sensation. . . . Of course the fog was terrible coming home last night. And bad for one's eyes, too. But the party was worth going to. That Italian girl sang quite beautifully. And Mr. French was so very interesting at dinner about the Migration of Fishes.

Sir Frederick Nicholson, Bart., D.S.O., M.P., who had once been Freddie Nicholson, a young bachelor in London (when a London bachelor dined, danced, called at tea time, trimmed his mantelpiece with invitation cards), and in love with Lily Elsie, in love with Gertie Millar, and went to East Africa to shoot big game on account of Lise Tessier, whom none of his family ever knew about—who had been the little boy taken by his mother to call on Lord Beaconsfield, and stayed outside in the carriage, and a "woolly bear" caterpillar fell mysteriously on to his knickerbockered knee and his mother found him stroking the "woolly bear's" back with his forefinger, and said, "No, you can't take it home, for they always die." Frederick Nicholson, in his brass bed in his room with the grey walls and maroon curtains and the sepia monochrome of "The Angelus" hung over the mantelpiece, slept on his side, one bony pink hand grasping the goffered edging of his pillow slip.

George Cashmore got out of the bed, took his clothes off the chair, and went on tiptoe into the kitchen. He shut the door behind him and switched on the light. He started dressing, paused, with his shirt and socks on, to light the gas stove and put on a kettle. His teeth chattered. He began coughing and picked up his coat to find the tin of lozenges in the pocket. The electric bulb suspended on its cord from the high ceiling lit the tank-like kitchen, glared wanly on the pale blue walls, on the clean rose-patterned curtains, on pictures of kittens, tropical seaside resorts, skating and coaching scenes. It lit George Cashmere's face from above, a face of Italianate beauty, grey with fatigue, eyes dulled, mouth sullen and uncertain. An eclipsed face. He had a big body, round shoulders, a musician's hands. He played just about as well as he was needed to play—in one of the few picture houses where they used a pianist now—a small draughty, rickety place off the Waterloo Road where they had silent films. He played there from six to eleven. The audience was mostly children.

He was thinking about this job as he put the lozenge in his mouth and put on his trousers and fastened up his braces. If he could get some sort of

morning job. He didn't like Lily going out again. He didn't see how she'd manage with the baby. He didn't like being left with the two other children, but the baby got on his nerves so that sometimes he wanted to strangle it. Lily had more patience. He pulled aside one of the curtains, looked out, and let it drop again. He made two cups of tea—strong, two lumps of sugar each. A creamy spoonful of the tinned milk that made the tea rich and toffee-colored. He heard Edward in the next room, singing. A bat-like, almost tuneless voice:—

"Hearts of owk arrarships,
Hearts of owk arrarmen . . ."

And Amy's warm little contralto, joining in:—

"We or-orlwoysah readee,
Steadee, boys, steadee . . ."

George went in, carrying Lily's tea. The children went on singing. They were sitting up side by side, Edward's blond, mouse-like profile turned to his sister. Amy learned songs at school and taught him. They often sat singing together—Amy gazing before her, dark-eyed, prim, and rapt, Edward elated as at no other moment in his long day.

They hadn't woken their mother. George stood by the bed. Lily and the baby were both asleep. Her head had dropped over to one side so that her cheek lay against the top of the baby's head. They both looked as if they were made of wax. The baby of melting pink wax, Lily of white candle wax a little grimed with exposure. George stood wondering whether to wake her. It seemed a shame. She'd been up he didn't know how many hours in the night. And she'd only been back from the hospital a fortnight.

"Some talk of Aleex-ahn-der
And some of Her-ceu-lees,"

sang Amy and Edward.

"Oh, be quiet," muttered George to them over his shoulder, and they thinned and slowed their voices, but went on:—

"But of all the world's gright he-ee-rows . . ."

Lily had asked him to wake her, so that she could get up early to see the lady in Smith Square.

"Lil . . .!"

The baby stirred. The pink wax twisted and melted into a new expression. A sleepy but malicious little pink mask. The eyes opened, ovals

of bright dark glass, and scrooged again.

"Lil . . .!"

She gave a little moan, stifled as it sounded. He bent over her and touched her shoulder. "Here's your tea," he said.

She opened her eyes, saw his face, the crack in the ceiling, the white round gleam of the cup, felt the baby move and stretch against her shoulder, and said, nervously awake now:—

"What time is it? Put the tea on the chair, dear, thank you. Oh, *those two*!" She looked over at Amy and Edward, exasperated. "At it again," she said, smiling at the sight of them. "There's the choir again." She sat up, longing to lie back again. She wrapped the baby tight in his shawl. "Hold him a moment while I 'ave my tea." Her forehead frowned, her eyes smiled, her lips were pursed against the hundred little worries, fears, problems that crowded about her waking. But the tea was good, hot, strong, creamy.

George took the baby in practised arms.

"Fog's thick as ever," he said.

She thought how bad he was looking, and shouted, on edge:—

"If you get out of bed before I tell you, Amy, you'll get the spankin' of your life. You just stop there till you're told to get up." She added to George, "I don't want 'em up until the fire's lit—they'll catch their death this weather."

She dragged herself out of bed and pulled on her coat.

The milkman climbed the stone staircase of Blenheim House, to the fourth floor. Outside the door, unstained oak, of No. 10 (which looked like the unstained oak door of No. 12 opposite, except that No. 12 had a Lincoln Imp on the door), he clinked down a pint bottle of milk, four pennyworth of cream, and a paper bag containing four fresh rolls. He met the news agent's boy on the stairs. They said good-morning perfunctorily. The news agent's boy wore mittens and blew on his fingers. He pushed the papers halfway under the door of No. 10: the *Times*, *Le Matin*, the *Berliner Tageblatt*, the *Week-End Review*. Downstairs, the porter, uniformed and great-coated, stood bleary and red-nosed, arms crossed, blinking at the greenish-brown veils which shrouded the familiar shapes of the King's Road. "Not too warm standing here," he said to the paper boy.

"It was below zero at midnight," he croaked.

A bus crept past, breathing hard, keeping near the kerb.

In No. 10 a mouse came up through a crack in the cement into the cupboard of the kitchenette, and began to eat a piece of ham. His daughter joined him. But Mark slept. And Clare slept. There was a trap in the living room behind the books. Mark had bought the trap and they had baited it, but neither of them would set it. It lay, savory but unsprung, between *Nostromo* and the wall.

# CHAPTER II

*7.00 o'clock*

Rose came downstairs. She wore the "morning uniform" of 59, Smith Square, light brown dress, white collar, apron, and cap, with such a wooden neatness that she might have been a model housemaid in Harrod's window.

When she got into the servants' hall and saw the canary's cage uncovered she flushed and went into the kitchen to find Mildred. Mildred was at the kitchen table. She looked up with an expression of impish pleasure.

"Who told you to take that baize off, Mildred?"

"Thought it might save you time when you got down late."

Rose primmed her mouth, turned on her heel, and went out. She wasn't going to argue with a girl like Mildred King. But she came back to say, "I saw you at the corner with Fred Basham last night."

"I dare say you did."

"Kissing and carrying on . . ."

Mildred's pasty cheeks warmed. Her lips smiled, remembering. Rose saw the smile. "I saw you all right."

"I dare say you did," said Mildred. She went into the larder and came back with the fish clammily wrapped in paper. "And we saw you, as a matter of fact, pretending you only come to post the letters. And Fred's got a name for you."

Rose minced. "I don't want to hear anything that sort of boy has to say."

"Sister Skinny, 'e called you," announced Mildred, savoring the phrase. " 'There goes Sister Skinny,' 'e said."

Rose looked Mildred up and down.

"I should say it was just as well you were leaving," she said. "And if 'er ladyship knew what some of us know you'd 'ave left some time ago."

Mildred jerked up her childish head, thrust out her round underlip, drew up her fat, womanly little body.

“Oh, yeah,” she said, and added, “I suppose you’ve got a morning off to-day? And Mary’ll be down to do your work?”

Rose turned and went out, closing the kitchen door after her.

In the servants’ hall opposite the canary was sounding a shrill minute bugle call, over and over again. Rose went to the cupboard and mechanically got out her dustpan and brush, and went up the first flight of the back stairs, then through the baize door to the first-floor landing. Brisk raised his head and looked at her from the blue sateen upholstery of his basket. She didn’t speak to him. She got down on her knees and began to brush the green carpet, beginning as usual at Miss Clare’s door and working round, by Sir Frederick’s door, by her ladyship’s door, by the radiator, the bathroom, the cupboard, the bathroom door, the spare room, to the top of the stairs. She was thinking of Fred Basham, sitting beside her in the char-à-bancs that day they went to Worthing, before Mildred came along.

The rhythmic brushing of the landing soothed Blanche Nicholson, suggesting to her drowsy brain, for she was already half asleep, that all was well, that all was regular, that one morning was like another, one day telling another, to the rhythm of green Wilton being brushed, brushed, brushed . . . that all days began and had always begun and would always begin to the rhythm of green Wilton on quiet landings being brushed; and that as she lay in bed and knew that the second housemaid (such a nice, clean, respectable girl) was on her knees brushing the landing there couldn’t after all—in spite of what-the-papers-say and the stock market and Clare and things-being-so-different—be so very much wrong while the landings and the stairs, the white-painted, green-carpeted front stairs, were being brushed, brushed, brushed by the second housemaid, who was such a nice respectable girl. . . .

That damned brushing woke Frederick Nicholson. He looked at the luminous dial of his wrist watch. Twenty past seven. That damned noise! But his nerves must be in a bad state for him to wake like that all the same. Perhaps his doctor was right. He needed a rest. “People’s nerves are in a bad state these days,” his doctor’d said. “Meanwhile take these tablets, two three times a day, when you feel your nerves are getting out of hand. . . .” Better to get a bit of holiday, though, better than taking drugs. He didn’t believe in drugs. . . . He remembered about his speech last night. He’d put it pretty clearly. Made some of the Labor people sit up. Pity the House was so empty.

But the press would have it this morning. The thought of the morning papers tempered his irritation at being wakened before he was called.

Lily Cashmore dressed, putting on clean underthings, her brown silk stockings, her white blouse, her brown skirt. She put her old purple cardigan over the blouse, safety-pinning it in front at the neck, and her felt slippers. She brushed her hair and fastened it back with a clip. She looked at her face in the glass in the kitchen dresser and thought, "What a sight I look." Black marks under her eyes and lines coming in her forehead, and she never seemed to have time to go and see about her teeth.

Lily Cashmore was thirty now. She had a little, pale, charmingly built face, a pretty nose, brown eyes long-lashed, set wide apart under a square brow, sweet but too pale lips, with a humorous twist to one corner, a little chin grown stubborn since she was a girl. Her smile was gay, but uncertain and brief as if she remembered her missing tooth.

George had courted and married her after the war. He had had six months in France. They met in Ramsgate, where George's people lived, and where Lily Blunt was staying with her aunt and uncle, who kept lodgings. Lily was giving them help for July and August.

George and Lily were married in October 1919, when George was playing in the dance band at the Royal Hotel, South Parade, Margate, and they lived in Margate for a year. Then he got an offer of a job in a dance hall in West Norwood, and they moved to London. Amy was born in West Norwood just when they'd given up hoping, in 1928. But just after that things began to get bad, for the talkies were coming in and the craze for dancing was going out. But they had moved to Westminster when George got the job of lift man in Plimmer Schön's New Building, and he still got four pound a week and his uniform, but he lost the job through getting influenza the spring of 1933, just when Edward was ill too, with his glands.

Mark Petre got up and left Clare asleep. He left the bedroom dark, pulling on his dressing gown as he went, closed the door after him and put on the light in the "hall"—a space twice the size of a sentry box, painted green and containing hats and coats, an ice box, and a drawing of a nude by John. He went through the kitchenette into the bathroom and turned on the geyser. The ice-cold bathroom grew steamy. He filled the basin with cold water and plunged his face into it, then scrubbed his face with a rough towel.

As he put the towel down he noticed Clare's Temple edition of the Sonnets lying on the tiled window sill. He knew her well enough to realize that she must have lain in her bath last night looking for a text after their quarrel. In times of emotional stress she treated the Sonnets as Holy Writ. He reflected, acidly, that they appeared to have comforted her last night. She'd gone to her bath, chill, snuffling, and hostile, and came out warm, fragrant, and amorous.

He sat on the edge of the bath wondering if it was possible to let things go on like this. He told himself, stooping to feel the water, that she wanted him simply as a romantic and sensual adjunct to her life. Did she feel hollowed out when they left each other? Or have to get through agonizing minute after minute before they met again? She had so many frank pretenses that her honesty, when she revealed it, didn't seem real. He found it easier to believe in her gayety, her desolation, her brutality, her indifference,—which she said were artificial,—than in her sensitiveness to beauty, or her passion for himself—which she believed to be the mainsprings of her life. She had been his mistress for more than a year now; but he had never, for a moment, felt safely that she loved him. And his uncertainty of her, because of its very unreason, tormented him. Last night he'd spoken to her again, about their marrying, giving half a dozen practical reasons, and hiding his real one, which was to have her bound to him by any tie, however absurd and conventional.

He turned off the geyser. As he lay in the hot water, he noticed a new set of green glass bottles on the glass shelf, and thought how characteristic of Clare to "spread herself" about a place in which she refused to live. He glanced at her bath crystals, her powder, her lotion, her "Doctor Pierre," her thick pink bath sheet, her petal-soft pink linen towels, with the big "C" on them, her pale blue satin riband she tied round her hair and in a bow on the top of her head while she had her bath, and which had no use, as far as he could see, except to change her entire character and appearance while she washed.

The blue riband hanging over the metal end of the towel rack brought his thoughts back to last night. He felt his panic again as her silhouette groped away from him down the street; his exasperation when he brought her back, grasping her icy hands in his own; his anger when she stood crying, shamelessly and luxuriously, by the fire. And later when he lay awake, his

growing realization that if she'd left him, or if she ever left him, he couldn't be more alone.

*7.30 o'clock*

Ackworth crossed the landing, carrying Sir Frederick's morning tea tray in her right hand, his grey suit over her left arm, his shoes in her left hand.

She put down the shoes outside the door and knocked.

"Come in."

She went in with discreet but heavy tread. She slipped the suit off her arm on to the chair at the end of the bed and, ignoring, yet respecting, her couchant master, put down the tray on the bedside table. She turned and went to the sash window and pulled the cord which drew back the curtains. She shut the window. She came back to the bedside and switched on the lamp with the maroon silk shade. She took Sir Frederick's dinner jacket, waistcoat, and evening trousers over her arm and picked up his patent-leather shoes. She went out on the landing and laid the clothes on the chair and the shoes below it. She brought in the brown shoes, polished like peeled chestnuts, and set them at the feet of the fat chintz armchair. She went through into Sir Frederick's bathroom, turned on the cold water, spread out the green bath mat, laid the cork mat on top of it, took the big bath sheet off the hot rail, and spread it out ready over the chair. She laid out the shaving things on the glass shelf as if they were a surgeon's instruments, switched on the tube of light round the shaving mirror, and went back to the bedroom. She put the grey suit ready on the chair vacated by the dinner jacket, while Sir Frederick, raised on one elbow, massive in blue wide-striped pyjamas, lifted the lavender-blue cup to his pink face. She went back into the bathroom and turned off the cold tap. She came back into the bedroom.

She said, "Your bath is ready, sir."

He grunted, "Thangyou."

She went out, closing the door quietly after her.

Mary was bending over Brisk and persuading him to get up: "Come along," said her slow, honey-sweet voice. "Get up, you lazy boy."

Brisk gazed up at her with languorous but impudent brown eyes. He wagged his tail lazily against the edge of his basket.

"Come on," said Mary. "He does like his bed," she said to Ackworth.

Brisk put his ears back and smiled.

“All right,” said Mary. “I’ll leave you.” She turned to go downstairs. Brisk waited until she was halfway down, then he stepped slowly out of his basket, stretched his stubby white person, bowing it slowly as to greet yet another satisfactory morning, and pattered with a preoccupied air to the top of the stairs.

Rose was polishing the parquet in the hall below. She sat back on her heels and looked up.

“Kim on, Brisk,” she said. He came, still preoccupied. Mary waited for him at the bottom of the stairs to let him out by the front door into the square. He vanished into the yellow-brown vapors. She waited, shivering, on the steps. When he reappeared he was laughing to himself, but he seemed eager to come indoors.

Once inside he hurried through to the kitchen to find Mildred. Mildred was frying bacon.

“Hullo, cockeyolly bird,” she said.

But Mrs. Perrott came down the back stairs. She disapproved of Brisk. He knew it. He ran into the front hall again, skidding on the parquet. He ran to Mary, who was now in the drawing-room fixing the plug of the Hoover into the plug by the fireplace.

“Well,” she smiled, “don’t they want you?” She patted him. But she was thinking of Jim Taylor, and seeing him waiting for her, as he would be this evening, in the doorway, looking down the street for her. She switched on the machine. Moaning filled the room. Brisk scuttled out. She began to push the Hoover to and fro over the rich close pattern of the carpet, over the reds and purples and ink blue fitted like little bricks. And her elation rose through her body and bubbled from her lips in vague soft snatches of song.

“You—are-my—Heart’s delight—” sang Mary.

The Hoover sighed and moaned again.

Blanche Nicholson had been such a pretty girl, and Sargent painted her sitting on a Récamier sofa in a cantaloup-pink dress, with her cousin Jean in a white dress. Blanche, creamy, with glimmering brown eyes and soft brown hair and a diffident yet arrogant expression, and poor Jean rather yellow with black hair but such beautiful hands. Blanche had a real talent for drawing, and Mr. Sargent had admired her portrait of “Fenny,” her old nurse, but she hadn’t gone on with her drawing after she married Frederick Nicholson. For there had been Hugo almost at once; when he died at five months, of infant diarrhoœa, she had been broken up and had gone to

Palermo with the Van Diemens; and then there had been Clare, who was born in Queen's Gate, for it was only in 1919 after Frederick came back from Egypt that they moved to Westminster.

Blanche had been a nice little girl, and a pretty girl, and such a pretty woman; and age could not wither her and she cloyed no appetites because she didn't feed any. But she often regretted that she had given up her drawing, and went often to the National Gallery and to the Tate Gallery and to the Wallace Collection and argued with Mark Petre (whom she could not help liking when she saw him, although Frederick had said that he ought to be strung up) about the pre-Raphaelites. She was very fond of color, especially that lovely blue which is like lapis lazuli. So the curtains in her bedroom were blue and so was the carpet, and the Donatello plaques which she had brought back from Florence in 1913 hung one over the mantelpiece and one above the glass bookcase. And her blue quilted dressing gown lay over the armchair which was covered with the same pretty chintz that she had had in Queen's Gate; only there the curtains had been rose color.

When Ackworth had gone out, Frederick Nicholson got out of bed and put on his dressing gown. He took the small comb off the chest of drawers which served him also as dressing table and combed the white and goldish hairs across his head, looking in the cheval glass and seeing, without observing, his own tall, round-bellied, monk-like figure, robed in camel hair.

He took a handkerchief out of the pocket and blew his nose, making the noise of a cardboard trumpet. Then he switched on another light, opened the window, letting in the fog, and raised his hands six times above his head, breathing deeply. Then he raised his arms and stiffened his knees and bent and touched the toes of his crimson slippers six times. Then he lay down on his back on the floor, drew up his knees, put his hands on his hips, and, keeping his head and shoulders and the soles of his feet on the carpet, raised his body and swung it from side to side with "a hammock-like movement," listening as he did so for the sound "which should be like the liquid moving in a churn" of his recently drunk tea. His attentive ear was rewarded. He got to his feet, raised himself on his toes, and walked four times round the room, swinging his arms in large circles. He looked like some holy man expecting to "take off" the ground by an act of faith. But at the fourth round he stopped, drew three final breaths, and went into the bathroom, locking the door after him.

Gusts of fog went on pouring into the room.

Amy Cashmore buttoned her own shoes and then Edward's.

"Come on, you children," shouted her mother from the kitchen. "Yer breakfuss's ready," and Amy pulled Edward with her, for he was dreamy when she let him alone, and Dad was sitting at the table holding Baby and talking to Mother. "I've a good mind to chuck it up," he was saying.

Lily poured out the children's cocoa into the big cups with roses on them. "I don't know what to say. You can't rely on this promise of Mr. Fenwick. You never know what'll happen between now and Christmas, and Mr. Fenwick might decide to take a younger man. He wouldn't have to pay a boy so much." She spooned the sugar into the cocoa. "*Sit* down, you two," she said. "I got a bit of ham for you," she added, glancing at their grave faces. She put her hand on Edward's mousy head. "Cheer up, son. . . ." He looked up at her and frostily smiled. Lily fetched the plate of ham out of the larder. "The trouble about Mr. Fenwick," she said to her husband, "is that he's all *over* you one day and hardly knows you the next."

"I wish I'd 'ave took that job in the dance band," he said, watching her put a mauve-pink slice on his plate.

"A month wasn't worth it, even at five pound a week," she said. "Then you'd have bin out and probably no prospect of anything else."

He began to eat, without appetite. "If I was getting the dole now I'd be gettin' thirty-five," he said, "and that five shillin's extra pretty soon goes on fares and the wear of me boots."

She sat down with them, feeling that she couldn't stand any longer. She watched them eat. The smell of the cocoa nauseated her.

"Well, if I get this job," she said, "that'll make a difference, won't it?"

He agreed unwillingly. He added, "Ain't you going to eat anything?"

"No, thanks." She pushed herself to her feet again and came round and took the baby from him. When she sat down again it began to twist its head from side to side and whimper.

" 'E's hungry," he said.

She held it, pressing its chest against her shoulder, and began patting its back. "There, there . . ." she said. "If I feed 'im now I won't be able to before I go out, and then you won't have any peace while I'm gone."

The baby's bleats quieted. Its forehead dropped on to her shoulder. She rocked her body to and fro.

"I'll see to 'im while you're out, mum," said Amy.

"You can't! You'll be off to school."

Amy smiled. "Don't you remember, mum, I got 'olidays now?"

"Oh Lord, so you 'ave," said Lily. She had forgotten.

"And May Findlay wants me to come with her to the pictures this afternoon. Can I go, mum?"

"I s'pose you can."

"Good riddance," said her father.

"Oh, don't tease 'er, George!" Lily's expression changed to a gay irony. "I should think May Findlay can see as good as the pictures in 'er own home, with her mother putting red on her toenails and her father sleeping under the kitchen table."

"Look out, Lil!" said George. "It'll all go back."

Lily shook her head. "Mrs. Findlay don't care if it does. She don't care about anything. All she cares is putting a set of traffic signals on the end of her toes."

George looked up, amused and pleased, because Lily was jealous.

But, "Look out whatyer doing, Ed," she exclaimed, for Edward was gazing and listening and holding his cup askew in his starfish-like hands.

Clare woke to find Mark sitting on the edge of her bed and looking at her; and, still half asleep, she held out her hand, saying, "I can see that you've been awake for hours hating me."

He didn't answer. He took her hand and kissed it. He kissed her wrist. He said:—

"I've just been making up my mind to do without you."

She sat up, pushing back her hair from her forehead. He thought how lovely she was when she was plain. (Plain as an alternative to her achieved beautiful "appearance" for the day.) He liked her now, pale, a little hollow-cheeked, her dark hair pushed off her brow, her mouth coral color, her eyes,

which seemed bluish dark in the day, so big and grey under their thin long eyebrows.

She said as lightly as she could:—

“You could do without me better than I could do without you. Fetch me my dressing gown.” She watched him as he got up. He still moves like a puppy, she thought.

He brought the dressing gown. He noticed that it was white and new and trimmed with white feathers. “More glamour!” he said. But when she got up, wrapping it round her, he said: “You look like some fantastic white bird.”

She trailed across the room. She stopped at the door and looked back, and then said nothing. She checked an exclamation, a sudden endearment. She didn’t want him to kiss her until she had had her bath.

# CHAPTER III

*8.00 o'clock*

Mary knocked.

"Come in."

Mary went into the dark room carrying a glass of hot water in a nickel stand on a tray with an écru lace mat on it. She switched on the cream silk shaded lights on the dressing table. She went to the bedside and put down the tray. Blanche Nicholson's face looked small on the pillow. The lids of her eyes opened quickly, like a doll's. She said:—

"Good morning, Mary."

"Good morning, m'lady."

Mary went to the windows and pulled back the curtains. Behind them the white half-curtains were frilled like petticoats. The window looked as if it had been painted with French mustard.

"Oh dear," said Blanche Nicholson. "Dear me. It's no better."

"No, m'lady," said Mary, going to the washstand behind the screen. She emptied the basin and rubbed it round. She took up last night's hot water can, went out to the bathroom, filled it with boiling hot water, polished it, and brought it back and set it in the basin. She put the cosy, embroidered "Hot Water" in white cotton handwriting, over it.

As she took the evening dress off the chair, Blanche Nicholson cleared her throat and said:—

"I shall have my breakfast in bed this morning, Mary. I think I have a suspicion of a cold."

"Very good, m'lady. Will you take your bath now or later?"

Blanche hesitated.

Mary waited, her solid legs planted on the carpet, her quietly glowing gaze bent in sympathy on her mistress. She was thinking that her ladyship wasn't at all strong, and admired her for this fragility, just as she admired her for the needlework on her underclothes; and the smallness of her shoes and her innumerable little handkerchiefs.

"I'll have it later," Blanche decided. For it would be best, she thought, to have her hot tea directly after her warm bath.

"Very good, m'lady."

Mary took the dress over to the cupboard, where the dresses hung serried in the dark, shrouded in muslin and scented with heliotrope sachets. Mary liked going into this cupboard. She liked its fragrance, its neat shoe cupboards on one side, its high shelves piled with cretonne boxes, where laces, feathers, buttons, gloves, lengths of riband and silk waited in camphor for eternity.

Blanche sat up and wrapped round her shoulders the little pink shawl that hung on the bedpost above her head and began to sip her hot water. She repeated that she would see how she was after breakfast, and if her throat felt all right she would get up. But she wouldn't go out in this weather.

"Would you switch the wall lights on, please, Mary?" she said, and Mary obeyed, and round the walls three groups of lights shone behind petal-pink shades, and Blanche said:—

"That makes the room seem a little more cheerful, doesn't it?"

And Mary agreed, charmed by the sunrise that she had just made, pleased by the order which she had perfected, the chairs cleared, the dressing gown elegantly fainting over the armchair, the little slippers waiting, toes outward, beside the bed. . . .

Downstairs in the hall the others were already seated round the table, and Mary took her place on the left of Mrs. Perrott, who was telling Ackworth that she had seen silk stockings with clocks at Swan and Edgar's for 2/11. But Ackworth said:—

"I don't believe in getting cheap stuff, Mrs. Perrott."

Rose was stirring her tea and picking at her bacon. She was always particular what she ate, and this morning she felt out of sorts. But Mildred ate fast, munching like a child of four. Mary said:—

"Her ladyship feels as if she'd got a cold. She's having her breakfast in her room."

Ackworth said this weather was enough to give anyone colds and there were several cases of pneumonia in the paper. It was very different in Cannes—cold, but nearly always sunny. "Miss Greene and I," she said (Greene was Lady Nicholson's ex-maid), "used to be able to sit in the sun, in

the public gardens, in the afternoon. And I don't think I had on a mackintosh more than once all the time we were there."

Mildred dared to give Mary a wink which said, "Some of us think a lot of ourselves since we've been to France." Mary's dimple showed, but her look discouraged further *lèse-majesté*.

"Well, there'll be no more sunny south for any of us for many a long day," said Mrs. Perrott. "When 'er ladyship spoke to me about Mildred leavin' she said, 'Things are very different for all of us, Mrs. Perrott, and it doesn't seem likely they'll get any better.'"

"That's right," said Ackworth. "I know several of their investments isn't paying."

"And her ladyship hasn't had a new evenin' dress this year," said Rose.

Mary, sipping her coffee, said, "It does seem a shame! When you think what she's been used to."

Mrs. Perrott nodded. "I expect it is hard. When I went to speak to her that morning she seemed quite upset, though she wouldn't show much while I was there. But I could see she was worrying. 'We've all got to economize now,' she said to me. And I said to her, 'Well, m'lady, facts is facts and I'm not a believer in grumbling about what can't be helped. . . . What is to be is to be,' I said."

They all knew this story of Mrs. Perrott's.

"Miss Clare doesn't economize much," said Ackworth. "Two Chanel models she brought back from Paris last week—I should imagine she owes money to every shop in London."

"Poor thing," said Mary, thinking how sweet Miss Clare looked when she was going out.

"Poor?" said Ackworth. "Poor for spending what isn't hers. It'll be her father who'll have to pay in the end, if *someone else doesn't*."

They only dared, as a group, to give little "oo's" and "er's" expressing their sense that for once Ackworth, however impeccable her work and however glamorous her "experience" (for she had "never been below a baronet"), had gone too far.

Mrs. Perrott changed from a good-natured cook to a Buddha in cook's dress as she emitted:—

"I'm surprised at you, Ackworth. I don't imagine you rightly know what you're saying."

Behind her Roman parlormaid mask Ackworth was embarrassed. She hadn't meant to say so much. Indeed until now she'd been pleased with her own reticence on the subject of Miss Clare and what the porter at Blenheim House had told her. But she wasn't going to be put down before the lower servants, so she said:—

"I don't know why you should think I mean anything by that! Unless of course you start putting all sorts of interpretations of your own on a simple sentence!"

Mrs. Perrott, still Buddha-like, asked for the jam. She wasn't going to argue with Ackworth. She wondered sometimes why her ladyship kept her on; but she saw, of course, that she did her work well and kept the silver lovely.

Mildred spoke, munching:—

"What's an 'interpritation,' Miss Ackworth?"

Mary and Rose waited for Ackworth to answer.

"It isn't any business of yours what it means," said Ackworth.

Mildred's little blue eyes bulged with resentment. But she contented herself with thinking "old bitch." As she put some more sugar in her tea she supposed that Ackworth meant that Miss Clare got money off her boy friend. The idea seemed unlikely, for, as far as Mildred could see, all the gentry had bank accounts.

Frederick Nicholson was one of those elderly cherubs who, while accepting a paunch as part of their classic infancy, regret the almost too infantile tendency to be bald.

Sir Frederick admired many of the disgraceful activities of the force he liked to call Nature. He mistrusted, as being "against" her, aperients, cold inoculations, hot-water bottles, contraceptives, pacifists, and any methods which could give women, in childbirth, complete (not partial) immunity from pain. But with the inconsequence of an English gentleman he was often "unnatural" himself, carrying an umbrella in the rain, eating his food cooked, observing a fanatical privacy for all his natural functions, and using every and any tonic whose label assured him a renewed growth of hair.

As he stood, in his braces, shaking a liquid smelling of cantharides over the top of his head, he screwed up his eyes and stared at the rosy expanses of "upper forehead" and wondered if perhaps, after all, Clare's notion, joking of course, that he should try her eyelash grower there mightn't have something in it! He tried to remember if she had mentioned its name and maker— But doubtless any good chemist would stock such a thing. He could pretend he was getting the stuff for his wife (just a word to the young man across the counter. "Women will try anything . . . etc."). On the other hand, he considered the possibility without amusement, supposing the stuff only grew eyelashes, wherever you put it on.

He imagined little white eyelashes curling up out of his pink glazed head.

He put down the bottle and massaged round and round with his finger tips. When he had done this until his face reddened, he paused, opened a drawer of the chest of drawers, and took out a black cap and put it on. It fitted tight so that he looked like the funny man of a seaside Pierrot troupe. Then he went to his door, switched on the light, then went and stood below the lighted electric bulb, unscrewed it and attached a cord, one end to the light and the other to the metal centre of his cap. Thus suspended, he looked like an enormous marionette. He waited, consulting his watch. He waited from 8.16 until 8.21. The makers of the "Judge" (guaranteed) Electric Hair Restorer didn't advise more than five minutes at a time.

Lily Cashmore said, "If only we could live in the country!"

The wish hung like a small bright picture in the recesses of her mind. Every week or so she would pause in some discussion with George—about a different job for him, some sort of work for her, something needed for the children, some extra (like that stewpan and those corsets for herself), and bring out the picture and tantalize her imagination by the delightful enameled detail, the cornfield in the foreground, the three elms with rooks' nests in them, the winding path leading away through the corn to the wicket gate, and beyond the gate the cottage—whitewashed, thatched, half overgrown with ivy, with red rambler roses growing over the latticed windows on the ground floor.

"If only we could find something in the country," she repeated. "If we was to get a little cottage and serve teas . . ."

George had heard this before, too. He made his usual remark: "You need to have capital for that."

"—And I should think we could let a room off easy enough, with all this hiking—and cyclists too. If we was to find something not too far from the road . . ." She saw a white road now, a peaceful road, running beside the cornfield and past the cottage. And a sign—painted green on white—hanging from an iron bar that was fixed on the side wall of the cottage: "TEAS." She said, "When you think what those people must make that give teas and refreshments . . ."

George lit a cigarette. "Mmmm . . ." He got no pleasure out of imagining things that couldn't happen. And "country" as an "idea" didn't stir him, for his experience of country was the seaside in England and a small section of northern France.

"How much capital d'you need?" asked Lily.

He looked at her with surprise. She had never spoken in such a practical tone of the subject. He gave her an acrid grimace of a smile.

"Awlright, Mrs. Rothschild."

"And I suppose you'd want enough to stock us with crockery and spoons and tables and chairs, but you can get them cheap enough at Cresset's secondhand. . . ."

"—And silver tea urns and gold plates and a red carpet and an awnin' for when Royalty comes," said George, annoyed by the tempting and concrete quality of his wife's vision. "We might as well buy the Metropole Brighton and be done with it," he said.

"I'd like to go to Brighton again," said Amy, remembering hot sand in her toes and swishy-sounding waves fringed with soapsuds, and donkeys racing with children on them against an endless salt-tasting blue.

"I would too," echoed Edward, remembering doughnuts he'd made, powdering balls of wet sand with dry white sand from beside the breakwater where the lady in black was reading.

"Them spacious days will not return," said George.

"The children 'u'd be better in the country," said Lily thoughtfully.

While Mark put on the coffee percolator and laid the table, Clare went through her morning ritual. She covered her face with massage cream, locked the bedroom door, took off her nightdress and did exercises stretching her limbs, breathing deeply and lying on her back across the bed,

and revolving her head on her neck as if she were trying to get it off. She had read in *Vogue* that this will defer a double chin. Then she got her hairbrush out of the drawer and brushed her hair for three and a half minutes by her clock, pretending to herself that it was five. Then she put on her dressing gown and passed through the kitchenette, where Mark was making toast and thinking at that moment about Monsieur Paul Boncour, to the bathroom, where she turned on the cold tap and began to take the cream off her face with pieces of cotton wool soaked in skin tonic.

She didn't know that Mark, as she passed him, was thinking about Monsieur Paul Boncour, about French Policy, about Inspection of Armaments, but she knew that he had lost consciousness of her. And that if she had stopped, at that moment, on her way through the kitchenette and said to him that, after last night, she had decided to leave him, he would simply look at her—and go on thinking—about the American Experiment, or the character of Hazlitt, or his book. . . .

As she dabbed her face she caught sight of her Sonnets, and wondered why she had been so angry last night, and whether he weren't right in saying that her prejudice against marriage was just lack of character, an inability to deal with dailiness, a fear of permanency, a post-war bourgeois "fancy" about independence? She wanted—that was how she'd begun by putting it—the "two lives." She wanted her life with him; but she didn't want to give up, as he demanded, her nice life with Mammon. There was no reason, she'd said, why she should be poor and uncomfortable, when her parents were so richly comfortable. Her own £400 a year from her grandfather was enough for her taste in life, if she lived at home, and in debt. And why should her refusal to accept Mark's philosophy (which she agreed with in theory) prove (as he'd pointed out, last night and so often) that she didn't love him? Did she doubt that he loved her, because he disliked her way of life, and described her parents' household as "an offense against modern decency" and "a survival of the Age of Hypocrisy"? And she didn't, she reflected in a vein of early-morning irony, respect Mark because he chose leisure on three hundred a year, rather than six or seven hundred a year and a job; although she agreed as to the respectability of such a choice. Why he should hope to respect her more, or less, according to her way of living . . . He said her standards were those of a "superbly intelligent demimondaine"; that she reconciled luxury and license with weakness for tradition and respectability. That she couldn't simplify even her passions and must elaborate even sensual delight with scents, shadowed rooms, and laces and satins. . . .

But if she changed? . . .

She plunged in the icy water, gasped, and sprang out again and seized her bath sheet.

—If she simplified her life and conformed—she smiled trying to imagine it—to the wishes he'd expressed about her at different times? . . . If she had "one lovely dress and then stopped thinking about her clothes—didn't bother about her face and hair because she was lovely anyway"; and gave up "seeing people who were bred by Coward out of *Vogue*; used her brains to understand the remaking of the world she'd been born in, instead of wishing everybody still had tight waists and coachmen." Would that make him more in love with her? Wasn't his demand that she should believe with him, this strange passion to convert her, only another expression of his fear that she didn't love him? Or was it in his breeding, a Roman Catholic heritage, this need to impose intellectually, to possess spiritually? Had his own heresy transferred his ingrained need of spiritual communion to his everyday life; so that what he demanded from her wasn't just a "being terribly in love," but a mystical yet beautifully everyday passion, which she could imagine, but knew she could never feel . . .?

A smell of coffee came through the door. She heard a tap-tap and then a spluttering. He was frying the eggs. She hurried up and seized the tin of "Heure Bleue" and powdered and did her teeth rapidly, wondering where her toothpaste had gone. (But perhaps she had left it at Smith Square, and she hated Mark's stuff. And one of her economies was two lots of toothpaste.)

*8.30 o'clock*

A white dining room, paneled. A white cloth. A blue and white Copenhagen service. Yellow chrysanthemums that made the fog at the window green. An electric stove. The *Times*, the *Morning Post*, the *Daily Mail*. The frosty light streamed down from the chandelier, giving a festive hyper-breakfast glitter to the silver dishes on the breakfast heater.

Ackworth set the silver coffeepot and the silver hot-milk jug on the heater, and the silver cream jug on the table beside the silver sugar basin. Alone with the gleaming table, the shut savory dishes, discreet electroplated heater, Ackworth's temper abated. "Her" dining room gleamed wherever it should gleam, from parquet to salt spoons, was pure white, was deeply carpeted, was richly curtained, was warm, high ceilinged—elegant in fine. And the chandelier was her child, her toy, her treasure (its crystal oak leaves washed with Lux and water, rubbed with silk and shrouded in muslin whenever the family was away).

Flora Ackworth had two lives, the life of the Impeccable Parlormaid (which she was, by such standards) and the life, supplied to her by the library, of High and Passionate Aristocracy. Elinor Glyn, more than any other author, initiated Flora Ackworth into a world where Foreign Princesses seduced young Earls on beds of red rose petals; where daughters of rich Jews could be ennobled by beauty, chastity, and a title; while the still unravished brides of Marquises endured not only their own virginity, but the misunderstanding, cruelty, and adultery of their mates, so to win through to an orgy of lustful remorse on the last page. Flora Ackworth moved easily, because logically, between her two worlds. For however her employers might fall short of her "dream company" in the size of their estates and retinue, the modesty of their table, and the lack of passion in their lives, they at least confirmed—if only as a "globe" of the world—her vision of the larger, more glamorous universe. Their silver, as it were, argued the existence of Gold Plate; their dinners proved the possibility of Banquets; their small rituals and conventions implied Ceremonies; while Ackworth herself, single, square-hipped, and stalwart at the front door, represented Flunkeys.

Ackworth opened the dining-room door, set a weight against it, and went out to the hall cupboard to fetch the gong. She sounded it: and Sir Frederick appeared on the landing above as if he were its genie. He came briskly downstairs. He was as punctual in his solitary breakfast as for all other meals and appointments. Clare said he never kept himself waiting. He went into the dining room, blowing his nose and remembering that Clare was away again and wondering when she'd be back. Clare exasperated him, but he loved her with a warmth and unreason he'd never felt for his wife. He disapproved of her way of dressing, and of painting her lips, yet was impressed by the result. He condemned her friends, but found them puzzling and entertaining. He disagreed with her about religion, books, pictures, politics, manners, patriotism; and her way of finishing off one of their arguments with a smile and an epigrammatic summary of both their points of view often made him lose his temper and behave, as Clare had once pointed out, like a gouty colonel on the stage. (The phrase had first added to his anger, and then made him chuckle.) But he was proud of Clare; as he might have been proud of a valuable first edition found in his library. Her meaning was obscure to him. He heard her beauty, it seemed to him, overpraised by people who weren't his sort. But he was aware that she had a special value—and that by some satisfying, if odd, chance, it was he who had, so to speak, brought her to light. And though he had picked Blanche then for the qualities he admired in a woman, he had never felt her expressed

griefs and anxieties as he'd felt even Clare's earliest troubles—her fox terrier's illness, her schoolroom disgraces, her taut and angry endurance of physical pain. Even when the little boy had died he hadn't felt more than just wretched himself, and wretchedly sorry for poor Blanche, and arranged for her to go away to Sicily. But when Clare, at eighteen, was in love with Ronnie Field, who threw her over for a married woman, Frederick had spent a whole night striding up and down the Kensington Road, knowing, with a curiously dog-like instinct of devotion, that he could do nothing at all for her—except perhaps relieve her of Blanche's company. It was then that he'd taken Blanche to Florence.

Frederick helped himself to the whispering kidneys and bacon, and added two fried eggs. He poured out his coffee, putting in two lumps of sugar as Blanche wasn't down to make him take saccharine. Then he sat down to his newspapers.

The Parliamentary Report on the centre page of the *Times* mentioned that "Sir Frederick Nicholson, U. Sheffield, pointed out that history is being taught in many of our 'primary' and 'secondary' schools by men who do not hesitate to give a Socialistic bias to their teaching, and in some cases to express the belief that all government is tending towards the Communist ideal." In the Parliamentary Report his speech was recorded in full.

The *Morning Post* gave him a headline: "Sir Frederick Nicholson on Communism in Our Schools." . . . The *Daily Express*, in large type printed across half a page: "Communist Scandal. Sir F. Nicholson Denounces Red Propaganda in British Schools." Below, Sir Frederick re-read his remarks paraphrased in heavy type and reported in small type, and set off by two photographs—one of himself at the age of forty, and the other of Trotsky in the kind of hat he was getting used to seeing on Clare.

While Sir Frederick considered the photograph of Trotsky, his wife, upstairs, tested her bath with the thermometer. (For Mary, though such a very very nice girl, wasn't really quite used to maiding her yet, and was apt, too, to be a little absent-minded. But she sewed beautifully, and some of her work, on that nightdress top she'd begun to make, was like they do in convents—so very fine.)

Blanche Nicholson did not luxuriate in her bath. She sat up straight, small and slender in the deep water, and looked like a water baby with a head out of Émile's window. Even in the early morning and with a possible cold, her skin, and features, and charming waved grey hair had a sort of

hairdresser's perfection. She was saved by the changing blue of her eyes and the willful yet tremulous expression of her mouth, and the spider's-web lines that deepened on her brows, for she had a habit of quick frowns and perplexed lifting of her eyebrows.

Though Blanche hated and mistrusted all Roman Catholics (her tolerance of Mark Petre was partly due to the fact that he had "broken away from Them"), she washed herself as if she had been brought up to the strictest conventual ablutions, beneath a sheet that hid her body from her gaze. Her speed in washing, and the way in which she hurried out and into her towel, would have given any spectator the impression that she believed the Devil to lurk in the water. In fact there had never been a spectator. But she always remembered her mother telling her shortly after her marriage that whereas, of course, English husbands were very considerate, Frenchmen were very different, and so inconsiderate of the privacy of their wives that all *bien élevées* Frenchwomen bathed in milk.

Amy Cashmore ran down the two flights of stone staircase, but she hesitated in the doorway downstairs, for she could hardly see the lamp post two feet away, and she remembered a picture in a book May had shown her called *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, where there were huge tangly shapes in the dark water.

There had been a fog last winter and the Provost Buildings children had lit a fire and there had been a blaze that looked like a huge chrysanthemum in the middle of the courtyard, but a bobby had come. But Amy didn't remember it was so freezing as this morning. The cold went choking down into her body as she breathed, and nipped her ears and knees and stung her eyes like ammonia.

May lived on the opposite side of the yard, on the ground floor, and Amy started out, her shoulders hunched, her arms crossed and hugging her chest, a drip falling from her pink nose. She had as little view of her destination as if she were crossing Siberia, but she knew the shape and position of each cobblestone, the three flagstones near the centre, where there had once been a pump, the stone gutter that led from the edge of the court to the round grating where she and May and Stanley had fished for rats with sardine tails on pins, because May's mother said there were rats in sewers. She followed the stone gutter which led up to the door by the Findlays'. The Findlays' windows had no curtains, but the blinds were down. There was a light inside. Amy stood by the window and called:—

"My?"

There was no answer, but she saw a man's shadow move across the blind.

"My?"

May's shrill precise tones answered.

"Orroight, wite a minnit."

Amy went into the passage and waited outside the Findlays' door. She could hear Mr. Findlay going on at May in a grumbling whine and May's unperturbed, "Orroight, Dad." . . . "No, I won't, Dad." . . . "Yes, Dad."

The door was opened.

"Come in a sec," said May.

Amy hated going into the Findlay place, but she was docile and always obliged May, who, at seven, had enough poise, initiative, and worldly wisdom to run a hotel.

"Sit down while I get me coat," she said.

Amy sat on the edge of the red plush sofa which extended from the fireless fireplace to the door. This sofa, enriched by two grimed mauve satin cushions, "pen-painted" with sweet peas, and a round table and vast mahogany sideboard were the only bits of furniture in the room, except the deck chair occupied by Mr. Findlay—and the standard lamp in the corner which had a mauve silk shade and bathed the room in a faint livid light. Amy was afraid of Mr. Findlay. He was a small thin man with big arms, and black eyebrows and darting little eyes and a loose little mouth, and a chin that he was always pushing forward as if he were trying to make it live up to the prominence of his nose. He nearly always wore a bowler hat, and smoked cigars. At this moment he was lounging by the table in his deck chair and drinking black coffee out of a glass, and reading last night's evening paper. He wore his check overcoat and no collar. To Amy's surprise he hummed a tune to himself, although he looked as cross as ever.

As May returned from the bedroom she left the door open—the light was bright—and Amy could see the big brass bed and Mrs. Findlay lying in it, her mop of curled golden hair pushed back from her face, which was stained and puffy so that Amy didn't want to look at her. But when she and May got outside May said her mother had been crying all night.

Amy asked what for; and May said, "Oh, she's crazy about this Mr. Hermann that she goes out with. Dad don't know, of course. I wish she could get a divorce and marry him and take me along too. But 'e won't of course."

"Why not?" said Amy.

"Because he's a married man already, for one thing," said May. She explained no further, for she had an adult tenderness for Amy, whose innocence she despised but admired, as part of a nature superior to her own. May added, "'E's very rich. 'E took Mother to 'is flat once,—when the servants an' all were away,—and she says there was carpets you could sink yer 'eels into."

Amy's imagination was stirred. She saw May's mother, whose beauty she silently and passionately admired, standing in a huge white room and her high heels disappearing slowly into a carpet the color of raspberryade.

"What shall we do?" asked May, brisk on a new subject. They were standing in the middle of the yard now, and May's teeth were chattering and the damp was settling in a fine dew on her sealskin jacket, and her gold hair hung lank against her beaky-nosed little face. She looked, in spite of her self-possession, so forlorn that even Amy noticed and took her hand and said, "You'd better come along to our place; it's too cold to stop out here, and we got a fire. Ma won't mind."

May nodded. "Rightchuyah—we don't start our fire so early."

The living room at Mark's flat was lined with books from floor to ceiling. In the only space above the mantelpiece hung his Mathew Smith. He had bought it in 1929, the year he came from his architectural experiments in New York to try six months in his uncle's firm in the City, and consoled himself for work, which he found even more futile than he'd expected, by changing his salary conscientiously (and youthfully he felt now) into pictures and subscriptions to hospitals. The room gave the impression that its owner found beauty a necessity and comfort a matter of course. The log fire (lit by Mark himself every morning) added to the lived-in and leisured character of the room.

Mark and Clare had breakfast here. Clare was late and came in fastening her belt. Mark got up when she came in, but went on reading the *Times*. She sat down opposite him and poured out her coffee. He said:—

"Darling, your father has been thundering again."

"What now?"

He read aloud from the Parliamentary Report.

"Poor Father!" said Clare.

Mark was silent.

"The *Times* makes no comment?" she asked.

"Of course not. That's just the kind of thing they don't comment on. The *Times's* have made themselves a political policy like one of those shot silks that look blue in one light and red in another."

He went on reading. She took up the *Weekend Review* and began to read the advertisements on the back.

"Do so many people have cockroaches?" she asked.

He said: "The *Times* reporting of debates is very interesting. They report accurately, but they report the Conservatives more fully than the Socialists. You can see if you compare Hansard."

"Really?" She thought she must do that sometime. Poor Father and his absurd speech; roused to defensive action by the least glimmer of intelligence. History must go on being taught nationally or children would soon learn not to think nationally.

"Father would admire Hitler," she said, "if only he weren't German."

Mark put down the *Times*.

"Hitler's the natural poet of all the rabid patriotic half-wits in the world. And even though Englishmen don't like to pay lip service to him directly, he's bucked up all the little Fascist movements everywhere—even in the King's Road."

Clare nodded. "Lovely young men with narrow foreheads and big shoulders and black shirts—Marmalade please, darling." She paused, looking at him, and then smiled. "When the English Nazis—*soi-disant* Fascists—get into power (I should think there must be heaps of little business men with repressed instincts and inflamed brain cells who could lead them!) then you'll find your vocation, darling, defying them and being thrown into prison."

"And shot?"

"Of course."

He looked back at her, amused.

"I didn't know you saw me in heroic parts."

"Of course. I see you quite, quite ready to die for any cause that was hopeless or fantastic enough."

"But you accused me last night of being conventional and having a passion for safety."

"Oh—that—" She didn't want to talk about last night. "I meant in personal relationships."

"I have no 'personal relationships' that matter to me, except you. . . . Naturally I want that to be—as safe as possible." He dismissed his own gravity. "Do you see me leading an armed force, or just plotting in pubs?"

"Oh, an armed force, and I'd do the plotting."

"But you'd be with the Royal British Nazis. You'd agree with me in principle, but you'd feel it was so important to preserve the England of Edward the Seventh, and that after all the R.B.N.'s *were* the only people who entertained nowadays—"

"Brute!"

He leaned across the table and took her fingers in his. Then he said, "Give me some more coffee, go to the ice box and get some more butter. Cherish me a little." . . .

"Now I must go home," said Clare.

"Why?"

"A lot of reasons. But chiefly because I want to see Daddie before he starts work."

She lit a cigarette. She came and sat on the arm of his chair—put her arm round his shoulder and said, "Darling, I'm so in love with you."

He took her hand, kissed her finger tips. "What work?" He repeated in a mellower tone, "Your hands smell of roses."

"That's the expensive stuff I put on them! . . . I don't know *what* work myself. Nobody really knows what M.P.'s do in the mornings. I don't think they really know themselves, because each new one doesn't dare to ask the others and so each of them locks the door and invents something. . . . I think Daddie and little Tandy do scrapbooks with press cuttings."

"Why must you see your father so immediately?"

She hesitated. "Because I very immediately want money."

"Will he give it to you?"

"I suppose so."

"If you stayed here for the day you could help me go through those 1850 Albums."

"I know. I'd like to. But anyway I can't be here when Harris comes."

"Why not? You've never minded Mrs. Hepburn—why should you feel more . . . equivocal in the eyes of a manservant?"

"Harris might talk."

"To whom?"

"Oh—to anyone."

"Really . . . darling!"

She crossed her knees and said:—

"Well, the day he came round in your car with those books you sent (you remember? last week—with that life of Stendhal and the Woolf essays), he stayed outside and Daddie's car was there and Harris was talking to Cox, Father's new chauffeur."

Mark, leaning back, looked up at her as she talked. He couldn't, now as often, reconcile his knowledge of her as a woman, as a creature who was emotionally subtle and instinctively wise, with those moods of quite childish secretiveness. He said:—

"You tell me that you won't marry me on principle. Why, if you're living up to your principles, should you be ashamed of them?"

She got up. She was impatient. And inside she was miserable. She said: —

"I don't know I don't know I don't know! And I hate being asked questions. . . ." After a pause she said, "I *do* know, of course. And so do you. It's because of Mummie and Daddie."

He got up too, saying: "Don't for heaven's sake let us go through all this stuff again. You know what I think."

"Yes, but you only think that because you don't understand! You say I love them for all the wrong things and because they're stupid and darling and always the same, and because I've always known them and I can't really bear to leave my comfortable nursery. But you won't see that one *does* love people just as much for the wrong things as the right things. . . . After all," she added, "don't you love me for all the wrong things?"

He looked at her. When he answered he said: "Yes. For all the wrong things, and all the right things. And for nothing, and for everything." Then he stopped looking at her and said, "But because I love you I couldn't pretend to you."

She said: "I know. And I couldn't to you. . . . But that isn't the same—with Mummie and Daddie. You see nearly all their Truths are based on deceptions. They can only believe certain Truths because they've always deceived themselves. For instance, Daddie believes in the Rightness of the British Empire because he's consistently deceived himself about all the interests and injustice that really keep it going. And they believe that all good women are chaste women, and vice versa. And they believe, though the last thing they think they are is snobbish, that they really are different in calibre from 'poor people.' They think there's something almost natural in their class privileges. . . . I mean 'class' is a Truth to them!" Clare threw her cigarette end into the fire. ". . . And if, for instance, they knew that I was your mistress it would be dreadful for them, because the only Truth they would know about me then would be that I had ceased to be 'good' and become 'bad' . . . and might just as well be on the streets."

"And you must keep in the cotton wool you call their 'Truths'?"

"Yes. To be kind. . . . Because I'm fond of them."

He looked at her with bright, angry grey eyes.

"I'm fond of my family. But I don't have to lie to them!"

"It's different for a woman."

"I don't agree. I had to be just as brutal—in a way—with them about my religious opinions."

"Oh, Mark, my darling, don't let's argue."

"Would it be so dreadful for your family if you married me?"

She said, half-laughing, "Oh well, dreadful . . . in a different way."

"But not so bad?"

"Not nearly, of course. Not that they'd rejoice over a Papist with no money four years younger than myself. But the point is, as you know, that I just *don't want to*. Let's stop arguing."

He came close to her, but didn't take the hand she held out.

"And I do want to."

“So as to have the privilege of paying my bills?”

“No. I won’t pay anything for you. And I won’t earn anything for you. You’re quite rich enough.”

“Darling, you’re enchanting.” She put her hand against his cheek. He smiled absently and said, “Now you must go.”

“Why?”

“Because you said so.”

“Yes. I must.”

He said without tenderness:—

“Why are you crying?”

“I don’t know.”

“Stop, then.”

“Yes.” She stopped and went unwillingly to put on her coat.

When she came back he was sitting in the armchair reading Hazlitt’s *Essays*. He looked up for a moment and said:—

“Good-bye.”

# CHAPTER IV

*9.00 o'clock*

Blanche Nicholson's bed would have been surrounded by two hens, a pig, a Negro, a glazier, a silversmith, and a textile worker if she had had the fancy to summon only a few of those who had combined to make her breakfast tray what the books on home nursing call "dainty" and "tempting."

But Mary alone presented the tray, furnished by men and supplied by bird and beast, placing it on the bed table which Frederick had given Blanche for Christmas (and which was of wickerwork painted blue and silver and had a place for newspapers on one side and for letters on the other).

The pink tray cloth and napkin were edged with Irish lace. The porcelain service, gold-edged with roses on it, had been given her by Angela Van Diemen the Christmas of the Peace (with a card "To dear Blanche on this Christmas of Peace and Victory"). The two eggs, upright in silver cups, wore grey felt hats embroidered with forget-me-nots. The tea cosy Blanche always used out of affection for dear old Lady Bassett, who had made it herself and sent it after Clare was born. It was white, and embroidered in green and yellow thread was the legend, "Many are called But few get up." And there was a little rising sun (yellow) on green hills. Three crisp strips of bacon lay in a miniature entrée dish. The "shells" of butter were packed in ice, the toast was cut in isosceles triangles, the hot rolls lurked in a pink napkin, the milk jug was porcelain, the cream jug crystal, the marmalade in a jar like a miniature decapitable orange. Blanche's letters were propped between the tea cosy and the hot-water jug.

Mary slipped the *Daily Mirror* into its place at the side of the bed table.

"Thank you, Mary. . . . Would you mind putting the electric stove nearer the bed? . . . Thank you. And would you turn the lamp shade more so that I can see better?" Blanche took up her letters and looked through them. Circulars—a cleaner's bill—Mrs. Stemp's Agency; Alice Storr—from Dinard (of course, she'd gone there with her sister!); the Claude Hemsteads accept for the nineteenth. She must read Alice's letter afterwards. Dear little Mrs. Tate thanking for the jacket and bootees—"He is getting on splendidly . . . weighed nine and a half pounds.". . . Mrs. Stemp asks for a reference for

Mildred King—her mother had been there . . .! "Yes," Blanche thought, "Mildred was really a very nice girl." She sighed. Perhaps she had better put an advertisement in the *Morning Post* as well, about the daily woman. . . . A postcard from Mabel from Torquay—"Delightful walks and *really* mild weather these last two days. . . ." How different from London just now. "Jack is enjoying every minute of it and they are so kind about his meals in the hotel. . . ." A letter from dear "Fennie." She must read that afterwards. She glanced at the beginning: "*Dear Lady Nicholson. What a delightful surprise! Nothing could be more acceptable than the beautiful cardigan that arrived to-day from Debenham's. And what a beautiful color!* . . ." An appeal from the Cancer Hospital—a sale catalogue from Tiptree—a receipt from the Art Club for her subscription—a letter from the W. Sheffield Women's Conservative Association. . . .

She uncovered an egg, thinking about Fennie. Why shouldn't they ask Fennie to spend Christmas this year? . . . She helped herself to bacon. "Dear Fennie would so enjoy being with them all, and she had such a lonely life now that her brother was dead—a dreadful place St. Andrews. . . ." Blanche poured out her tea and glanced at the headlines of the *Daily Mirror*. FOG HOLDS UP TRAFFIC. BOAT TRAIN TWO HOURS LATE. There were photographs for which any blurred negatives might have been used. On the other side the pictures were more explicit. WIMBLEDON WOMAN'S TALKING GOLDFINCH. BABY DISAPPEARS. HETTY BROWN WHOSE BODY WAS FOUND YESTERDAY BY THE POLICE IN A WOOD NEAR KING'S NORTON. ACTRESS SUES FOR DIVORCE. MISS DILYS SWANN WHO WON OUR SIXPENNY DINNER TABLE COMPETITION. PARIS FASHIONS: MONKEY FUR HAS COME INTO FAVOR AGAIN AND IS BEING WORN ROUND THE WRISTS AND ANKLES OF BOUDOIR PYJAMAS. THE ABOVE MODEL IS CARRIED OUT IN WHITE CHIFFONESE. . . . Blanche laid down the paper and buttered her toast. She heard Frederick's voice out on the landing talking to Mary. Perhaps it was about that mark in the bath that he had complained about yesterday,—and she had forgotten to tell Mary,—but she hoped that he wasn't being hard on Mary, for she was as obliging as she could be, but his voice sounded quite cheerful.

He knocked at the door.

"Can I come in?"

"Yes, dear."

She could see at once he was in a good mood, for he came in accompanied by Brisk, saying:—

"Well, dear, here's Brisk come to say good morning to you."

She said, "Good morning, Brisk. Good morning, dear."

She put down her egg spoon while her husband kissed her.

"Well," he asked, "not feeling quite the thing?"

"I feel as if I might be starting a little cold. I thought I'd just have breakfast in bed, and perhaps stay upstairs this morning and then see how I felt."

"Quite right," he said perfunctorily. He saw the *Daily Mirror* on the quilt. "Well," he demanded, "what d'you think of your old husband's speech last night?"

"Oh . . . is it in this morning? I didn't see. Well, I've only just opened the paper."

He took up the *Daily Mirror* and turned over its pages.

"Here you are! Look here . . ." he thrust the paper, open, into her hands.

She read, saying some of the words under her breath—(She ought to have looked for it first. He had told her last night, when he came on to the party, that he had spoken so successfully.)

"Well," he asked, "what d'you think of it?"

"Excellent! How true, too— Excellent. I wish I had been there to hear you. What a terrible thing it is to think of—"

He took the paper away from her again to see if there were any comments he hadn't read. She began, uncertainly, to eat her second egg.

"It really does seem shocking," she said, anxious that her eating shouldn't make him feel that her interest was at an end. "Dear me. To think of those children being victimized. . . ."

He said, "I'll just borrow your paper for a minute or two. . . ." He stood at the end of the bed reading. He said: "I was having a talk with Tandy yesterday and I've decided to keep a double set of press cuttings now. One here and one at Sheffield!"

"I should think that was an excellent plan."

"Saves confusion. You never know when you want them for reference."

Tandy was his secretary.

"Yes, indeed!"

"I expect the press'll have a good deal of correspondence about all this. It's a thing there can't be too much talk about. Did you notice how I put one

thing?” He read out. “ ‘Is the Taxpayer paying for the education of Englishmen or Bolshevists?’ Puts the question in a nutshell.”

“Indeed yes.” Blanche poured herself out a second cup of tea and put a lump of sugar in. “Shall you be in for lunch, dear?”

“I expect so. Yes. I think I shall. Got a Board Meeting this afternoon, and a lot to do here this morning. Tandy’s coming early. I want to get that article for the *National Magazine* finished. When’s Clare coming back?”

“Sometime this morning. She said she was motoring up early with the Clarkes.”

“She can’t do much motoring up this morning!”

“No. I expect she’ll be late. Shall you be in for dinner, dear?”

“I can’t tell yet. I’ll let you know later. I may be dining with Arkwright at the club. I’m expecting a message from him.”

“Very well.”

He sneezed. A sound like a mastiff beginning to bark. She said, “Oh dear, I hope that doesn’t mean you’re starting a cold too, Fred!”

He shook his head violently, whisking his handkerchief to and fro across the end of his nose.

“Cold? Nonsense. Just my catarrh. You know I believe if you didn’t keep this house so hot I shouldn’t have this catarrh at all. When I was a boy we never thought of having central heating, only Americans and Jewish millionaires had it, and I didn’t have this catarrh trouble at all.”

Blanche knew this conversation, but it always distressed her.

“But you had it put in yourself, Frederick!”

“Actually on your account. You women feel the cold so. Why, this room’s like a hothouse.”

“It’s only because of my throat, dear.”

She was hurt. She didn’t like him to think her self-indulgent. But he must know how careful she had to be. He came to the usual peroration:—

“My mother had nine children and never had a fire in her bedroom until her last illness.”

Blanche’s pained mood changed to resentment.

“I expect if she had had one more often she wouldn’t have had that illness.”

Frederick had worked off his annoyance about the heating and didn’t notice his wife’s tone.

“Oh well, eighty-seven, a good age,” he said. “If you and I do as well . . .”

He came and patted her shoulder with jovial indifference.

“Well,” he said, “enjoy your breakfast, my dear. . . . I like the bacon we’re having just now. Very good. Very good indeed.”

Lily put the full-fed sleeping baby down into the cradle, murmuring that he ought to be all right now, for an hour or two anyway. “Morning’s ’is good time,” she said to George as she went into the kitchen to fetch her coat from the door. He was drying the teapot. “And if those two girls in there start makin’ a row turn them out.” She came back into the bedroom where Amy and May Findlay were sitting on the floor arranging Amy’s cockleshells as a “garden.” “D’you hear what I said?” she asked her daughter. “If you wake that baby while I’m gone I’ll give you what for. . . . See?”

Amy nodded.

“Yes, Mrs. Cashmore,” said May.

“That kid does look poorly,” thought Lily. “Would you like any more cocoa?” she asked.

May colored and shook her head.

“Oh come on, I know you would,” said Lily impatiently. “George,” she called out, as she took off her apron.

“Yes?”

She went in to him herself and said in a lower voice, “Make that kid another cup, there’s a dear. I haven’t got the time.”

He grumbled. He said:—

“I suppose this is Doctor Barnados.” He got the tin down from the shelf.

“I’d like to give that mother of hers a piece of my mind,” said Lily. “And Mr. Findlay too. She can afford to get herself perfume and suède gloves!” Lily looked at herself in the glass. “Oh Lord, I’d better wash me face before I go. Why didn’t you tell me there was a smudge on me chin?” She took a

cloth hanging on the tap, scrubbed her face over, and dried it hurriedly on a towel that hung on the line at the end of the kitchen. Then she went to the bedroom chest of drawers and got out a brush and comb and her brooch and gloves. When she had tidied her hair, brushing it over from a side parting and pulling it a little forward on her forehead, she put back the brush and looked round in case George could see her, then she pulled a powder puff out of the drawer, dipped it in a box and rubbed it over her face and put it back in the drawer, slipping it under her old brown scarf. She leaned close to the mirror, wiped her face over with her handkerchief.

She put on her brown velvet beret straight, as Henry VIII wore his. She took out the white woolen gloves that she'd washed through yesterday.

"I'm off now," she said to George.

"You look all right," he said. He thought how pretty she looked. He didn't notice how much she had changed in ten years. She colored at his look. "Well, I won't be long." Suddenly she felt nervous and empty. "I wonder if there's any sense in me goin'? There must be dozens that'll apply."

He said, "Don't be silly, Lil. You've got yer references."

"Mmm."

"Well, they're good enough, aren't they? Especially the one Mrs. Raikes give yer."

"Mmm. Oh well, I'd better 'ave a try. So long."

*9.30 o'clock*

While Mary and Rose were making Sir Frederick's bed, Rose said:—

"Well, if Mildred wasn't leaving I wouldn't have stopped on much longer myself."

Mary folded the sheet neatly under her top corner of the mattress.

"Mildred's all right," she said. "I don't know what you've got against her."

Rose picked up the pillow.

"Nothing at all. Except that she's as common as dirt."

Mary smiled as she spread the top sheet. She smoothed her hand over the soft linen.

“Oh go on, Rose, you started all this about that canary. Life’s too short to bother yer head about nothing.”

Rose sulked. They finished the bed in silence. Mary said:—

“As ’er ladyship isn’t getting up yet you’d better get on with Miss Clare’s room. She’s due back this morning.”

Mary stayed in Sir Frederick’s room. She hung away his Jaeger dressing gown and put his slippers in the shoe cupboard. If this fog went on she’d have to wear her old coat to-night. Still, Jim was fond of it because she’d had it on new the day they got engaged. What a time ago that seemed, and it wasn’t much over a year! Hampton Court, and Jim with a rose in his buttonhole, and frosty sunshine that made you feel as you’d had a glass of wine. They might go to Hampton Court again, one of these days when the weather got finer—“for remembrance.” She swept the carpet, thinking about Jim. She dusted the blue ash tray and the piece of shrapnel with “Oct. 5, 1917” on it, and the ivory monkey with the long tail, which Ackworth, in a light moment, had christened “Mr. Darwin,” wondering if she and Jim would manage their holiday together this year? . . . If her ladyship shut the house in August and gave them all their holidays then . . . like last summer.

Rose swept Miss Clare’s carpet, although it was quite clean. She wondered if she ought to open the windows while she was doing the room, as on other days, or if it would only let the smuts come in. She decided to keep the windows closed. As she dusted she sniffed two of the glass bottles on the dressing table. One was too “strong,” she thought, but the other was nice and “fresh.” She looked at herself in the glass and straightened her already neat cap. The sight of her figure made her remember Mildred’s taunts. But she decided that she wasn’t too thin, really; and nothing was more ugly than to be fat. Mildred never looked smart! As she dusted the low table by the bed she paused to examine the little pile of books. She hadn’t heard of any of them. The title of one, *The Way of All Flesh*, attracted her. But when she turned the pages it didn’t seem to have anything about sin at all. Miss Clare was always reading; you’d think she’d get headaches reading as much as that. And she wrote, too, sometimes, Ackworth said, and Miss Greene had seen something by Miss Clare in a book, but it wasn’t much, funny stuff, Miss Greene said. Rose dusted the writing table—more books on there too. She’d looked at them before—poetry books. One by Shakespeare and one that seemed to be in French, one with a naked woman on the cover—disgusting, Rose thought, but nothing to some of the pictures you see.

Mary came in. She said:—

"Did I tell you Miss Clare's expected back this morning? So you'd better put in some hot water. . . . And if she doesn't come early put some more hot in at eleven before you go to lunch."

Mrs. Perrott moved upstairs and across the landing and knocked at her ladyship's door.

"Come in. Good morning, Mrs. Perrott."

"Good morning, m'lady."

Mrs. Perrott planted herself just near enough to the bed to hand over the little block with her menu for the day. She always wrote out a suggested menu and Blanche corrected it. She waited, her hands folded on the front of her starched belt, her elbows resting on her hips.

Blanche looked through the menu. Lunch: Eggs with cheese sauce, rissoles, baked potatoes, beet root, ginger pudding. Dinner: Clear soup, fried sole, mixed grill, fried potatoes, cauliflower, chocolate mousse.

"Yes," said Blanche. "Yes. That seems very nice. Only I think we might have some other pudding at luncheon, as we had ginger pudding last week. What do you suggest, Mrs. Perrott?"

"Well, what about marmalade pudding, m'lady? Sir Frederick likes that and we haven't had it for quite a time."

"Yes," said Blanche, handing back the menu, "that would be very nice."

"Very good, m'lady." Mrs. Perrott turned to go, when Blanche stopped her.

"Oh, by the way, I have a letter from Mrs. Stemp's Agency this morning asking for a reference for Mildred. You've found her quite satisfactory in the kitchen, haven't you?"

"Yes, quite, m'lady. Mildred's a very nice girl. She's a bit careless sometimes, but then she's young." Mrs. Perrott decided to say nothing about Mildred's habit of "picking" at things. She'd speak to her herself.

"Thank you, Mrs. Perrott."

"Then we'll be starting the new arrangement the first of next month? That's next week?" Mrs. Perrott asked.

“Yes. I put an advertisement in the *Evening Standard* and in the *Times*, so I hope to have some satisfactory applicants soon. What terrible fog, isn’t it?”

“Yes, m’lady, it is terrible,” said Mrs. Perrott. “I hope your ladyship’s cold isn’t bad.”

“Not at all, thank you, Mrs. Perrott. It’s really nothing at all. I shall be getting up later on.”

Mrs. Perrott retired.

Blanche took up Alice’s long letter. So nice to hear from Alice always. She wrote quite amusingly. . . . “I am very well just now except that my shoulder has been troubling me again and if it goes on I shall do my best to go South before the really cold weather comes. . . .” Poor Alice. How troublesome for her. Always some worry. Perhaps Acqui, which everybody said was so extraordinary, would do her good. Frances Arnold had been entirely cured at Acqui. It might be worth writing to Alice suggesting this.

Lily kept along the edge of the kerb, but even so, though she could have sworn she knew the district blindfold, found herself in Great Peter Street when she thought she’d only just got to the corner of Romney, and had to turn round and feel her way along the walls and past dim steps and doors into Smith Square. She couldn’t see the church in the middle of the Square, but she could discern an immense architectural something. “Fifty-nine,” she said to herself. She began to walk round the Square nervously, going up steps and peering at the doors as she went. Once she opened her bag to make sure the references were there. Three hours every morning, the advertisement said. She wondered which hours. About nine o’clock, she supposed. It was usually after breakfast they wanted help in big houses like these. Mrs. Raikes had liked her to come early, but then that was so as to get the stairs and day nursery done before breakfast.

As she got to No. 59 a taxi crawled out of the fog and stopped and a lady got out, and as she paid the man said something that made him laugh. She went up the steps of No. 59 and Lily saw her get out a latchkey. She had a black coat on and Lily couldn’t see her face, but she looked young and ever so smart, and Lily wondered if it was perhaps Lady Nicholson herself. Only from the advertisement Lily’d had the idea of an elderly lady. The lady opened the front door and went in and Lily pushed the area gate and went down the steps, stopping halfway down to try to give her shoes a bit of rub with her handkerchief.

Frederick Nicholson was smoking his morning pipe when he heard Clare's voice in the hall, and then she came in, pulling off her ridiculous hat and saying:—

"Well, old Badger, how are you?" Before he could rise she came over and kissed him—a scented kiss on his cheek, and her hand on his shoulder.

"You're home early," he said. "We didn't expect you until afternoon! You don't mean to say the Clarkes came up by car in *this*?"

She began taking off her coat.

"No. Of course not. We came up by train yesterday and stayed at Queen Anne's Mansions last night."

"Just as well, I should say. This is no weather to be on the roads. I must say I'm glad to see you. I was quite worried at the idea of your motoring!"

She threw her coat over the fender.

"Look out," he said. "You'll burn that coat if you put it there. Take it out in the hall, and tell Ackworth to get it dried anyway."

"But darling, I didn't *walk*, here! I came in a taxi."

He said, "What, a taxi from Queen Anne's Mansions?"

"Of course. In *this*."

"Well, I suppose it saves your shoes or complexion or something. Take that coat out, anyway. I don't want it here."

She obeyed.

She came back and sat down on the fender.

"Where's Mummie?"

"In bed. Thought she had a cold. But she's getting up later."

"I must go up and see her. How was the party last night? Did she enjoy it?"

"Party? Oh yes. We went. But I did something more than go to a party."

She broke in. "Of course, my dear, you made a lovely furious little speech . . . all about how the little 'angels' are being dyed a deep and dreadful Red! I wish I'd heard you."

He snapped, but with an indulgent glance, "The press is very favorable."

"*Which* press?"

"Well—er—most of it! *The Morning Post*, the *Express*, the *Times*, and so on. And a good thing too. It's time something definite was done. It's all very well for you and your young friends to talk about die-hards and go kiting off to Russia to admire everything they like to show you!"

"Darling, you seem to have a sort of rhetorical hang-over. You know I've never been to Russia and don't want to go."

"Good. That's just as well."

"You're always assuming I'm a Communist because I'm rather a Pacifist."

She waited for him to say, and he said:—

"One thing leads to the other."

She didn't answer. Then she laughed at him.

"What a jolly way to welcome me home. By serving up cold stale politics. Stay me with sherry instead. Can I ring?"

"Sherry, at this hour?"

"Yes. For once. I'm sad, rather."

"Sad?" He got up and rang the bell himself. "What have you got to be sad about?"

She shook her head.

"Nothing much."

Ackworth appeared.

"The sherry, please, for Miss Clare."

"Very good, Sir Frederick."

"Now then," he said, "out with it!"

"Not yet!"

"Come on, Clare. What is it?" He glanced at her with a keenness that existed only in his own imagination. "What's the matter?"

"Something very banal and rather urgent."

"Well? Come on, child." He smiled, pleased by the sense that this handsome woman sitting on his fender was, after all, his own daughter and

not quite as wise as she often pretended to be, and probably was in some little scrape now where she wanted his advice.

Clare read this mood in him and thought angrily that she didn't want him to be too easy, because it made her feel a cad. She felt that if he was furious first she wouldn't hate herself when he paid afterwards. So she said brusquely, but with detachment:—

"I'm in debt again."

Ackworth brought in the sherry. Clare helped herself. When Ackworth had gone he said:—

"For how much?"

"More than three hundred pounds."

"That means about six hundred pounds with you."

She was surprised at the quickness of his answer.

"Yes," she said, "nearly that."

"And you want me to pay."

She saw that he was angry anyway. But there was a reserve of some other emotion, heavier and slower. She said:—

"I hate the idea of your paying"—and felt bored by the silliness of her own remark.

"What are the debts for?"

"Clothes, mostly."

"Gambling?"

She shook her head.

"Are they all London shops?"

"Some in Paris."

"All pressing?"

"Most of them. If they weren't I shouldn't want to pay them."

"I see."

After a pause he said:—

"I paid two hundred pounds' worth for you just after we came back from Cannes."

"I know."

"And those are all since then?"

"Yes."

"I see." His tones were taut, but she saw that his anger was giving way to the other emotion, which was fear. And when he said, "By Jove, Clare, no one knows what's going to happen these days," she saw that the question of her debts seemed to him small in itself, but significant as yet another spark driven before the Great Fire. And as she pitied him and hated herself, she saw that six hundred pounds in itself meant nothing to him, and thought too, "*How* rich They all were!" thinking of Them in the past.

"Well, I suppose I shall have to see what I can do." He poured himself out a glass of sherry. He looked at her from under his thick fair eyebrows. She saw that even his fear couldn't altogether spoil the luxury of her dependence on him.

"Why d'you pay them?" she asked. "You haven't got to."

"What d'you mean, why do I pay them? Isn't that just what you're asking me to do?"

"Yes. I—only wanted to know why you're being so nice."

"Nice?" He couldn't help liking that. After all he was being pretty tolerant. He leaned forward and put his hand on her knee. "I s'pose I've always spoilt you, Clare."

"Yes. . . . And sometimes I feel beastly about it. And then I—come back like this and take advantage of you."

Frederick was warmed by her smile and the sherry.

> "O woman! in our hours of ease
> Uncertain, coy, and hard to please . . .
> When pain and anguish wring the brow,
> A ministering angel thou!"

Clare said, "A consoling text, but fallacious. When you had pleurisy you wouldn't even see me and you sent Mummie to Crowborough."

"I was pretty bad then, wasn't I?" said Frederick, growing grave at the thought.

Clare remembered that—and when Mark had flu she dropped the thermometer because her hand shook. She wondered why Mark had said

good-bye to her like that this morning.

# CHAPTER V

"There's a woman downstairs, m'lady, who says she's come in answer to your advertisement."

Blanche put down Alice's letter.

"Oh yes," she said. "Of course . . ."

"I told her you were engaged just now. I didn't know if you wished to see her later."

Blanche rearranged her little pink shawl round her shoulders and patted her hair and said that perhaps she had better see the woman now.

"Up here, m'lady?"

"Yes, Ackworth."

"Very good, m'lady," said Ackworth. ("But up here!" she doubted. For she hadn't taken to the woman at all, herself. For Ackworth could smell out poverty just as she could discern degrees of good breeding; and she wasn't taken in by the woman's looking clean and respectable.)

As she went downstairs she met Mary and said, "Her ladyship's finished with her tray." And as Lily Cashmore, glancing right and left but not really seeing anything, and pinching the top of her handbag with all her finger tips, followed Ackworth upstairs they passed Mary bringing down the tray, and Lily thought "What a sweet face" and caught a whiff of bacon and felt a hollowness round her solar plexus.

"Mrs. Cashmore, your ladyship."

And Lily told herself "She can't eat me," and went in and heard the door close behind her, and she was in a beautiful bedroom, so lovely and warm, and scent-smelling like the perfumery department at Selfridge's. And the lady sitting up in bed with pillows, an elderly lady (so it wasn't the young lady; she'd thought it wouldn't be when that old dragon said her mistress was in bed), said "Good morning."

"Good morning, madam—m'lady," she stammered (for she had never been with a titled lady). But the lady didn't seem to notice; she had a lot of letters scattered on the blue silk quilt and her grey hair was pretty and she

had ever such a sweet face, but sad-looking. Perhaps she'd had a sad life, Lily wondered, pinching her bag harder to stop her hands shaking and standing between the edges of the two rugs and wondering if she ought to stand nearer the bed, or farther away perhaps.

"You've come in answer to my advertisement?"

"Yes—m'lady."

"Yes. . . . As a matter of fact I did put in the advertisement that I would see people between six and seven to-night."

"Oh," muttered Lily. "Oh dear, I'm sorry, madam." What a fool, she thought, not to notice. Well, that'll put her against me right away, and no wonder, disturbing her . . .

"Not that it really matters, but in the ordinary way I'm very busy at this time of the morning."

"Yes, madam." (Moss stitch that shawl was, but it was the swansdown round the edge that made it so dainty looking.)

Blanche cleared her throat. She had never really got over her bridal shyness in interviewing servants.

"Do sit down over there, won't you?"

"I'm all right, thank you," Lily said, seeing the armchair out of the corner of her eye as a strange resort that she couldn't comfortably get to.

"You see, in the advertisement, what I want . . . Unfortunately my nice little kitchenmaid Mildred is leaving, as we are having to cut down our staff, and I want Cook to have someone in to help her for—I think three hours every morning."

"Yes, m'lady . . ."

"Are you accustomed to that kind of work?"

"Yes, m'lady. At least I'm accustomed to all sorts of housework . . ." Lily shifted forward an inch without seeming to move her feet, for she felt the electric stove too close and it was beginning to scorch her left ankle. The lady looked at her and Lily felt that she must have seen her move, and stood stock-still trying to stop her silly trembling.

"Have you any references?"

"Yes, m'lady." She began to pull off her glove so as to open her bag better. "I brought two with me, one from Mrs. Gaylord. I used to help with

the nurseries there, and one from Mrs. Raikes—" The glove fell on the floor, but she thought, "I'll pick it up after I've got these references out." She got the bag open and stared into its familiar pockets, reassured to see her handkerchief and her key and the familiar little mirror with the corner chipped. She pulled out the envelope.

"Thank you," said Blanche; while she was taking them out of the envelope she said, "What horrid weather, isn't it?" She thought the woman seemed nice, and if these references were all right (of course she would ring up to verify) she might quite well do. She unfolded one of the references (after all, it was only for three hours a day). "Of course I would pay you by the hour, ninepence an hour, and you would come in after breakfast."

"Yes, m'lady."

Blanche read through the first reference and while she wasn't looking Lily put up her hand to undo her coat a bit, for it was a change coming in here, and she wouldn't like to live in a room so hot as this.

"You were how long with Mrs. Gaylord?"

"Ten months, m'lady."

Blanch re-read the reference, wondering why the name "Gaylord" was familiar. She unfolded the other, written on blue paper. "Lily Cashmore has been in my service as daily help for a year and a half and has proved very satisfactory. . . ." (Of course, Gaylord was the name of those nice people at Ryde that summer.) "How long did you work for Mrs. Raikes?" she asked.

Lily felt her forehead and eyelids perspire, but she heard the question and answered, "A year and a 'alf, m'lady," but she wished she'd sat down earlier when the lady asked her. The heat or something. But it couldn't be long now, and once she got out of this heat . . . and she fixed her gaze on a corner of the blue quilt which was turned back and she could just see a little label sewn on, with a trademark or something. And now the lady's words reached her.

"I should expect you to be here punctually at nine o'clock every morning —including Sundays, of course."

She hoped she was getting out the words "Yes, m'lady," making them sound sensible, but the inside of her head felt as if it were turning over, and the corner of the quilt swelled, contracted, swelled again, and the bed with all the pillows and the lady, a blur of grey hair and pink, shot up in an invisible lift—up and up and up—and she heard the lady give a shriek. . . .

Clare, coming up, heard her mother scream and sprang to the top of the stairs in terror, and ran across the landing thinking "Now something really has happened to her," and imagining heart attacks and thinking "Brandy" and "Her smelling salts are in the little right-hand drawer in the dressing table," meanwhile Mary—no, Ackworth (Ackworth is more on the spot) must telephone to Dr. Wrench, and if he's out . . .

She broke into the room and Mummie was sitting forward in bed and saying in a little gasping voice, "*Dear* me. . . . Oh dear . . ." and then, "*Clare!*" and there was a woman lying full length with her head next to Mummie's dressing slippers. Clare said automatically, "Has she fainted?"

"—*Dear* me," said Blanche, feeling her heartbeats banging in her chest. "I was just interviewing her . . ."

Clare bent over the woman, whose face was in the shadow of the bed. A streak of hair had fallen over her eyes. "Where's your brandy flask?"

Blanche gradually leaned back again on her pillows. "In the little cupboard above the washstand."

Mary was standing behind Clare in the doorway.

"I'll get it, miss."

"And the smelling salts out of the right-hand drawer in the washstand," said Clare, kneeling down and putting her arm under the woman's head. "Thank you, Mary. Pour a little into the cup you see—you pull it off the flask. That's enough. Now get the salts."

Blanche kept her hand pressed against her chest. She watched Clare forcing the brandy against the woman's mauve-white lips and managed to say, "She seemed perfectly all right."

The woman's eyelids moved, but her eyes didn't open.

"I'll take her into another room," said Clare. She knelt up on one knee, pushed her right arm under the woman's back.

"Take her legs, Mary."

"Hand me those smelling salts, Mary," Blanche said.

They carried her out to the landing.

"Spare room," said Clare. "What's her name, do you know?"

Mary shook her head. "Ackworth showed her up."

The spare-room blinds were down. They laid the woman on the bed. Clare put on the bedside lamp.

"Fetch me the brandy flask again. It's on the floor."

The light fell on the woman's face. Her hat had fallen off as they lifted her. She must be about thirty-five, Clare thought. A pathetic little face. She pulled the counterpane and eiderdown from under her and put the eiderdown over her. She felt her hands. This room was chill in spite of the heating. She said to Mary, "Fill me two hot-water bottles."

She bent over the woman to give her some more brandy, and remembered something about "loosening all clothing." She hesitated. She was coming round. Clare told herself that the woman would be less embarrassed if Mary were to do that. She went out on to the landing and called for Mary. She said, "Come here, Mary. I want you. Tell Rose to do those bottles."

"Yes, miss."

"And bring me one of the thick rugs out of the chest in the hall."

When Clare went back into the spare room the woman was lying with her eyes open, but she seemed dazed. Clare said:—

"Don't speak. You're all right," and took the matches to light the fire. She said to Mary, "Undo all her things round the neck and if she's got stays on take them off. Take her coat right off and put the shawl round her shoulders."

"Poor thing," murmured Mary. "I dare say it was coming in out of the cold, an' being a bit nervous an' all." She removed the coat as gently as if she were undressing a baby.

Clare watched the sticks crackle. There was a knock at the door. Rose came in carrying two stone hot-water bottles. Clare saw her expression and knew why she'd filled the stone ones. She said:—

"Give those to Mary for the moment and go back and fill two rubber ones."

Rose flushed scarlet and went.

"I don't suppose Rose herself has a stone one," Clare said to Mary. Mary's dimple showed.

"No, miss."

Lily's senses had been swimming up and up and up out of a daze and now, suddenly, things slipped into focus and there was another face over her, not the first one (the lady with the big eyes and long lashes), but a face she'd seen before. She tried to remember. Yes, she'd seen her bringing down a tray. Goodness! Lily remembered how she'd gone off when the lady was speaking to her, fainted right off. She sat up suddenly.

"Now then!" said Mary.

Lily saw the room, a big room with beautiful furniture and an armchair, with tulips all round the room. And there was the young lady by the fire that was crackling.

"Oh miss, I'm *ever* so sorry."

"Lie down," said Clare.

"But I'm quite all right, miss."

"Lie down, please."

"Go on, dear," said Mary. "You'd better 'ave a bit of a rest. Here, put this round you."

Lily realized she'd got her coat and blouse off.

"Gracious."

Mary said, hesitant, "Miss Clare wants you to 'ave your corsets off."

Lily lay back and accepted the red shawl round her shoulders, but she was obdurate about the corsets. "Oh no, miss. I'm all right now. I'll be up in a minute. What a thing to do, going off like that," she muttered, but her head still felt light. She wasn't sorry to lie back again.

"You'd better have something before you get up," said Clare. "Thank you, Rose. Now put one bottle at her feet and one beside her. And take away the stone ones. And when you go down tell Ackworth to get a tray ready and I'll come down and see what I want."

Ackworth and Mrs. Perrott and Mildred were in the kitchen passage when Rose got down and banged down the two stone bottles and said, "Miss Clare says Ackworth's to get a tray ready and she'll come down to say what she wants!"

"I suppose I'm to bring it up too!" said Ackworth. She was pale. She added, "I s'pose I'm to put all the best silver out for the guest. . . . That slut

of a woman in the best spare room! I never heard of such a thing. I suppose that's Socialism that we all hear so much about."

A bell rang. "There's her ladyship's bell," said Mrs. Perrott. "You better go, Rose, as Mary's helping Miss Clare. . . . It certainly does seem unnecessary putting 'er in the *spare* room," she went on. "And now if she's feeling well enough to eat I should think she's well enough to get up, and get a move on. Queer thing, comin' here and then going and fainting like that. But as a matter of fact when I *saw* her I said to myself, 'That woman's not strong!' You know you can tell sometimes, and when Mildred let her in the back door I was just comin' out to put the cream back in the Frigidaire and I saw her and I knew what she must have come for, of course, and I said to myself, 'That's not a 'ealthy woman! Not by a long chalk.' "

"Did you notice the 'ole in 'er stockin'?" said Mildred. "I noticed when she was waiting, a 'ole as big as a potato."

Mrs. Perrott turned. "You run along and get on with your work, Mildred."

Mildred retired into the scullery.

Rose came down again. "Her ladyship would like an egg beaten up in sherry. Sir Frederick's up there with her. She looks ever so upset. And no wonder."

"Poor thing," said Mrs. Perrott. "It must a given her a turn. And she wasn't very well anyway. Fetch me the sherry, Miss Ackworth, would you please?"

"Miss Clare had some as soon as she came into the house this morning. She was feeling nervy, I expect. She was asking Sir Frederick for money again."

Ackworth went through into the hall and fetched the sherry. She stopped a minute to look into Sir Frederick's check book which lay on his desk. But there was nothing written on it and the stub of the last check had "£2.17.6" on it.

Mrs. Perrott whisked the egg.

"This'll do 'er good," she said, taking the sherry. "Very rich it is, but heartening. When my father couldn't take anything else he'd say to my mother, 'What about a Port Flip?'—port of course he took, not sherry, and it'd do 'im a world of good."

Ackworth brought a round tray and Mrs. Perrott set the glass on it.

Ackworth carried it upstairs. As she passed the spare-room door, Clare came out and said, “Oh there you are, Ackworth. Tell Mrs. Perrott I want some hot coffee, with milk, and some scrambled eggs and plenty of fresh toast and butter.”

Ackworth stopped.

“I suppose Mary’ll fetch it up, Miss Clare? If she can spare the time.”

Clare controlled her temper. “Yes, Mary will or I will. But give the order at once, please.”

“Very well, Miss Clare.”

“—And strawberry jam,” said Clare. She noticed the egg and sherry. So Mummie’s reviving herself!

As Ackworth went into Blanche’s room Sir Frederick came out. Clare stood in front of the spare-room door, as he said:—

“Have you got that woman in there? What on earth d’you think you’re doing? You women are enough to drive me mad. There’s your mother with her nerves all upset, and Ackworth coming with a face like a tombstone. . . .”

“The woman fainted,” said Clare, with her back to the door.

“I know she fainted. And chose a pretty queer place to faint in. But even if she did I want to know what you think you’re doing sticking her in there and making all this fuss about her.”

“I’m not going to argue,” said Clare. “If you’d rather throw a sick woman out in the street—”

“No,” said Frederick. “I’m not going to argue either.” He walked past her and down the stairs. And when he got down into the hall he looked up and, with a boiled face, said, “I’m going out. I’m going to the club.”

But Clare had gone into the spare room again, and only Brisk heard him and wagged his tail.

Ruth Findlay got out of bed shivering, and wrapped her green kimono tight around herself so that her body looked taller and thinner than ever. She looked into the next room and saw that Jo was still sitting there and reading last night’s paper, or else he was asleep again; and no wonder either after the time he came in last night, the filthy swine. She shut the door quietly again

and locked it, for she didn't want him coming in, and then she started wondering again if there really was anything in what Frank said last Friday about his wife. But you bet he didn't mean it, for if she did divorce him he wouldn't want to marry, you bet he wouldn't—men were all alike, even Frank; and perhaps she'd made a mistake being so easy and she ought to be like a lot of women and get it all for nothing. But she'd fallen for Frank and she was lonely, and you wanted a man in your life. She sat on the bed and started pulling on her stockings. But by God, there'd be a good old bust-up if Jo was to find out, and sometimes she woke up thinking just how he'd set about murdering her, and she'd had that dream about Jo carving Frank up all into little pieces and putting him in one of those baskets for litter that they have in the Park. But there wasn't any sense in her getting a divorce even if they could afford it, which they couldn't, for where would she be then—with May and a place to keep? For you could never depend on these wholesale places; it would be different if she could get something in one of the big Model Houses, or even if she could get another job, programme selling, like she had at the Royal Plaza, but then you only got fifteen bob a week. And anyway,—she pulled on a grubby pink satin garter clasped with a Felix in black and white enamel,—Jo wouldn't ever agree to a divorce, he was so jealous, though that didn't stop his goings-on (and he'd given her one dose already, and if Frank was to find that out that'd be the end of her as far as he was concerned). She pulled on the other garter. If only Jo would go out to-day she'd be able to get on with her dress; she'd like to get it done before to-night— But she thought suddenly, suppose this fog stops him going off this week-end—and how'd she let Frank know? His wife would open a telegram and he'd told her never to telephone. But he might go all the same. Talk about "business"—when they all spent half their time sitting around in the bar. And he had a woman down at Manchester (so Dick told her) and he wouldn't want to miss that—not him. But she got up and shrilled through the door, "Are you goin' to Manchester to-day or not?"

He didn't answer. She unlocked the door and looked in. "I said are you going to Manchester to-day?" The room smelt of the oil stove which he was lighting. He grumbled without looking round.

"It isn't any of your business where I'm going."

"Oh. All right."

She banged the door and started dressing, pulling up her elastic belt and then her flowered cami-knickers under her nightdress.

Tandy was late. He had heard Big Ben striking ten as he came out of Westminster Underground Station. And as he sprang up the familiar three steps of No. 59 and was about to ring the bell the front door opened and Miss Nicholson came out, with her coat on, but no hat. She seemed in a hurry, he thought, and stood back. But in the moment that she passed him, saying hurriedly, "Good morning," she turned round suddenly and broke out, "Come with me, Mr. Tandy. It isn't far, but I want a taxi—and men are so clever at finding them!"

"Certainly, Miss Nicholson."

Clare took in his surprise. Absurd little Tandy with his bowler and his rimless spectacles and his beige moustache and his rosy, bulgy little face with the inquiring nostrils. "A slight crisis has arisen," she said. "Only I'll explain as we go. I want to fetch a baby—in a hurry rather."

Tandy tried to get into step at her side. She took long but uneven strides. He didn't attempt to adapt his mind to a situation not yet sufficiently clear for him to form any judgment. He liked Miss Nicholson; but she belonged, in his opinion, to the world of "smart people" whose doings interested his wife—and her appearance had always made him suspect her good sense. As he hurried beside her in the fog this doubt seemed to be amplified, though not necessarily, for he awaited her explanation, confirmed.

"Here's a taxi," she exclaimed. "Taxi—taxi—"

It came to them out of the fog.

"Provost Buildings," she said, and Tandy, holding the door for her, thought that the driver looked surprised. In the taxi she explained. She ended up, "Apparently the husband has to go out and see some man at ten, he must because it may mean an extra job, and I wouldn't let her get up until she'd eaten something and rested. She's obviously half starved and I saw she was worrying about the baby being left alone, and the eldest child mightn't have the sense to stay."

"Are we going to fetch a baby?" asked Tandy, sitting up in his beige mackintosh and propping his umbrella between his knees. In his way he was rejoicing (though without disloyalty) over Miss Nicholson's description of her father stamping out to his club. He reflected that his employer would not be reassured if he returned and found a baby installed.

"Here we are," said Clare and told the taxi to wait, and they went across a strip of asphalt and through an arch into a courtyard, in the midst of what

seemed to be a high block of buildings, for they could only see one floor high.

"She said the third doorway—or staircase—on the right after you go in!"

Ruth Findlay, coming across the yard on her way out, saw them and peered, wondering whatever a couple of toffs were doing here gaping round like that. She passed close to them on purpose. Clare caught sight of her and for a second each saw and admired the other and tried to gauge the other's charms. ("Should I look so smart with my hair as short as that?" thought Ruth. "What heavenly shaped eyebrows. I must train mine to go down at the outside corners," thought Clare.) Ruth went on slowly through the arch and looked back over her shoulder to see them—whatever for—going into No. 4 staircase. (There was old Mrs. Scholl there and Mrs. Cashmore second floor and the Jameses and the Kirbys above that . . .) Oh well, it was too cold to wait and she'd never get the dinner on if she didn't hurry.

Clare preceded Tandy. There was a gas jet on the first flight of stairs, but turned very low. As they got to the second floor they heard a baby crying.

Clare knocked.

A very little girl with a sedate pointed face opened the door.

"Is your daddy in?" asked Clare.

"Dad's gone out."

"I see. Are you Amy?"

Amy nodded. "Yes."

Clare hesitated. She didn't want to frighten the child. She hadn't really thought of her being here at all. She said, speaking gently, "Amy, I've just been seeing your mother—and she—she isn't very well—and she asked me to fetch Baby for her in case he was alone. She's quite all right. It's only that she came to—to see me and then felt tired." Clare felt helplessly stupid and at a loss. She didn't know what idiom a child of this sort would understand. She was surprised by the child's grave acceptance of her statements. Amy looked her up and down and up at her face again. It didn't occur to her to mistrust a lady, and she knew this was a lady because she spoke like Mrs. Raikes that had come once.

"Baby's in here," she said. She looked up at Tandy and noticed his glasses had no rims. But he didn't interest her. "'E's only just started screaming," said Amy. "After Dad went out. . . . Edward's gone out with Dad."

Clare looked at the screaming baby. Tandy, waiting in the scullery, wondered if it would be part of his duties to carry the baby. Clare gazed down at the screaming infant and wished she hadn't come, thinking, "Its noise could soon drive me mad." She bent down and picked it up and wrapped it in its shawl and a blanket. It was oddly light and she held it close, partly from fear of dropping it and partly from nervous exasperation. But as she held it its screams died down and stopped. Its face unscrewed. It looked at her. She thought it looked at her with those dark bright eyes. Could they see at three weeks—four weeks—?

"Kin I come too?" Clare looked down at Amy, whom she had forgotten.

"Of course." Clare looked round the room and thought of the little girl alone in it. "Of course," she repeated.

"I'll get me coat then," said Amy. She went to the chest of drawers and with precise movements and the same grave, half-dreamy expression got a garment out of the bottom drawer. It was dark green velveteen with a fur collar, and her Aunt Kate had given it her on her fourth birthday and she handled it with pride, smiling to herself, but her head bent so they shouldn't see her smile, as she put it on. Its hem was high above her dress and she could only just button it. Tandy said:—

"My, what a smart young lady we've got."

Clare glanced at him. She had never thought about him before. "You go down first," she said. She felt precarious with the baby in her arms.

He said, "Very well. The young lady shall hold my hand."

Clare held the baby close, but more easily now. She could feel its warmth coming through to her body.

When Mary brought up the tray as Miss Clare told her to Lily was out of bed and putting her blouse on. And when she saw the scrambled eggs and toast and butter and everything she said:—

"Oh I say, what a shame! You ought never to have bothered," for she felt it was indeed a shame that this nice girl should be running around and put to all the trouble for her, Lily Cashmore (to say nothing of all the trouble the young lady'd taken), and yet she couldn't help feeling greedy at the sight of those eggs and the butter and the smell of the coffee, and these little coffeepots were ever so dainty with the rosebuds design on them.

"You oughtn't to be up yet," said Mary, setting the tray down on the bed. "But if you *will* insist you'd better sit here by the fire and you can 'ave the tray on the small table."

Lily hesitated.

"Come on," said Mary. "You don't look up to much yet and you'll be better when you've got something inside you."

Lily sat down on the edge of the armchair.

"I'm sure you are ever so kind."

Mary set the tray before her.

"Now I'll leave you. I must get on with my work or I'll never get done. How're you feelin'? Still a bit funny?"

Lily shook her head. "Oh, I'm all right. But—"

"Now then, *monjay*—as they say in French."

Lily smiled. "All right. And thanks ever so."

"Don't mention it." Mary dimpled. "You must take it easy. 'Tisn't often you get a quiet meal, I expect. Miss Clare'll be back soon."

She went.

Lily ate and drank, the fire glowing on her. She put three lumps of sugar in her coffee. She guessed the eggs and butter were of the best. Like country butter. She took slow satisfying mouthfuls. She sighed, breathing the aroma of the coffee. She examined the little jar, which was of crystal, containing the strawberry jam. She began to feel better. She felt warm. A sense of well-being seeped through her body and mind. She was a little drowsy. She felt as if she were still dreaming. But it was a pleasant dream now, a soft carpeted dream in such a lovely room, and real lace all round the tray cloth, and a silver toast rack and crystal jar winking in the firelight, and photographs of statues all round the walls and a dressing table with net flounces over mauve. Mrs. Raikes's place had been nice enough, but everything very plain, for they weren't wealthy people; and Mrs. Gaylord had some good things but a lot of her things were worn out, but you could see these people had money; though her ladyship said something how they were cutting down— And it did seem a shame, Lily thought, if you had a place like this —then you started to lose all your money. Why, Mrs. Fenwick had told her ever so long ago that the people she used to be in service with, near Ascot, they'd had to sell up everything, house and all, and yet the children there

used to have real Valenciennes on their underclothes and every stitch by hand.

The clock on the mantelpiece chimed and Lily looked up and saw it was half-past ten, and whatever was she doing sitting here and dreaming, and goodness me, she must get her coat on and be off, and probably the young lady was somewhere about downstairs, and if only she could get off without meeting the lady again— And Lily was buttoning her coat when the door opened and Miss Nicholson came in carrying Baby and followed by Amy hand in hand with a gentleman.

"*Gracious!*" was all Lily could say.

"He's asleep now," said Clare. "He fell asleep in the taxi! But why are you up? What are you doing up? You ought to be in bed."

Lily explained incoherently, taking the baby, embarrassed by the strange gentleman, appalled at the very sight of Amy's boots on these carpets (but thank goodness the child had had the sense to put her best coat on! But no hat, my goodness), that she felt quite all right now, that she'd had ever such a delicious breakfast, that she didn't know how to thank Miss Nicholson, that she must be going and ought to have gone an hour ago . . . She stopped, hot in the face.

"Well, you've got to wait a minute or two now," said Clare, "because I've promised Amy something."

"No, really, miss, we can't stop."

"—And besides I want to see my mother about you again."

"—But she won't ever want . . ."

Tandy had gone. Clare felt more authoritative without him.

"Yes, she may. Anyway, please wait here."

Lily accepted Clare's authority as more natural than her rather troubling politeness. She sat down with the baby in her arms. Amy stood beside her staring at the room, at the tray, at the lamps and mirrors and pictures, and when Clare had left them bent down to poke her forefinger into the pile of the pink carpet. The baby had woken and, immediately aware of Lily's nearness, began to nuzzle at her coat. But Lily muttered, "Shut up—stop it, you little devil," disconcerted by such a display of instinct in these surroundings.

“That’s what Mrs. Findlay’s Mr. Hermann’s carpets must be like,” thought Amy. She went over to the washstand and examined the pattern on the big jug and basin and the little jug and basin just like it. Green birds of paradise with magenta tail feathers that spread out like a fan and ended twirling like question marks. She wondered what the big table had a dress on for, like a lady with frills—and a mauve petticoat underneath. There was a window seat with little cupboards under it and a little cut-glass handle at each cupboard. She opened one of the cupboards and found shelves covered with chintz, and on one of the shelves a sachet that smelt of vanilla. The curtains were very high and tied back with pink ropes.

“Stop nosin’ round, Amy, and be’ave,” said Lily, standing up with the baby now to distract his mind. But Amy didn’t hear. She was entranced, though not surprised, by this visit to this house, which, though it wasn’t so big as Hampton Court, gave her more exquisite sensations of warmth, of quiet, of magical prettiness and clearness. And as she moved about, looking eagerly and touching long and gently, she perceived that it was from this “atmosphere” (though she couldn’t have explained either atmosphere or her sense of it) that the children came whom she saw with nurses in the Park. She went over to the bed and laid her hand on the eiderdown.

“Shh—then sh-sh,” Mother was saying to Baby. Why had the lady smiled when she said she wanted a riband for Eileen’s hair? Was it because she thought she was too big to care for dolls? What did she mean when she said to the gentleman (whom Amy supposed was her husband) about everybody liking circuses more than bread?

# CHAPTER VI

Blanche tried to concentrate her attention on one of the little coats she was knitting for the Mary Beck Babies' Hospital. She was still too upset to read. And Frederick hadn't made things any better by coming in and being so annoyed about it all, and talking about living at his club, as if this kind of thing happened every day, or indeed had ever happened before. And, as she'd pointed out to him, she wouldn't have had the woman up here if she'd thought she was going to faint. On the other hand she was sure Frederick was wrong in saying that the woman had done it on purpose, but it was very irritating naturally that Clare should be making all this fuss, and he was right about the spare-room bed and how they would have all the trouble of fumigating, which so often ruined mattresses, and that they had to consider every penny these days, for he said Combine, Ltd., weren't going to pay any dividend now. . . . But, as she'd said to Frederick, she did what she could, and Greene had gone—and they were getting rid of Mildred, and she was going to tell Mrs. Perrott to order off cream for luncheon. But when she said that perhaps Clare was right, and they'd be happier in a little flat with just two maids and everything as simple as possible, he said, "Women have no idea of proportion." She wondered if that Mrs. Cashmore had gone yet. She hadn't heard anything more going on out on the landing. She'd better ring up Mrs. Stemp's Agency perhaps and see if they could do anything for her, but of course as she'd said between six and seven to-night there might be several.

Clare came in with her coat on but no hat. She came up to the bed and said, "Darling, have you 'come round' yet?"

Blanche, who disliked irony, said, "Is—she still in the spare room?"

"Yes. I wanted to know if you could see her now?"

"*See* her, dear?"

"Yes," said Clare, pretending not to understand her mother's tone.

"I don't think—there's any need, is there?" Blanche hesitated. She knew that when Clare was direct and monosyllabic she was forceful. She wished Frederick hadn't gone out.

"Yes, Mummie. She's quite all right again."

Blanche smoothed out her knitting on her knee. "I see. Well, of course there's no question of my engaging her now, poor thing . . . is there?"

Clare was mild. "Dear Mummie, how absurd you are. She's quite all right again. She only needed some food. She had a baby four weeks ago, and that and having had no breakfast—and I expect your formidable presence overcame her."

"A *baby*?" said Blanche.

"Yes."

"But then of course there's no question of her coming here."

Clare was still mild. "A legitimate baby."

"Of course," said Blanche, irritated.

"A nice baby," Clare went on. "It's in the spare room now. I'm sure she'd love to show it you."

"You don't mean to say she brought it here? That really is too much . . ."

"No. I brought it here. At least Tandy and I did. And the little girl, who's enchanting and looks like 'Mamie' in the Rackham Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens."

"Really, Clare! Really." Blanche's dislike of the unusual and mistrust of the unexpected combined and exploded in nervous anger. She demanded, "Why should you do this? Bring it—them—here?"

"Because I wanted her to rest and feed, and I found out the baby would be alone."

"I don't understand you, dear. I don't see at all why you should have done such a thing! Does your father know?"

"Will you see Mrs. Cashmore now? Before she goes, Mummie?"

"Certainly not."

"Why not?"

"Because I wouldn't dream of engaging her after this."

"After what? After her fainting?"

"No, no, of course not. She couldn't help that."

"Because she has a baby?"

"No. Though of course the baby's far too young."

"The baby doesn't want the job. You mean you won't engage her because I brought her baby here?"

"Don't be foolish, Clare. I'm not going to let you force me into anything."

"Can I see her for you? If you aren't feeling up to it?"

"No indeed."

Clare thought perhaps trying to make her feel will be better than reasoning with her. So she said, "They're dreadfully poor. I saw their flat just now. Tandy said on the way back, and you know how Tory and mild and *petit bourgeois* he is, he said, 'I can't think why they aren't all Communists!'"

"*Really!*" Blanche was shocked at this lurid beam on the excellent little Tandy.

"But Mummie, try and *think* for a minute. Think how easy it is for you to engage her—and you *know* there's no valid reason why you shouldn't. And think if whatever she'll get—two and threepence a day, isn't it?—*can* make a difference how dreadfully they must need it— And you've got her references and it isn't as if she wasn't a nice woman or hadn't good references!"

"Yes . . ." said Blanche, beginning to be hypnotized by Clare's voice and expression.

"Mummie, I *can't* go out and tell her you won't have her! I mean all the more because she *feels* she behaved disgracefully and doesn't really think you will. Imagine your own feelings if you were her and so much relief depended on such a dreary thing as three hours' charring."

Blanche couldn't and didn't try to imagine that. But she was softened.

"It is terrible to think of—"

"If you like I'll tell her . . ." Clare urged, for she knew that her mother feared the unprecedented as much as she cherished all (people, events, and beliefs) that had precedent; and that she was capable of refusing Mrs. Cashmore because she wished to forget the discomfort of this morning's events. Clare's seeing her would avert one more "awkwardness," and once the woman had been engaged she might, Clare calculated, be relegated to that large province in her mother's mental hinterland of "things one doesn't care to think about."

“No, dear,” said Blanche, calmer now and warmed by a vague distressed pity. “I’d prefer to see her myself.” Blanche hesitated and in a rapid mental process changed her instinct to evade difficulty into a decision to postpone it.

“No. Tell her that I don’t want to decide now, but that I’ll think it over and if she’ll call this evening,—say, six o’clock,—I’ll let her know.”

Clare protested. She was sentimental and ironical in a succession of agitated phrases. But Blanche was firm, even complacent, resting on a decision which so blessedly seemed to settle everything and in fact decided nothing.

When Clare had gone, she took up her knitting again. She was pleased with these little coats . . . And the matron told her this pattern was more satisfactory than the last because the armholes were bigger and it was easier to slip them off and on.

The lady came back and started saying something to Mother, and Amy slipped out on to the landing where she had caught sight of the lovely little basket that the lady said was for her dog. Yes. There it was. There was no one about. Amy went to it. It stood on four wicker legs and had a low opening cut in one side. She felt its blue cushiony lining. Why, it would do for a baby!

“That’s the little dog’s bed,” said a voice.

Amy looked up. She knew from the cap that this must be a maid (when Mother went to work at Mrs. Raikes’s she wore a cap too). A nice maid, Amy thought, with such white teeth and a dimple in one cheek. “And here’s the owner of the bed,” said the maid. “This is Brisk!” and a stocky white dog with brown ears and patches came running out of a room and looked up at Amy, and she held out her hand repeating “Brisk! Brisk!” and he licked her knee.

“He looks as if he was laughing!” she said; and the maid agreed.

“Oh yes,” she said. “He’s always got a joke up his sleeve,” and Amy smiled at this because the way his feet grew out of his front legs really did make him look as if he had sleeves!

But “Imee? Wher*ever*’ve you got to?” Amy ran back into the room and Mother was saying good-bye to the lady. But the lady turned to Amy and said, “Here you are. I hadn’t forgotten you,” and gave her a whole roll of

riband, like she'd seen in shops—lovely pink riband, and when Amy undid the end the other side of the riband was blue. Pink and blue, her two favorite colors, except red.

"Well, what d'you say?" said Mother.

Amy said "Thank you" in a whisper, clutching the disk that had, she knew, yards and yards and *yards* (What would May say!) of this riband that was pink one side and blue the other.

Mildred was putting the chairs in place again (for the servants' hall was turned out Fridays) when she heard them coming down the back stairs, Miss Clare talking and that woman saying something and "I'm ever so obliged, miss." They passed the door, which was open, and Mildred had a glimpse of the baby and checked herself running out to have a look at him, because of Miss Clare. The little girl followed them. She stopped for a minute outside the door of the servants' hall and looked in and stared at Mildred. What an old-fashioned-looking little thing! thought Mildred, nothing like little Gracie, her own kid sister.

"Ellaow!" said Mildred.

"Ellaow," murmured Amy.

"Fond of canaries?" asked Mildred.

Amy colored and looked up at the cage.

"Dickie 'is name is."

Amy nodded. "Is 'e yore canary?" she asked.

"Yes," said Mildred.

Amy looked with admiration.

"Come on, Imee," called Lily nervously. Amy turned and went. Mildred laid the cloth for "lunch" and set out the cups and saucers. She wondered if her ladyship was going to engage that woman, but from what Cook and Ackworth had been saying she supposed not. She looked at the clock. *Goodness!* Five minutes to eleven and she hadn't put the milk for the cocoa on yet. She hurried across the corridor and there was Miss Clare outside the back door in the area saying good-bye to them. She called out:—

"Mildred!"

"Yes, miss."

"See if you can find Mrs. Cashmere's umbrella, would you? She thought she'd left it by the door here."

Mildred remembered now. She'd seen Rose, who was always tidying up everything, slip it in the umbrella stand.

" 'Ere it is, miss."

Clare thanked her. Mildred felt Clare's smile, whose light shot through its victims and left them warm and vaguely excited.

Mark read until eleven o'clock. Then Harris came and, as Mark couldn't go out for his usual walk, he had to listen to Harris's wise or facetious comments—on the fog (*it saves you seeing a good many unpleasant faces*)—on the American debt (*why don't we manufacture a couple of million paper dollars over here at the Mint, and hand 'em over? No trouble to make, no use to us, and the very thing they're askin' for!*)—on murdered servant girls (*girls what don't look fer trouble don't get it*)—on Hollywood beauty (*they ain't nothing much in real life . . . you could give a Jersey cow sex appeal if you paint 'er face and put some crapedersheen undies on 'er*).

Mark reflected that it seemed impossible when you lived alone to get a servant who didn't turn out to be a "character." Mrs. Dean had known or surmised far too much about illness, Mrs. Ray had had a cheerful word every time he passed her in the narrow spaces of the flat. Mrs. Hepburn reported every morning verbatim scenes from the talkies that she saw every night. In despair he had established the habit of a walk while the flat was being charred. And to make assurance doubly sure had engaged a manservant, formerly employed by his cousin Lionel, and whom he had often seen looking like a jockey in his Sunday suit moving discreetly about his cousin's grandiose flat in Cleveland Row. Mark concluded either that Lionel had a more repressive manner, or that the cook and housemaid had been so satisfying an audience at Cleveland Row that Harris had needed no other.

As Harris, polishing the steel fender (unnecessarily, Mark thought), expatiated on the future of English cricket, Mark wondered if he couldn't really do his own housework. (If he were a novelist or even a conversationalist he could make use of all this. . . .) "All sport is gettin' professional," said Harris, tearing off a fresh piece of emery paper, "because the gentry 'asn't got the money and the leisure they used to 'ave. . . . You don't get cricket weeks like what I remember at Mr. Lionel's father's when I was a boy, at least it isn't the same class of people if you do that plays. The

motor car and the death duties ’as ruined cricket the same as they’ve ruined a great many other things—”

—The only thing, Mark reflected, is the washing up. Clare won’t wash up at all when she’s here; and I hate it; and then making the bed every morning would be boring. But he said, “You needn’t stay and cook lunch to-day, Harris. I shall be going out.”

“Very good, sir.”

But before he went Harris came in, carrying Clare’s green velvet dressing jacket, and asked in his Cleveland Row manner:—

“Does Miss Nicholson wish this to go to the cleaners, sir?”

Mark got out a brusque, “I don’t know at all.” He had never mentioned Clare to Harris, leaving him to conclude that the female paraphernalia in the flat belonged to a professionally doubtful lady—who had no relevance to the Miss Nicholson of Smith Square to whom Harris had taken the parcel of books. Mark saw now why Harris had discoursed two mornings ago on Marriage and Free Love, giving his opinion that “*there was often more Sanctity, so called, in a ‘leeason’ than in half a dozen marriages*.”

Harris took the dressing jacket back to the bedroom and put it in the shelf which he had allocated to the female belongings. (The two women, Mrs. Dean and Mrs. Hepburn, who had been with Mark since Clare’s semi-habitation, had never touched her clothes, leaving them to flaunt disgracefully in an otherwise scrupulously tidied room. But they had been kind to Mark himself, subtly implying their sense that he had been “got hold of.”) Harris came back to make up the fire, and Mark held his book up in front of his face. But after a minute he heard him clear his throat, and say, not to him but to that invisible third person who seemed, though inaudible also, to spur on so many of Harris’s monologues:—

“Hazlitt? . . . Now where did I ’ear that name, I wonder? Seems familiar . . .”

Mark turned a page.

“—I *got* it! I thought I knew ’is name as well as me own. Aren’t ’e the man that used to do them cartoons in the *Mirror*? Funny stuff—I ’ad an idea ’e wrote too, seem to remember seeing something written by ’im—Mr. Lionel ’e used to take in the *Mirror*, for us you know, ’e took the *Telegraph* ’imself.”

“Yes,” said Mark. He thought, “I shall look for a dumb Japanese.”

When Harris had gone he put down the book and lit a pipe. He saw his papers lying on the writing table and told himself that he might work. He got up and fetched the typescript of the first ninety pages and sat down to correct it. He found himself drawing rabbits with tall ears round the title "The Nineteenth Century." They were good rabbits. He put a silk hat on one, darkening out the ears. He drew another with lop ears and dressed it as Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Then he did a rabbit Queen Victoria, a rabbit Disraeli (a thin one rather like Br'er Rabbit), a rabbit Laureate with its ears sticking through its sombrero hat and a swinging cloak (he might use that as a heading for the chapter planned as "The Great Hypocrites"). He sketched out a "Winterhalter group" of a family, crinolined and frock-coated, with gloomy trees in the background. . . . He wondered what would best adorn the chapter on "The Triumph of Ugliness." . . . He turned to one of the chapters already written—"The Rich Man in His Castle, the Poor Man at His Gate." He drew a rabbit family singing in a pew and a sanctimonious God-rabbit with a big stomach sitting on a cloud. He saw one of his own sentences, "Fatted, scarcely literate females read 'L.E.L.' in drawing-rooms whose ugliness was without precedent, while babies of three worked eighteen hours a day in the cotton mills and women crawled half-naked in the mines, in chains." It looked cheap. These violent and monstrous antitheses tempted one's style. He examined the list of chapter headings: "Our Empire"—"The Harlot's Cry"—"England Is a Garden" (ballyhoo was the word they didn't know)—"God, Mammon, and Company" (the first lateral Combine—the famous amalgamation of two rival firms)—"Vices and Graces."

He happened on a note in Clare's writing under the title of the last chapter, "The Goodly Heritage"—"see page 18 in Renan's *Souvenirs d'Enfance et de Jeunesse*." He got up and found it in the shelf, and looked up the page. She must have read his copy, for the passage was marked and there was a note written in the margin.

> Le monde marche vers une sorte d'américanisme, qui blesse nos idées raffinées. . . . Une société où la distinction personnelle a peu de prix . . . où la haute fonction n'ennoblit pas, où la politique devient l'emploi des déclassés et des gens de troisième ordre, où les récompenses de la vie vont de préférence à l'intrigue, à la vulgarité, au charlatanisme qui cultive l'art de la réclame, à la rouerie qui serre habilement les contours du Code pénal, une telle société, dis-je, ne saurait nous plaire. . . .

At eleven o'clock Mrs. Perrott put a chocolate cake in the oven, took off her cooking apron, rolled down her sleeves, and crossed the kitchen passage to the servants' hall. At the same moment Ackworth put down the jar of furniture cream and the yellow cloth on the dining-room sideboard; Rose got up from the all-fours posture in which she had been washing the brown linoleum of the top landing outside the servants' bedrooms; Mary stopped scrubbing Sir Frederick's bath. These hurried, also turning down their sleeves, towards the servants' hall, and by half a minute past eleven they were seated at table, while Mildred placed a frothing jug of cocoa before Mrs. Perrott and placed a plate of thick-sliced bread and butter in the middle of the table. Only once a year, on November 11, cocoa was served three minutes late in remembrance of a war that ended the year that Mildred was born and Rose learned to walk and Mary first went to school.

At this hour Mrs. Perrott, the mistress of ceremonies, usually chose to discuss some subject culled from her morning paper. But this morning there was no need to select a subject and it was Rose who began:—

"Well, I wonder if the next 'applicant' will expect to stay in the spare room?"

"What surprised me," said Ackworth, "is that she should have allowed Miss Clare to keep her there. Her ladyship wasn't too pleased. I heard her speak to Miss Clare on the subject. As for Sir Frederick . . . I told you what he said, didn't I, Mrs. Perrott? He went out of the front door muttering to himself, and his last words to me were, 'Tell her ladyship I shall be lunching at the club.'"

"He won't," said Mrs. Perrott.

"What? Won't lunch at 'is club?" asked Mildred, who belonged to a girls' club herself, but never could make any picture to herself of what gentlemen's clubs could be like.

"No," said Mrs. Perrott. "You mark my words, 'e'll ring up ten minutes before lunch time to say he's returning after all."

"Did you hear what he said to Miss Clare?" Rose asked Mary. "He said, 'You women are enough to drive me mad.'" She giggled.

"Oh, you're always *listening*," said Mary.

But Ackworth, eating a thick slice of bread and butter with her finger crooked, said to Mary:—

"I suppose you like being a sick nurse for a change."

Mary didn't answer. She lived at peace with Ackworth because she wasn't interested in quarreling with anybody.

"She looked different after she'd had something to eat," said Mary. "You should have seen 'er face when she saw your scrambled eggs, Mrs. Perrott."

"I dare say," said Mrs. Perrott. But she added, "Pore thing, I expect she was glad of a nourishing meal. . . . And there's many that have to go without these days. Round Cardiff, where my niece's husband comes from, it seems things are terrible. . . ."

"A lot of the so-called unemployed don't want to work," said Ackworth, who had not listened at reputable tables for nothing.

"That's right," said Rose. "They'd rather draw their money and stop idle."

"Yes. I dare say that woman's husband's drawing two pound a week anyway," said Ackworth.

"If Jim gets that rise," Mary thought, "we shall get married in the spring"—and she sipped her cocoa looking at Ackworth's Roman profile and thinking of the little house they'd been in to see, she and Jim, just for the fun of the thing, last week; ever so convenient and labor-saving with all those cupboards built in and a little bit of garden with that pear tree in it.

"—I shall speak to her ladyship," Ackworth was saying.

"But what's the good of *expectin'* trouble?" said Mrs. Perrott. "And anyway if anyone was to complain,—and I don't intend to,—I should think it would be me. . . ."

"When I take a dislike to anyone," said Ackworth, "I always find out afterwards that I've had good reason to do so."

"More cocoa, Miss Ackworth?" said Mildred with her mouth full. (She saw there wasn't much left and she wanted it herself.)

"If you please, Mildred," said Ackworth.

At half-past eleven Blanche had just finished the sleeves of the little coat and decided to get up.

She rang for Mary and said:—

"I will get up now, Mary."

Mary said "Yes, m'lady" and fetched a can of hot water and asked Blanche which dress she would wear.

"The grey," said Blanche, and Mary went to the cupboard and fetched the two-piece grey stockinet dress with the white net frills sewn in round the V-neck, and put out the grey stockings and the black patent shoes with steel buckles, and got out a clean handkerchief and put it ready on the dressing table.

When Mary had gone Blanche got out of bed and put on her slippers and went to the washstand behind the screen. She washed her face and hands again and dried them with one of her four soft damask towels embroidered "B.E.N." in monogram. She cleaned her teeth again, using the blue-handled morning toothbrush, and sprinkled milk of almonds on her hands. Then she went to the electric heater and turned it round so that she could dress by its glow, and took off her nightdress and put on a pair of thin pink woolen combinations, and then a white batiste chemise edged with Valenciennes, and stays and stockings, and white batiste drawers, and over them a pair of black satin knickers which buttoned at the knees. She never wore crêpe de Chine underclothes because you couldn't boil them when they were washed, and linen or batiste was really much daintier, and she wore a clean set every day.

She put on a grey silk petticoat over the knickers and then slipped on a muslin dressing jacket and sat down at the dressing table and began to brush her hair. She used a brush with special bristles; the silver ones, embossed with the heads of Joshua Reynolds angels, were only for show, and belonged to her dressing case. When she had brushed her hair she parted it in the centre, puffed out the waves over her temples, took two side pieces and pinned them to meet on the top of her head, and twisted the ends into a flat coil; then she took the rest of her hair from the back and rolled it up over her fingers and pinned it over the coil, and took three tortoise-shell pins and made the "bun" firm, and fluffed out the sides a little more. She took the hand glass and examined the result from each side and at the back, stuck in another hairpin on the right side, and put the rest of the hairpins back in an ivory box with pansies painted on it. The box had been given her by Fennie, and she thought, "I must remember to speak to Frederick about her coming at Xmas!" And as she took out her powder puff and dusted her face over and wiped the pale pink powder off again, she wondered if she would put Fennie in the spare room, or in Clare's room, which got the sun, as Clare said she was going to St. Moritz with some friends. The thought of the spare room reminded her uncomfortably of the morning's happenings and she thought,

"Dear me. I must see that they air the room properly—and the mattress ought to be fumigated; you never know what these people may bring in, and if Clare had been so foolish as to put her right in the bed . . . Really!" . . . She became agitated again. Clare might have been sensible enough to think of these things. She could quite well have put her upstairs in Mildred's room or on the old couch in the servants' hall. Blanche got up from the dressing table and rang the bell, and when Mary came she said:—

"Mary, please see that the spare room is *thoroughly* clean and aired out after this morning. You had better send the blankets and covers to the wash, and what about the mattress? What d'you think we'd better do?"

Mary understood the theory of Blanche's agitation. She responded, as part of her duties, to the imaginary difficulties and trivial agitations of her employers.

"Well, certainly, I'll air the room through— If only this fog would lift. And the blankets could go on Monday. . . . I don't know what to say about the mattress, m'lady. It isn't as if she'd been at all a dirty sort of a woman. In fact she seemed very clean, m'lady."

"Really? Are you sure, Mary?" Blanche was anxious to be reassured.

"Oh yes, quite, m'lady. You can always tell."

Blanche said quickly, for she didn't want to risk any reference to how you could tell, "Well then, perhaps if you just air the mattress, it'll be all right. But you might perhaps talk it over with Ackworth and see what she thinks."

"Yes, m'lady."

Blanche took off the muslin wrapper and Mary came forward and took it and folded it and put it away in a drawer. Blanche put on the grey dress, carefully, so as not to disarrange her hair, and put on the little grey coat that went with it. She said: "I bought some more frilling for the neck of this dress yesterday, Mary. I want you to put it in this evening. Really, two days is the most one can wear anything light in this weather."

"Yes, m'lady," said Mary.

Blanche took up the scent spray and sprayed a little eau de Cologne behind her ears and on her clean handkerchief.

Clare telephoned.

"Is that you, Mark?"

"Yes."

"Can I come back and lunch with you?"

"I thought you were lunching with your family."

"No. I don't want to. We—I've just had a fantastic morning here. I want to get out of the house."

"Why, what's happened?"

"Oh, too much to tell on the telephone. Will you be in?"

A pause.

"No, I'm afraid I won't."

"Why? Where are you going?"

"I'm not certain. But I won't be in."

"Mark!"

"What is it?"

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Does that mean you don't expect me to dine with you to-night?"

"Not at all. I shall be delighted to see you."

"I see."

"What time will you meet me? And where d'you want to dine?"

"I don't care where or when. I don't think I want to dine at all. I'll just come and see you."

There was another pause.

"You must eat, darling."

"Mark, what's the matter?"

"Nothing. The fog perhaps. Anyway, fetch me here at eight and we'll decide what to do."

"Very well. . . . Mark? Darling? . . ."

But he had rung off.

# CHAPTER VII

Frederick Nicholson's temper was still disturbed when he reached the unimpressive doorway of Messrs. Fairlie & Stobart. Although he had stayed in his club for an hour, re-read the daily papers, read the *Field* and the *Bystander*, consulted the tape machine, and agreed with Burnett about the weather and disagreed with old Wontner-Hill about the repeal of Prohibition, he hadn't been able to shake off the mood of resentment in which he'd left home.

When he left the club he had meant to walk to Hanover Street, but after thirty yards of feeling his way up one side of St. James's Square he hailed a taxi. In the taxi he thought about Clare and the charwoman and Clare's debts and the amount he'd already spent on taxis this morning because he couldn't rely on having peace in his own home.

He entered Fairlie & Stobart's and for several minutes was left alone with an immense roll of scarlet cloth. It contrasted with the discreet time-honored drabness of the rest of the shop, and so affected Frederick's already irritated senses that he made a bellowing sound, and a man in a morning coat with a clerical complexion sprang from behind a partition of mahogany and frosted glass, saying, "I beg your pardon, Sir Frederick. I didn't hear you come in, Sir Frederick."

"Well, you've kept me waiting long enough, Mr. Flick," said Frederick.

"Yes sir. I beg your pardon, Sir Frederick. You'd like your fitting now? If you'll come in here? I'll call Mr. Perry immediately."

Still bellowing under his breath, Frederick let himself be chivvied into a frosted-glass stall, where the sight of his own angry-faced reflection renewed his anger. And he broke out (seeing the hydra-faced Mr. Flick, a monster flaunting the heads of Clare, of Lily Cashmore, of Mildred the kitchenmaid, of Blanche herself), "If things have changed as much here as everywhere else, Mr. Flick, the sooner they change back, the better for everybody."

"Yes, Sir Frederick. There's no doubt about that, Sir Frederick— I'm very sorry you were kept waiting, Sir Frederick."

Mr. Flick (unconscious of how many female heads sprang from his impeccable shoulders) wondered to himself why it was that customers were always more difficult on the days when he had one of his bilious turns and could really hardly see straight.

A youth came, carrying the suit to be fitted over his arm. He helped Sir Frederick on with the trousers.

“I shouldn’t have thought you got so much custom these days that you couldn’t attend to your customers!”

“As a matter of fact, sir, I’m glad to say many of our old clients are staying with us just now, though, of course, we’ve lost a great many of the American clients we used to have.”

“I’ve no doubt of that,” said Frederick. “No doubt at all!”

But his disturbed state was already giving way to the suggestions of the place, the implication that, since neither Mr. Flick nor the sallow green walls, nor the big stained mirror above the mantelpiece showed any signs of change since the last thirty years, it was possible that one exaggerated change in other things. . . . “Good morning,” he said to the tailor.

“Good morning, Sir Frederick.”

The tailor too, a small bent man with a tape measure round his neck, hadn’t changed. Frederick Nicholson had not the eye to detect an extra white hair or two, a pouchiness under the eyes, a shakiness in the hand that held the chalk. And Mr. Perry’s “I think you’ve grown just a shade stouter, sir,” however discouraging in its sense, had the reassuring quality of a phrase heard regularly in more auspicious times. The sense, too, had its own richness. There was something not only familiar, but vaguely encouraging in “growing a shade stouter” in such a thin unstable world.

“Think so?” said Frederick. “I shall have to try and take more exercise. Very difficult these days,” he said to Mr. Flick. “So much to be done. When I’m not in London I’m down in the Constituency . . .”

“I can quite believe it, sir,” said Mr. Flick, wondering if some more aspirin would help his head.

“If you would just slip on the waistcoat, Sir Frederick,” said the tailor.

Mr. Flick spoke gravely of the weather while Mr. Perry continued his planetary course round the orb of Sir Frederick’s figure.

“They say it’s the soft coal that does it,” said Mr. Flick.

“Soft coal!” said Frederick. “I’ve heard a lot of that talk, but you aren’t going to change the climate of a place by changing its fuel! These fogs are natural to London just as mist is natural to Scotland.”

“Yes, Sir Frederick. I dare say there’s something in that,” said Mr. Flick, accustomed to defer to all sorts of noble nonsense.

“—And half the troubles of the world,” continued Frederick, who liked nothing so well as an ignorant or servile audience, “are due to these notions that you can interfere with established things, established—er—phenomena! That’s what trade’s suffering from! That’s what our international reputation’s suffering from! What’s all our so-called Industrial Legislation been except interference? Meddling? And what’s the League of Nations, I should like to know, except interference with every country’s business? Interference on an international scale!”

“Quite!” said Mr. Flick.

“If you would just raise your arms for a moment now, Sir Frederick?” said Mr. Perry.

“British trade,” said Frederick in a “kamerad” attitude, “needs less taxation on profits and a strong Navy to protect it.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Mr. Perry, stepping back. “Now I should just like you to have a look at that back, sir, if you wouldn’t mind, sir.”

Frederick looked in one of the panels of the triple mirror and saw his own back in the grey pin-striped suiting. He was pleased but didn’t show it. “What about that left shoulder? It feels to me as if it dragged just there . . .”

Mr. Perry adjusted three pins by a millimetre and made a cabalistic sign between the shoulders with a piece of chalk.

“Does that feel easier, sir?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“When would you like the suit home, Sir Frederick?” asked Mr. Flick, thinking he would run along to the chemist’s and get something for his head as soon as Sir Frederick had gone.

Frederick didn’t mind. He was in no hurry. He looked at his reflection and was, on the whole, satisfied. He thought that Wontner-Hill, who couldn’t be more than two years older than he was, looked twice his age; a bad color: looked as if his trouble might be kidneys. He’d heard something of the sort.

This grey suited him. He let Mr. Perry take off the coat. Blanche hadn't liked the pattern, but she was wrong.

"By the way," he said to Mr. Flick. "You might get through to my secretary for me—will you? Victoria 2269."

"Very good, Sir Frederick. Do you wish to speak yourself?"

"Yes."

When they got through Frederick said:—

"That you, Tandy?"

"Yes, Sir Frederick."

"Look here. I left a message I wouldn't be back for luncheon, but I shall be in after all. I want to get on with that article for the *Imperial Review*. I've decided to go down to Sheffield for two days next week, so that I shall be pushed for time."

"I understand, Sir Frederick."

Tandy put down the receiver and rang for Ackworth.

Ackworth came in a baize apron.

Tandy gave her the message.

"Yes, Mr. Tandy."

As Ackworth retired Clare came in. She said, "Forgive me for one moment. I know I've taken up half your morning already. But if Daddie should begin to talk to you about—this woman—will you say that you liked the look of her?"

Tandy said, "I doubt very much if I have any great influence on your father, Miss Nicholson."

"Oh yes, you have," said Clare, "because he relies on you to do any difficult thinking."

Tandy didn't smile, but his beige eyebrows moved up his square forehead and down again and the corners of his mouth moved under his moustache.

"If your father should refer to the matter I will try and put Mrs. Cashmere's character in a favorable light."

Clare thanked him.

When she had gone Tandy sat down at the desk. He reflected that Miss Nicholson seemed an excitable young lady, and that her interest in this woman was doubtless a thing of the moment. For she had never, as far as he knew, been philanthropically inclined before.

Rose finished cleaning the taps in the maids' bathroom and went downstairs to Mary, who was turning out Sir Frederick's room, to ask if she was to get on with her ladyship's room now.

But Mary had done her ladyship's room already and told Rose to come and help her strip the spare-room bed. Rose said:—

"Whatever for?"

But Mary said, "Well, it isn't very nice for whoever comes if there's been someone there before them."

Mary pulled off the blankets and gave them to Rose to take down and put with the other washing in the hamper under the back stairs. Then they dragged off the mattress and put it over a chair.

"Are you going out this afternoon?" asked Rose.

"Well, I always do Thursdays! Don't I?"

"Yes. Only I was thinking it's pretty foggy."

Mary knew that Rose was inquisitive about Jim and her and suspected something about that week-end when she'd given out that she was going to her aunt's at Beaconsfield. She pulled the cotton undercover off the pillow and handed it to Rose.

"I don't bother about weather— That'll have to go with the blankets."

"Going to the pictures?"

"Yes."

"With your young man, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Mary. "Any more questions?"

"You needn't be so touchy. Anyone would think you was ashamed of him, the way you go on. Miss Ackworth was saying only yesterday that no one but Mildred ever seems to have set eyes on him."

Mary said firmly but without anger:—

"Well, I have. That's the chief thing."

Rose kept back her opinion that Mary had doubtless seen him more than a good many people knew. Rose felt that there was something different about Mary from the rest of them, and with prudish divination suspected that difference was due to the impropriety of Mary's relations with her young man.

If George was round seeing Mr. Fenwick he ought to be back any time now, for Mr. Fenwick went to dinner at twelve. Not that there was really much chance of Mr. Fenwick taking him on, for there was three others after the job and George didn't look any too strong, and that put people off.

Lily put on the potatoes and told Amy to go and get her cardigan out of the other room, for the place didn't seem to get warm to-day, not with the fire going since seven.

She unwrapped the bit of liver she'd bought on the way home. Amy brought the coat in and stood by the kitchen table watching her mother.

"That dog's nime was Brisk," she said.

"Was it?"

"Yes. It sleeps in that little basket, with the blue insoide. Did you see it, Ma?"

"No," said Lily. Whatever would George say when she told him what a fool she'd made of herself?

"He licked my 'and when I patted 'im, Ma."

"Did 'e?"

Amy leaned her elbow on the table and propped her chin on her hand.

"What was that trap on the tray for, Ma?"

"Trap?" asked Lily.

"Yes, Ma. There was a sort of a trap with a bit o' toast stuck in it."

"That was a silver toast rack," said Lily.

"What's a rack, Ma?"

"Oh go on," said Lily, "and find something to play with."

There was a knock at the door and Lily went and opened it. It was Ruth Findlay in a coat and muffler and her beret pulled on one side of her head.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Cashmore, is May here?"

"No."

Lily shook her head. "I ain't seen 'er since I come back." (Mrs. Findlay don't look any too well, thought Lily, frozen stiff she looks—And all that lipstick only makes her look a fright.)

"I dare say she's gone home then," said Ruth, giving a glance round the Cashmores' place, for she'd only been in once before. "How's Baby?" she asked, despising herself for wanting to stay and talk with Mrs. Cashmore, who was just another drudge, she thought, without enough imagination to see what a life of it she got.

"All right, thanks." Lily went and got down a saucepan. She wasn't going to invite Ruth Findlay in, so she needn't hang about there.

"What weather!" said Ruth. "Isn't it?"

Amy was watching Ruth and admiring the way her gold waves and curls shone each side of her face. She thought Mrs. Findlay was prettier than the lady at the Big House, only her voice wasn't so nice.

"Well," said Ruth. "So long." She used the casual phrase in a pinched tone. Stuck-up all these women were. They liked you all right if you looked like them and were content to wear the same old dress all the year round and worship your husband all the more the worse he treated you.

"So long," said Lily.

When the door had shut and they heard Mrs. Findlay's footsteps go downstairs and out across the courtyard Amy said:—

"Mrs. Findlay's makin' 'erself a red dress, Ma, with a sparklin' buckle on the belt."

"Is she? Who told yer? May, I suppose?"

"Yes, Ma."

Amy added after staring at her mother for a long time:—

"I wish you 'ad a red dress, Ma."

Lily gave her an exasperated look.

"Stop talkin' nonsense. If I was to 'ave a red dress you wouldn't 'ave nothing to eat."

Amy saw that her mother was annoyed and turned away from the table.

Mark, getting himself the remains of the smoked salmon out of the ice box, and the butter and the roll that Clare had left, thought: "There are so few entirely sane people in the world that they could all stay at the Savoy at the same time. Most people are, mildly or wildly, lunatics. But because they wear evening dress and drive in motor cars and own houses and newspapers and there are so many of them, they won't know that they are mad. The press is run by lunatics for lunatics," he thought (his mind working still, at twenty-six, with the false clearness and easy anger of youth); "politics are practised by half-wits on half-wits; business is largely a matter of one cunning moron downing another cunning, but less lucky moron. When some devastating proof of this universal insanity, like a war or a world depression, makes humanity obviously 'certifiable' there is immediately a gibbering conspiracy among the lunatics themselves to prove that they cannot be as mad as they seem, firstly because they have always been mad, secondly because things have often gone right in spite of their being mad. The March Hare knew his world," Mark reflected. For not only were people like Frederick Nicholson devoid of any useful reason, but even one's most intimate and admired friends, who had seemed for years to be rational and without prejudice, had the strangest lapses; showed sudden and similar symptoms of some minor lunacy; revealed themselves, by chance, as snobs; or as believers in the Public School System; or developed patriotism (an infirmity of so many noble minds) quite suddenly, because the porter at Dover was more servile than the porter at Calais. . . . Mark wondered—putting the smoked salmon, the butter, and the roll all on to one green glass plate and finding a half bottle of Claret next to the methylated and the Jeyes Fluid—who was completely sane? reasonable? without prejudices? Where did his own madness lie—which were his own prejudices, his own dangerous (because so unconscious) unreasons? Apart from idiosyncrasies (disliking the Lake District, milk chocolate, nicely brought up girls, the works of George Moore, and the smell of bog-myrtle), in which insidious form did he betray one of these manias so easily inherited or breathed in childhood—or got, like the malady of Dr. Pangloss, from a source of contaminated innocence? He hadn't the wilder sort! (He didn't believe that the English were better than the French, or the rich cleverer than the poor, or that important people were important, or that democracy works or that a Mussolini would do any better or that the Soviet is a menace, or the gold standard a guarantee of anything at all.) But didn't he tend to believe, for instance, that there is something rather absurd about South Americans? (Why? A symptom of latent insularity? A result of reading the *Times* reports of their politics? A prejudice against dark fat women?) Wasn't he an addict

(there Clare had him) of certain things got by money (books, drink, experience) and therefore apt to toady to his bank manager, quote his cousinship to a rich peer (thus giving a fair, possibly too inspired imitation of a money-snob case)? Didn't he find himself being more deferential to the great than to the unimportant (incipient *folie des grandeurs*); and, though longing for the advent of Philosophic Tyranny, use his vote with an illusory sense of power against a Conservative candidate? His notion that finance is grotesque and money a fancy didn't prevent him trying to sell out shares and help to keep the fatal thing going.

He put the plate on the mantelpiece, thinking that he was probably a borderline case and that Clare was right when she said that he would end by carving "Rule Britannia" on his seat in the Lords. And right when she said that his attitude to her was another proof of his inconsistency.

He fetched a fork from the cupboard, and began to eat off the plate on the mantelpiece, twirling the smoked salmon round his fork and breaking off bits of the roll and smearing them in the butter. He thought that Clare would have made him have a nicer lunch in a more comfortable position. He wondered why he'd been angry when she rang him up? He traced his anger back to her manner of going off this morning: lightly—with a hint of pathos; a manner implying that she belonged neither here nor there, to him or to them, but pitied herself a little, and would have liked him to pity her, for having no anchorage. She expected him to be enchanted whenever she came and desolate when she went, and at the same time to accept her coming and going and let her decide when they should lunch or talk or sleep together.

Suddenly he threw all his nasty scraps into the fire, where they spat and sizzled, and went into the window to stare into the jaundiced face of the fog. How easy, if he could go on being, or even seeming, a little indifferent to her. When she was away he could expose her unreason, determine to give her the choice (even when she was asleep beside him he could plan this) between staying with him or leaving him.

But when she was there he lost his power against her because he lost his sense of her identity. As she came into the room she sprang to life in his senses, and lit his imagination. Her presence, though he saw and touched and heard her, became a renewal of himself, became a light in his mind, a singing in his senses, a new subtlety and intensity in his power to be.

In short—a sort of drunkenness?

He tried to remember if before he met Clare he'd ever felt even the beginnings of such an intoxication. He thought of Mary Chilcott, whom he'd

been engaged to, fair and lovely and conscientiously temperamental; and so mercifully disappointed in him.

And Marise, who amused him but had too many dogs, never talked about emotion, and became his mistress on principle in case they might fall in love with each other. . . . And Jeanne, who'd made an enchanting and yet disenchanting "episode" of that three months in Paris, just before he met Clare. If he hadn't met Clare, would he have left Jeanne, he wondered?

He thought, then, that he was in love with Jeanne. He remembered her deep jerky laugh, and her neat gold-brown body, and the way her eyelash black always got smeared under her eyes, and her husband "Auguste" whom he never saw, and who was a "Chef de Rayon" in the "Printemps" and never had a bath because his mother had died of an apoplexy.

It was the day that he lunched with Jeanne at Bougival that he met Clare. He remembered her first, sitting talking to Madame de Belfort in the Belforts' sombre, elegant, and overheated salon. He was introduced to an elderly Comtesse who was just going to Morocco, but he could see Clare while the woman talked to him.

He'd thought how cool she looked in this hot room and, compared to Madame de Belfort, how seldom she smiled.

He wasn't introduced to her. And this disturbed him, but was a relief. He'd thought her lovely, but suspected that she was the kind of indifferent and sophisticated woman who made him feel shy. Later he saw her go away accompanied by Henri Laval, to whom he had an introduction and whom he met several times.

Even now he hated to remember that it was at Laval's that he met her again.

Edward grizzled all the way home, although George carried him, for he was frozen with waiting about in the fireless parlor at the back of Mr. Fenwick's shop, and the doughnut that Mrs. Fenwick gave him was making him feel sick, and his father, silent with gloom, hadn't spoken to him for the last hour.

George was hardly conscious of the boy on his arm, though Edward weighed two and three-quarter stone. He had waited all morning for Mr. Fenwick to come back from his sister-in-law's funeral, and then Mr. Fenwick telephoned at the last minute to say he'd missed the train at Luton and wouldn't be back until the afternoon. Mrs. Fenwick wanted him to go

round there again at tea time. But she didn't seem too hopeful, and said she had an idea that Mr. Fenwick had half promised the job to his own nephew—who would be at the funeral. And anyway there was no going by what a woman like that said, for she'd tell you anything as long as she could keep talking.

When they got back and Edward saw his mother and Amy he burst into tears of self-pity, and Lily took him out of George's arms, saying, "Well, how did you get on?"—but seeing in his face that he hadn't anything to tell her.

He sat down by the kitchen table and told her what had happened. "Two hours and twenty minutes," he said, "we waited in the parlor, and whenever she come in out of the shop"—he raised his voice to make her hear him above Edward's howling—"she starts chewing the rag about one thing and another."

"Stop it, for *goodness' sake, Edward*," said Lily, undoing his muffler and taking off his coat. "Pore child, 'e's frozen. Go on and sit by the fire in the other room, and you'll soon be warm. . . . Then she couldn't tell you for certain if 'is nephew's got the job?"

George shook his head.

"I should think it's certain 'e 'as got it." He took off his khaki wool gloves and rubbed his hands over each other to make the fingers come alive. Lily went over to the stove. "I got a bit o' liver for your dinner," she said. She shook the frying pan wondering if she'd tell him now about her morning or leave it till later. But he said:—

"How did you get on?"

So she had to tell him, leaving out about the breakfast she'd had (for he was queer and touchy and you never knew but he might say she oughtn't to have took food from them). But when she finished telling him he hadn't seemed to be interested one way or the other and lit his pipe, though she told him dinner was just on ready.

"They want me to call back this evening."

"Looks like both of us callin' back for nothing," he said, taking his paper out of his pocket and unfolding it.

Amy came and stood behind his chair, but he took no notice of her.

"Looks as if there won't be no racing at Manchester to-morrow," he said. "Not in this weather."

Lily said, "Well, Jo Findlay's gone off *some*where, anyway. I saw 'im go 'alf an hour ago, when I run out to get some more lard. . . . And 'e got a suitcase with 'im." She broke off. Edward had begun to howl again in the next room. Amy ran in to him and saw that he had been sick. She was used to Edward's "bilious turns" and made him lie down while she fetched a cloth and basin.

"'E's only vomited," she explained to her mother, and came back to Edward, who lay whimpering now and looking more than ever like a sad white mouse.

"You'll feel better in a little while," said Amy, scrubbing at his jersey.

But Edward wasn't convinced and the tears rolled sideways out of his eyes, and one of them rolled into his right ear and the feeling was so odd that he gave a fresh sob, and Amy said, "Oh Ned, whatever's the matter now?"

But when he gasped that he had a tear in his ear, Amy stopped mopping on the floor and her smile began in her eyes and spread to her lips, and finally burst out into such clear enchanting peals of mirth that George, looking up from his paper, said:—

"Whatever is that child laughing at?"

# CHAPTER VIII

When Blanche came down Ackworth met her, saying that Sir Frederick had just telephoned to say he would be in for lunch after all. Blanche accepted the message and was just going into the library when Ackworth stopped her, saying:—

"Please, m'lady, may I speak to you a moment?"

Blanche waited. "Yes, Ackworth." She saw that Ackworth was pale, and so little herself as to wear a baize apron while addressing her mistress in the front hall.

"I don't like to trouble you, m'lady," said Ackworth, "but I should like to know if you still wish me to make inquiries about the woman that I spoke to you about on Sunday, m'lady, who used to work for Mrs. Hargreaves in Charles Street?"

Blanche, irritated but nervous, took in the implication of Ackworth's manner.

"Yes, indeed," she said, "please do. I haven't settled yet on anyone."

"Thank you, m'lady," said Ackworth.

As Blanche sat down at her writing table in the library, her hands were trembling. That Ackworth, of all people, should have spoken—though it wasn't exactly what she said—in such an unpleasant way. . . . And her nerves, anyway, were all to pieces after this morning. . . . And now Frederick was coming back. She could only hope that message meant he was in a good mood again.

She turned on the lamp on the writing table, for even with the wall lights on she couldn't see this morning. She opened the brocade blotter. She always answered her letters the day they arrived, usually after breakfast, before she went out.

For answering letters by return was one of the things she had learned from her mother, who had learned this excellent habit from her mother, as one of those traditions deriving from so far back in the generation of Ladies that it seemed probable that the more elegant females of the anthropoid apes

must, on the reception of a piece of scratched bark, have sat themselves down at some arboreal escritoire to scratch one back again.

In the Leicester Galleries the pictures by Henry Becker of light in London, in Toulon, in New York, bore witness against the fog's pretensions to eternity. And Clare, catalogue in hand, the tip of her nose still damp, saw that in Union Square there are no fogs, even in winter, when the little trees are made of hairpins, the toy motors spin past the grimy little green trams, and the New York sky, pushed up by the buildings to the top of the picture, is a high drawn-out vibration of gold and blue; that in Toulon Harbor, when you stay at the Hôtel du Port et des Négociants (and are neither at work in the Port nor negotiating in the town, and can sit in your room and look out between the jam-red curtains and over the little scrolled iron balcony), the light darkens the water, blanches the quays, chars the sailing boats to silhouettes with flickering sails, and drains the headlands, the islands, the dreadnoughts and submarines of the French Navy, of all bulk, leaving them flat and grey, and picks out the white *maillot* of Jean Brémond barefoot in his *vedette*, and the scarlet coat of the monkey who has climbed halfway up the lamp post on the opposite quay.

"I should like a month every year in Toulon," thought Clare. Next summer she and Mark might go. (But then, at Toulon, you met, sooner or later, the French you knew, who knew at least one of the English who knew you!)

Martigues has been overpainted, she thought. It has become a place inevitably in a modern frame with canvas showing through here and there and a signature in the lower corner, and has the banality of all exploited beauty.

She looked at the catalogue. *9. Hudson River. Evening. 10. Sunrise from Staten Island*. Through the window which was the soul of Henry Becker (Henry Becker, born in Bremen, raised in the Bronx, starved in Montparnasse, "glorified" in Leicester Square)—through this unexpected and sensitized window she saw the brass wings of a city sunset over a black river, black wharves plumed with little fires, black barges, tugs, funnels, and in the foreground a moonlike globe set on the pillar of a milky balustrade: she moved to the next picture and saw dawn run like a golden shiver up the phantom face of Manhattan.

At her elbow, Mr. White, one of the "partners," said:—

"How do you like them?"

She said, "That is how I should like to paint myself," and Mr. White pretended to be interested.

"But you should see the ones of London in the next room," he said, and cited who had bought this and that picture.

Clare was inattentive, but with White beside her she could see nothing but paint and frames and the buff walls. She turned to go into the small room next door and White left her, for a woman in a mink coat had come in.

There were two men in the small room hung with the pictures of London. One had his back turned to Clare, but she saw at once (for who else had those square but lightly poised shoulders, that crisp but soft hair on the brown neck, that hardly perceptible tilt of the black Homburg?) that it was Henri Laval.

During her startled moment, in the second in which she decided to go, he turned round. The lids of his blue, heavy eyes lifted. He said "Clare!" and his faint but visible change of color gave her back her own confidence.

She held out her hand, and he took it with a quickness that was to assure her and himself that this sight of her, after two years, gave him nothing but pleasure; in French, he broke into a lucid but elaborate explanation of what he felt, keeping hold of her hand in a manner that, without being either sentimental or familiar, managed to be both chivalrous and politely sensual. He exclaimed that if she had changed it was only that she was more than ever in beauty; that, had he imagined that she was in London, he would have attempted to see her (even though he was only in London for a few hours—on a small matter—having come by air, dined last night with Lord Beaverbrook, and being about to return this afternoon to Paris). He said that he had understood from her last letter to him that she now lived in Scotland. (She remembered now that a year ago she had answered his note from Biarritz, from Mull.)

"No," she said, "I've readopted London."

He let go her hand without letting go her look. "London is very beautiful in the summer," he said. "But such days as this! Why don't you come back to Paris?"

She shook her head and stood herself beside him so that they were both, in attitude at least, looking at one of Henry Becker's pictures.

"Because I don't want to just now," she said, knowing that nothing so disconcerted him as to be given the true answer to his questions. For he asked women questions either simply for "conversation" or to find out, by

their particular evasion, how some piece of land (in this case her present feeling for him) might lie. Her answer merely confirmed what he took as a matter of course, that she had at present a lover in London. But it didn't indicate whether this meeting troubled, annoyed, or excited her. Out of the corner of her eye, as she perfunctorily held up the catalogue, she saw the lift of his light-bronzed emphatic profile, a jutting of the already curved-over underlip below his moustache. He said lightly:—

"You have forgotten me then?"

She refused his look and he took it back with composure. But his voice, which had the rich terse quality of his physical presence, touched her nerves, and through her nerves her memory.

"*Deux ans. . . . C'est beaucoup*," he said, taking the catalogue out of her fingers.

"Do you like these pictures?" she said. "Why did you come to see them?"

He explained that Lady Fielden, whom he had met at luncheon yesterday, had told him that she had just bought one of Becker's pictures, one of the Toulon ones, and that Becker was to have an exposition in Paris. In fine, curiosity had brought him, and interest, Laval explained, in what pictures so pretty and clever a woman would buy. "And also," he added, again with that sharp lift of his profile, "as you know, I am interested in matters of art."

"Yes," said Clare, and, remembering his pictures, his bibelots, his furniture, felt safer in his presence. For (how well she knew!) she was safe with him when she was critical of him; he lost his hold on her senses whenever and at the exact moment that he woke her judgment (not of his "cleverness," for he was clever and successful enough, but of his spiritual intelligence). And looking at him, half smiling now (because she remembered his tables, his pictures, his glass cabinets), she wondered how far the lack of sensitiveness they implied (for they were beauty muddled with mere "value") had prevented her from falling in love with him.

"—And *do* you like them?" she repeated.

"Very much," he said. "Very much. I am going to buy one. Perhaps," he added, and his glance slid down her body, remembered, approved, and lifted with courteous, faintly smiling intensity to her face again, "you would help me choose one. . . . Perhaps," he ventured, "if you are not already engaged," he glanced at his watch, "you would also lunch with me?"

She said, "I'm sorry. But I'm lunching already."

"Ah," he said, "*que c'est dommage*." He didn't, couldn't perhaps, quite hide his chagrin. "*Tu es sûre? Puisque je dois partir cet après-midi . . .?*"

She hesitated, not because she meant to lunch with him, but because of her tenderness for his vanity, the only quality in him that had ever touched her heart; for it seemed, at least, to betray an uncertainty among his excessive certainties, a possible misgiving as to the absolute value of his own richly delightful luck and success. She said, in French, putting her hand on his arm, that indeed if the luncheon were not with her grandmother she would telephone. . . .

He was glad of so valid an explanation: disappointed still, but reassured. He gave unquestionable precedence to her grandmother. But then, he supposed, he wouldn't see her before he went?

She shook her head. She could see and feel and breathe him impassively. Only when he said:—

"And when you come to Paris?" and his voice, saying "Paris," touched her nerves, she stepped back.

"Of course I'll let you know," she said, a little too clearly and naturally.

He was inquisitive, but he was acute. She saw that in that moment he took in and accepted a situation which he respected. Her inclinations were not free. Her heart was involved.

"*Alors! il faut dire*—good-bye." He kissed her hand.

She said, "How strange seeing you." And turned and went out past Mr. White and a woman in green and a bust by Epstein and the commissionaire, and out of the door into the sulphurous street.

"Two-thirty special," cried a man a yard from her. "Two-thirty special," and she read "LONDON GOLD ROBBERY" in crimson letters on the poster, and turning right hurried into the Charing Cross Road and went north, impelled by the belief that Henri, seeking his solitary luncheon, would move either west to the Berkeley, or south to the Carlton, or east to the Savoy.

Mrs. Perrott, Ackworth, Mary, Rose, and Mildred had dinner at 12.30, and the canary kept up his thin bugling. They still went on discussing Mrs. Cashmore and her ladyship and Miss Clare and what Sir Frederick had said.

They had rolled ribs of beef well done, and gravy and roast potatoes and cabbage, and a marmalade steam pudding.

Blanche and Frederick had luncheon at 1.30. They had eggs with cheese sauce, and rissoles and baked potatoes and hot beet root and a marmalade steam pudding and cheese and biscuits. But Blanche ate very little and Frederick said, "No wonder you get colds and don't put on any weight." But she still felt distressed about this morning and didn't like to tell him that she had told the woman to come back at six o'clock. Frederick had two helpings of the marmalade pudding. He said, "These foggy days must use up a devil of a lot of electric light. . . ."

But after luncheon, when Ackworth had brought the coffee (without caffeine) into the library, Blanche approached the subject of Fennie coming for Christmas.

"—She would be so delighted, poor thing," said Blanche.

Frederick, standing with his back to the fire, sipping his coffee, said:—

"If only she wouldn't wear those rubber heels," for on her last visit, when she came for two days and the Chelsea Flower Show, she had tracked the parquet with semicircular marks. "And those Mrs. Noah stays," he added.

Blanche sighed at his intolerance but smiled because he had acceded to her little scheme without truculence, and changed the subject before any sense of his own easy-goingness could make him change his mind.

"Shall you be in for tea?" she asked. "I have to go to the Mary Beck Hospital at half-past three and I must try to get some shopping done, but I shall be back by five."

"I don't know. Can't tell how busy I shall be. I shall try to get back if I can." He was wondering if he need go to the House this evening. "I rather think I've got a bit of a sore throat—may have caught your cold," he said, tilting back his head like a bird after a drink and carefully feeling at the plump florid flesh above his collar. "I must be careful," he said, "I don't want to have another attack of bronchitis."

"No indeed," Blanche agreed. "No indeed," she repeated, a little absently, remembering with sudden sharp compunction that she had forgotten, with all this morning's turmoil, to feed the birds.

Ruth laid the red dress out on the table and pulled down the light so that she could see better. Jo had been such a time getting off that she wondered if she'd get the wretched dress finished after all. (Muddling about with his things, swearing at her because he couldn't find his razor, going on at May because his shoes weren't polished to his liking.)

"Come on, Ma," said May now, from the kitchen, "I made some tea. You 'aven't eaten nothing this mornin'."

Ruth thought, "If I could have afforded the stuff to cut it off the cross, the way it's meant to be. . . . And I shall look a sight anyway," she thought, and twisted her head to look over her shoulder at her reflection in the immense tarnished glass of the overmantel. "Oh, *all* right," she called out to May. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

She was glad of the tea, and when she saw that May had made buttered toast she flopped into a chair, grumbling,—

"You aren't a bad kid, I must say."

May pushed the sugar basin across to her mother and went to the cupboard to fetch the salt. Her movements were delicate and economical; her expression alert by habit and resigned by experience. Her pinched pretty features had kept no trace of childishness. They were her mother's features without her sulky but youthful happy-go-luckiness of expression, without her bloom of sensuality tempered by coquetry.

"I can make some more toast if that ain't enough," she said.

"This'll do me," said Ruth. "What about you? What've you got for yourself?"

May stood opposite her mother, resting her hands on the table. "I've had what I want," she said. Having had that cocoa at Mrs. Cashmore's she didn't feel justified in being hungry again. She had seen her father go to her mother's purse, just before he started, and take the last six and ninepence. She knew that when Ruth discovered this there would be a scene in which Ruth would begin by blaming her and end by crying and swearing that she'd quit for good.

"That all right?" asked May, watching her mother's white little teeth close on the hot crisp hunks glistening with margarine.

"A 1," said Ruth, her lips shining, her blue eyes good-natured now.

May was satisfied. She wondered if her mother would let her help with the sewing of the dress this afternoon.

Clare sat down in a corner at the Ivy and chose a meal which seemed suitable for one recovering from the shock of an amorous resurrection—oysters, Zabaglione, black coffee, and green Chartreuse.

It amused her to think of the oysters, as they slipped over her tongue (with their peculiar alluvial texture and their taste of safety pins), as in some sort a tribute or requiem for Henri, who had once told her, early in their relationship, that he had oysters for breakfast. Squeezing a segment of lemon, she remembered that she had taken to this habit in him as an eccentricity which might, she had hoped then, be an indication of some more profound originality.

She had even weighed the oysters against the leopard skin.

Now that she was so finally free of Henri, and instead of lingering equivocally in his company was staying and comforting herself in a corner of the Ivy with three stage celebrities on her left, a clergyman on her right, a mother and daughter in musquash opposite her, and two minor notorieties beyond them, she allowed her mind to release the reel marked rather hurriedly "Laval" and packed away since the early spring of 1931.

She saw (wasn't that their first meeting?) a close-up of Henri in the dining room of the Beau Rivage in Geneva, leaning towards her, and saying that he had had the pleasure of meeting her parents in Cannes, the previous spring. She saw his brushed-back grizzled fair hair, his heavy eyelids, the faintly ironical smile that made his hardly disguised tenderness of manner to her, and to any pretty woman, so attractive. She saw him appear suddenly in the doorway of her compartment on the train and ask her if she were also going back to Paris. Saw him opposite her, reading the *Matin*, looking up when she put down her own paper, to ask her if she was ready yet to dine, and to comment on the charming hazard of their reëncounter. She saw the Rue de Bourgogne in the rain from the hotel window, at the moment that she wondered if it wouldn't be beautifully easy to fall in love with him. She saw, in the best Hollywood tradition, the Ritz at tea time, the clusters of women in furs, in satins, with inconsequent hats and petal-bright faces, and Henri advancing, svelte, broad-shouldered, nodding to right and left, his nostrils alert, his step springing over the love knots and roses of his almost native Aubusson— She saw another close-up—Henri in the Champs-Elysées outside a glass window containing a blue Ford car, asking if she wouldn't, one evening, dine with him; he would invite one or two friends; his *appartement*, he promised her, overlooked the Jardin du Luxembourg.

And then those stages of intimacy as formal and predestined as the figures of a minuet. Those perfectly elaborate conventions leading up to a love affair that might (so it had often seemed to her when she stood before a mirror fastening a veil, or sipped port in shaded lamplight) have been a chapter from *Bel-ami*, an extract from *Colette*.

So she thought, at the beginning.

But then? Was it the leopard skin? Or half-past five and the elegant tyranny of seven o'clock? Or the two together? The same leopard skin lying in exactly the same position, head and four paws extended on the blue velvet divan at the same time for the same, somehow too planned, too exquisitely understood, too perfectly accomplished occasion? (So that she had once longed to stop—only she knew already the limits of his humor—on the threshold of such an occasion and demand that, for once, they might lie in the port and eat the leopard skin; and smoke at half-past five and make love at six.) Was it the sheer virtuosity of it all that estranged her imagination? Or was it that lack in him—which she'd felt again, half an hour ago, in the Gallery—of sensitiveness, of taste, of humor? . . .

She dipped her spoon in the Zabaglione. She remembered how she'd left him one evening, and come out, passing the concierge quickly, and crossed the road and gone down the hill beside the Luxembourg Gardens, feeling the frost on her face and glancing up through the trees at the astounding stars; and how, in the moment that she waited on the pavement of the Rue Vaugirard for a bus to pass, she'd realized that, if she was in love, she was more in love with the young man Mark Petre, whom she'd seen once at the Belforts' and once at Henri's at dinner, than she had ever been, or could ever be, with Henri himself.

# CHAPTER IX

Mary turned back her ladyship's bed, put in the hot-water bottle, laid out the mauve rest jacket, switched on the electric stove, and drew the curtains.

Then she went upstairs to her room to change.

She decided not to wear her new coat, considering the weather, nor her new hat, for the fog dirtied everything. But her blue kasha dress wouldn't spoil, and after all, who looked at you out of doors in this sort of weather?

She laid the blue dress, French blue the girl at Selfridge's had called it, on the bed, and her fresh set of underclothes and brown silk stockings, her crocodile shoes with the Louis heels, and the brown gauntlet gloves Jim had given her himself. Then she took off her cap and her brown linen dress, put on her kimono, took up her sponge and talc powder, and went across to the bathroom to have a wash.

When she came back her brown hair was damp and curling at the sides, and she put in some clips to set it. She rubbed vanishing cream into her face, and as she did so its oval broadened and dimpled, for the carnation scent of the cream was the tuning up of her every afternoon out, giving her a faint expectant tremor of delight. She rubbed some cream that remained on her fingers into her round neck. Putting on powder, she wondered if she'd do better to get "rachel" instead of peach next time. Her color was warm through the film of powder. Jim didn't like her to use lipstick, though she used to before she knew him.

When she had on her blue dress she was pleased with her reflection. She got out her little manicure set and the coral varnish and sat down on the chair under the light. She always did her own manicure, although lots of girls she knew, Jim's sister, for instance, said you could never do your own the same and paid away two shillings a week. Hairdressing was different. You needed a proper shampoo and a good set now and again. She thought Ackworth would look better if she'd have a decent "perm" instead of crimping up her hair with irons like that and wearing that awful back hair like Queen Alexandra in that coronation picture in the kitchen passage.

Mary waited while her nails dried, blowing on them and holding them up to the light to see how rosily they glinted. Then she rubbed some lemon cream into her hands, and she sniffed them because they smelled nice. Then

she got a small key out of her bag and opened her little leather jewel case and took out her ring. It was a turquoise (December was her month) set in a circle of tiny rose diamonds. She put it on the third finger of her left hand. She looked at it for several seconds before she allowed herself to accept it again as part of her real being. Then she took up her coat and, glancing at her clock, saw that it was already a quarter past three and that if she was going home to tea before she met Jim she'd have to hurry.

The stuff—a pale pink crêpe satin—had come from Barker's. A remnant—five and a half yards for sixteen and eleven. A week after Mrs. Perrott bought it her niece Ellen broke off her engagement (only a month before the marriage) and was therefore no longer in need of a trousseau; and Mrs. Perrott, after fifty-five years of alternately, winter and summer, flannel and longcloth nightdresses, was tempted by a vision of a pink satin nightgown, like the ones Miss Clare wore, encrusted with lace and with pin tucks at the waist.

The vision visited Mrs. Perrott at intervals for two months, during which time the remnant, cheated of its bridal destiny, lay in her second long drawer together with her rug, her spotted foulard summer dress, her work basket, her knitting, and back numbers of the *Christian Science Monitor*.

The final undoing (which comes only to those who subconsciously burst to be undone) was the sketch on the cover of *Mab's Weekly* with the caption, "A Dainty Nightie You Can Make at Home." The pattern was inside. Mrs. Perrott, passing the paper stall at Victoria, on her way back from her sister's at Purley, was undone, for the price of sixpence. The paper pattern only needed to be enlarged, in the cutting of the stuff, to fit her. And she had seen just such a lace top, écru lace with deep points, in Owles and Beaumont's window.

"If you like sleeves," said the directions on the centre page of *Mab's Weekly*, "you can have either the puffed or plain elbow length sleeve (as indicated by the dotted line above)." Mrs. Perrott, who, if she was undone, was not yet abandoned, had decided on a puffed sleeve, and Ackworth, after a preliminary shrugging of shoulders and lifting of eyebrows at the idea of an elderly Cook abed in satin, had let herself be mollified by Mrs. Perrott's placid appeal to her taste, and had pronounced for "puffed" as being altogether smarter and more in the style of the moment.

Every afternoon, since that decision, while Mildred scrubbed the kitchen floor, and Rose mended the linen or polished the brass hot-water cans, and

Mary did her ladyship's sewing or mending, Mrs. Perrott sat herself down at the table of the servants' hall and continued to substantiate her vision, running, hemming, tucking at the waist and sleeves, and finally encrusting the lace with an extraordinary speed and delicacy of stitching.

This afternoon, as Rose sat down opposite her, she said:—

"It's almost done," and Rose exclaimed:—

"Is it, Mrs. Perrott?" For she had come to think of that welter of gleaming pink as something as eternally in the making as Mrs. Perrott's own destiny.

"I'm thankful to say it is," said Mrs. Perrott—conventionally, for she had enjoyed its making.

"Shall you wear it straight away?" asked Rose.

For a moment Mrs. Perrott laid down her hands and looked through her spectacles (which she only wore for reading and sewing and icing) with a mild air of rebuke.

"Not to-night, anyway," she said. "This is Thursday!"

"I meant if you were going to keep it," said Rose, "or take it into use."

Mrs. Perrott shook her head. "What should I keep it for?" she asked. "To wear in me box?"

Rose giggled.

"No," said Mrs. Perrott, taking up the nightdress again and drawing her needle through, "I always say there's no time like the present. How do I know I may not be run over or taken in a fit the very next time I go out? . . . No," she repeated, "there's nothing to keep it for. No bottom drawer, either," she added, with the mild joviality that came over her when she referred, however indirectly, to the married state. For Mrs. Perrott was "Mrs." only by profession and courtesy, and had progressed through plump girlhood and buxom middle age to this, her florid maturity, genuinely glad that she had avoided marriage (which she admired in the gentry, being a regular spectator of London weddings; but despised in the poor, whose "troubles began," she would say, "the minute they left the church door," and if no young girls were present she would add "and often beforehand").

Rose began to sew a linen button on to a pillow case. "I never seem to have time to make anything for meself," she said. "The way that laundry tears these buttons off is too sickening for words," she added.

"All laundries," said Mrs. Perrott, "are the same in the end."

Ackworth sat in her black dress, but without her collar, reading. She sat in the basket chair in her bedroom, beside the gas fire.

What was she to do? She must get to Bearmouth, somehow, but it was a cross-country journey and not easy to arrange. Besides, Lady Duke would be dismayed at the thought of Honor running away when the garden party had hardly begun. Yet she was determined to find out what had happened to Lance.

Most of the guests had arrived by this time, and she was fortunate enough to find Lady Duke free of duties. She showed her the telegram, and was disappointed at the effect. She expected sympathy and an instant offer of help, but the world is a strange place. Many people who are good-natured when the sun is shining become timid at the first sign of trouble.

"Arrested? But, my dear, what does it mean?" said Ronnie's aunt, in alarm. "What has he been doing? I think you ought to wait before you take any steps. It would never do to mix yourself up in his affairs, if he has lost his character. After all, the police don't arrest people for nothing."

That is the way of the world. A man is only too often condemned before he is tried. But Honor had no doubts.

"I am sure Lance has done nothing wrong, Lady Duke," she said. "At any rate, I must go to him at once and see if I can do anything to help."

"Go to him? But I never heard of such a thing!" said the other, in astonishment. "It would be most improper to go flying across the country after a man who is in prison."

That was a point of view Honor would not discuss. Her friendship was of the whole-hearted kind, and Lady Duke turned away in high dudgeon, for which she would be sorry later on, for she was a kind woman, and truly fond of Honor.

The latter looked round the big garden in perplexity. In the distance she saw Ronnie. He had been trying to get to her side, but Lady Frazer had captured him for a game of clock golf, and he lacked the courage to refuse.

Ackworth paused and glanced at the clock. She folded the paper, put it in a drawer, and got her writing pad, pen, and the bottle of ink, which she uncorked and set on the small table beside her chair. She wrote to her friend Emma Lane, who used to be second housemaid at Lady St. Claire's when Ackworth was parlormaid. Then she'd married Lane, the butler there, and they'd left Lady St. Clair and gone to Mrs. Phipps-Saxby's, near Cirencester, because Lady St. Clair hadn't a cottage for them.

> Dear Emma [wrote Ackworth in her firm pointed writing]:—
>
> Many thanks for yours. I am not really surprised at what you say about Mr. Michael. He was always wild, but it does seem a terrible thing for poor Lady St. Clair. I don't suppose she will ever get over it. I will certainly try and get down to see you a week-end as you suggest after Xmas, but I can't promise this year as it is doubtful if they will be going away here on account of everything being so bad, in which case I won't be able to get a week-end.
>
> I have not forgotten little Florence's birthday and hope you will like what I am sending. Please tell her it is from her godmother and give her a big kiss from me. I dare say she must seem quite a big girl now. The snaps you sent from Bournemouth are so very sweet and she looks as bonnie as possible, and such lovely hair. I suppose it is over a year now since I have seen her.
>
> Well, Emma, remembrances to Mr. Lane. Sir Frederick was talking about Mr. Phipps-Saxby only last week at table and said he had heard he was giving up his horses on account of the expense, but I wondered because you hadn't said anything in your last letters about such a thing. They are busy "cutting down" here and the latest is we are going to have no kitchenmaid, but a woman in!
>
> Well, look after yourself and write soon.
>
> Yours affectionately,
> Florence

Ackworth put the letter in its blue envelope, addressed it, and sealed it with purple sealing wax. Then she went to the cupboard and fetched the box from the White House and took out the little dress and laid it on the bed. She had seen it ten days ago when she stopped to admire the window decked out with children's clothes. She often lingered at this shop, to admire the daintiness of the things, the beautiful lace, the lovely work (Lady St. Claire's children had had just such things). And on this particular day, among all this

crisp, fragile white and pink and pale blue, she'd seen this little frock with its white organdie frilling, its pink slip, its tucked bodice and tiny knot of silk rosebuds at the high waist, and thought "Wouldn't Emma's little Florence look sweet in that!"

She had gone in. The elderly Frenchwoman saw at once that this was a person who worked for her money, was economical, but had a respect for quality. She fetched the dress from the window and held it up, saying that while being so simple it was, at the same time, a dress that one could see was all made by hand, and cited the Countess who had bought one like it the week before. The price? After all, she said, when you paid for such a dress you knew that you were getting the best quality, and naturally a French dress!—and that lace on the underslip. . . .

Ackworth folded the little frock again, slipping in the layer of tissue paper, and put it back in the box.

She sometimes thought that she would have liked to have a child and dress her daintily and bring her up to speak nicely and be very particular and play the piano. The romantic in Florence Ackworth had led her once into an engagement with Robson, the second chauffeur at Lord Hextable's. But the realist in her (more alert in her youth than now, in her hard but sentimental middle age) had rejected him after a six months' engagement, partly because she couldn't get over her physical distaste for men, but chiefly because she saw that if they did have a child (this being her reason for marrying) she would never be able to bring it up the way she wanted to; and that even if she could have the "advantages" she coveted for it, it would, after all, still be a working person's child and be condemned to its own inferior station. (Ackworth had never believed in people "rising in the world." To flatter the luxuries and manners of your betters by imitating was one thing. What indeed would be more satisfying than to feel that your shoes were small as those Lady Nicholson herself wore? Or that Emma Lane's child in Wiltshire would appear on her birthday in a dress exactly similar to that of the child of a Countess in London! But to imitate, Ackworth knew, was not to be. People were what they were born, and she herself would no more have wished to be taken for a lady than she would treat others, pretending to gentility, as if they were.)

She put the lid on the box and tied it up with the blue string. She'd have liked, she thought, to see little Florence put it on for the first time!

There were only two ways out of the fog, Mark decided. Sideways and upwards. Upwards was quicker. He telephoned to Croydon for a plane for "personal service" for an hour. For escapes of all sorts, including travel and solitude and art, were in his category of necessary luxuries.

At Croydon the aërodrome lay in a smoky fog, and the still, dimly gleaming shapes of the machines looked like gigantic insects waiting in chaos for the word which could give them life.

Mark asked his pilot as they crossed the frozen ground whether the regular Continental services were going to-day. The pilot assured him the *Silver Wing* had left as usual, and they had just had news of its arrival at Le Bourget. He gave Mark a sideways glance. A queer chap, he thought, coming down like this in a polo sweater and no hat and a car that must have cost a fiver to hire a plane for one hour's flight.

"You want to go up for an hour, is that it?" he asked, as they got to the plane.

"I dislike the fog," said Mark. "I want to see the sun."

The pilot grinned. "We'll see what we can do." He climbed in and Mark followed, and settled himself down behind the pilot in the cockpit. Now that they were inside the glass windows he felt as if he were locked in a submarine under a murky sea and the two planes lying near them were looming fish with monstrous white fins. The machine woke to a throbbing life; its quivering and roaring gained in intensity until it stirred, moved forward, and gathering speed tore a vertical course across the shrouded aërodrome, and rose, gleaming, blind, and faintly rocking off the choking earth, and up at an angle of forty-five degrees into a malevolently breathing air.

Mark looked down. The toy houses were hidden. The machine was steadying now and he felt the thick sky falling past him, followed in a few minutes by white and whiter cloud, until suddenly the air broke into shining space and the cloud rolled and spread below him like a snowfield in the glare of the sun.

London buried beneath a snowfield, he thought—London and Clare buried in a layer of mud beneath a snowfield, he reflected in a moment of Icarian arrogance.

He blinked and narrowed his eyes, for the light hit him from every side. He wished he had brought Clare with him. He wondered, as the sun began to burn his right cheek through the thick glass, what she was doing at this

moment (2.35 on the clock above the speedometer). Had she lunched at home? Or alone? Or, in pique, exhumed some former admirer? Or retired, as she sometimes did, for solace, into a Turkish bath?

And when he saw her again, to-night, in what mood would he find her? Quizzical? Sentimental? Detached? Dogmatic? In ten hours she could change the whole surface of her character! (But remain, she protested, the same; if he would trouble to know the sameness in her, instead of looking out for the vacillations. For she was always the same pond, she said, though the reflections of a dozen different ducks, drakes, twigs, frogs, and clouds lived for a moment on the surface.)

He thought of her protest last night; that she was content with him, whereas he was always dissatisfied with her.

In a sense, he thought, though not in the sense she implied, that was true. Ever since the second time he saw her—at that dinner at Laval's—he'd been dissatisfied. (He saw her at the opposite end of the long table, in a black dress, with a minute patch stuck, he thought ridiculously, at the corner of one eye.)

He traced, from that evening at Laval's dark table, overdecorated with gardenias, the rising curve of his dissatisfactions. First his need to see her again (they had arranged, drinking Laval's coffee, smoking Laval's silk-tipped cigarettes, to meet next day at the Orangerie), the need to be, simply, in her company and hear her talk and watch her expression change. (In those days he hardly cared what she said.) Then the beginning of a physical desire which for a time (how many months—three? four?) seemed to resolve their relationship. Then new dissatisfactions. His obsession to know her thoughts, unravel her emotions, and, with his growing perceptions of the difference in their feelings, his growing and irrational hatred of Laval.

At each stage he'd been unsatisfied; searching for a new certainty of possession.

Now he coveted her time and hated the uncertainty of her absences.

Now he was obsessed with this belief that, if she lived with him, he would be rid of uncertainties and recriminations, and be at peace with her.

How far, he wondered, was this belief founded on his inexperience? Was there, in fact, any truth in his notion that marriage, as an institution, managed to be even so tempered a success, just because living together eliminated a large measure of uncertainty, and so made for peace?

She said that what he called "happily married" was too often simply managing a relationship. That there was hardly ever a perfect understanding, a spiritual *détente* comparable to—or even resulting from—a physical understanding. That one person always expected or wanted something the other wouldn't give; as he demanded from her a fulfillment of his own soul; and she from him some large and protective certainty.

"*En toi je veux l'impossible et l'infini . . .*"

Was France right? that women, in contradistinction to men, were content, in love, with the possible and finite? . . .

How often Clare had said "I'm utterly happy," at a moment when he could only have said that he was achingly above, or emptily below, the level of happiness.

From the beginning, his happiness had been tormenting and imperfect.

The cloud beneath him was thinning now. Looking down, he saw the earth showing between shreds of mist, looking like a child's map made in brown and green plasticine.

If he were to force her, as, in the end, he knew he could force her, by sheer pressure of his will on hers, into the belief that she wanted to marry him? Would he, in fact, simply from the points of view of his own certainty, be better off?

An instinct in him that hated her prompted the notion that he got more "out of her" by letting her have the semi-dependence which she pretended to enjoy.

On the other hand his knowledge of her, that he'd got, slowly and with such difficulty, by comparing her words with her actions, made him suspect her of a potential violence of soul that might (wasn't that partly his notion in "consolidating her"?) be made real by being simply believed in.

If he could so shape her will and possess her senses, couldn't he, in the end, "inform her spirit"?

Now they were flying lower, and there was no more cloud. He could see tiny cars speeding, yet appearing motionless, on roads as wide as a tape measure. The chimneys of miniature houses emitted twirls of cigarette smoke. An exquisite express train perceptibly moved across a patchwork of little fields.

Or was it fantastic, a paradox in action, to try to influence a creature who lived, after all, chiefly in one's own senses and imagination? In trying to

grasp the substance, Clare absolute, mightn't he merely destroy the shadow, —Clare in-relation-to-himself,—whom he loved?

Below his vague glance the minute cars still hesitated at forty miles an hour, the tiny train (called in its own world a Flyer) still crawled towards the Lilliputian Health Resort; and a speck of scarlet, who was in his own world a little boy of five, anxiously pursued a black kitten which from that height had no visible existence at all.

Lily shut the children up in the next room, baby and all, while she got on with the bit of washing that had got left over from this morning. "The worst thing about a baby is that you're forever washing," she said to George, who sat at the table, his head resting on his left hand, looking as if he were doing the crossword in his paper.

But he wasn't thinking much about crosswords, she discovered. More likely he was worrying about what Mr. Fenwick would say to him this afternoon. But then he was the worrying sort, she sighed to herself, cutting off a piece of soap with a knife, and there were times when really she felt as if she'd like him to be a bit more easy-going, not always sitting about like that and thinking things were going to get worse than ever. It didn't help to think that, and she believed that your luck had a lot to do with what you expected. If you expected trouble you got it. She poured the boiling water over the soap. She was a bit like that herself, and she knew it. Like this morning, for instance. Getting ever so nervous and worried and all for nothing. She took the wooden spoon and whisked the water until the suds rose in a honeycomb of bubbles. Not that George used to be like that, when they were first married. Not until he lost his job at Plimmer Schön's really, and had that bad go of "flu." He didn't seem to have been the same ever since that winter. Of course he was always a bit up and down. But now there didn't seem to be any "ups," she thought, glancing at his face still bent over the same sheet of paper.

"Why don't you get out yer old banjo and have a practice at that?" she asked.

He looked up at her, moving his eyes but not his head.

"I'm not feeling like it," he said. "And anyway I popped it. Months ago. I should say the ticket's lost by now."

He looked down at his paper again.

“What a shame!” said Lily. “And there wasn’t any need for you to do that. There’s lots of things might’ve gone before that old banjo.”

She took up the bundle of soiled clothes and pressed them into the basin. “It always reminds me of when we was at Ramsgate,” she said.

“I hadn’t got any use for it and it only took up space,” he said. “And anyway I don’t see any sense in keepin’ things for sentimental reasons,” he grumbled, and remembered the evening when he had thrown the ticket into the fire because there didn’t seem to be any prospect (fifteen and six he’d got for it) of getting the banjo out again.

He sat back now and lit his pipe. “I wish you wouldn’t smoke with that cough on you,” said Lily kindly enough, but with a note of weariness that she couldn’t altogether suppress. For the doctor had told him last winter about his smoking; and it seemed to her that there was enough trouble and worry, one way and another, without George going and getting his cough deliberately worse.

“And I wish you’d keep your opinions to yourself,” snapped George, for his head ached, his nerves were taut, his temperature, though he didn’t know or care about that, was just under 100°—and there seemed to be enough trouble and worry, one way and another, and little enough pleasure or prospect of pleasure, without Lily trying to do him out of his pipe.

She didn’t answer. And she understood his temper. Her back ached and she didn’t feel up to arguing with him. She bent over the sink, thanking goodness that at least those children were being quiet and behaving themselves.

“I s’pose you’d like me to give up smoking altogether,” he nagged, exasperated by her silence and by his own uncomfortable sense of shame; for he and Lily hardly ever had words.

Lily shook her head. She pressed her lips together. The pain in her back was getting worse and was making her feel a little hysterical. She wished to goodness George would stop looking at her and get on with something else.

“Well, I dare say,” he said, “that I shall have to soon enough.”

When I’ve got through this bit of washing, Lily told herself, I’ll sit down for a bit.

“I dare say Jo Findlay’ll make a bit at Manchester,” said George, changing the subject.

“I dare say,” said Lily.

Clare arrived at Antoine's at ten to three. As she stood outside the little vestibule in which the small exotic porter lived, like a marionette in a marionette theatre, he said something about the fog. For he made a point of saying something, even if it was only about the weather, to the ladies he admired, singling them out from the procession that passed before him all day and every day except Sunday, pausing only to strip themselves of their coats, their hats, their gloves, which they handed into his keeping.

He knew their coats, hats, gloves, with a subtle yet impersonal intimacy. And in handling these cloths and furs and velvets (labeled inside with Chanel, with Schiaparelli, with Hartnell, with Debenham, with "little places" in Shaftesbury Avenue), in perching hats with different expression on his little stands, in touching the limp or thick—but always extravagant—gloves that Englishwomen (he knew) but not Frenchwomen (he knew) indulged in, he fingered also the hearts of their owners. And in receiving their sixpences or shillings as they went, flushed from the dryers, and always with the same smell of *hairdresser*, he confirmed his intuitions as clearly as if he had received from them more generous, if less specific, favors.

So he spoke to Clare of the weather and she agreed and went into the first room, which is the room of the Lovely Young Men, where the walls are of mirrors and little dressing tables and chairs are set round the walls two feet apart. Clare went to the Three Graces at the desk and one of them said, "Miss Nicholson? Yes. Half-past two, Monsieur Paul, isn't it? And Miss Georgiana to wash." And Clare took her ticket and went through an archway into the room of the Handsome Young Women, and Miss Georgiana, in white, put a blue cotton cloak round Clare's shoulders and Clare sat down in a row of nine women in blue cotton cloaks, a Coal Baroness at one end, and Gertrude Lawrence at the other, all with their heads bent back, and a white-clad Beauty pouring vinegar, or eggs, or seeping oil over their heads, or whisking their heads into a white foam. Clare put her head back and answered, "Vinegar, please." But leaning back she could still see the Painless Inferno opposite, the double ranks of metal elephant trunks from each of which was suspended a white cotton bag blown out with hot air and tied at its lower end round a staring face.

"No oil?" said Miss Georgiana.

"Not to-day," said Clare, and as she spoke a Dandie Dinmont escaped screaming from the insults of a Sealyham whose mistress had fallen asleep with her head hung in a hot white bag, but woke screaming "Peter!" and dropped *Harper's Bazaar*. But Peter stared up. What did she mean? What

had he done?—And went under the chair, while the Dandie Dinmont—running amok among the legs of manicurists, tearing across the room where curls are shaped and waves persuaded, and annoying the Lovely Young Men whose fingers for a moment twined less cunningly—took refuge behind the desk among the Three Graces, and "Oh," said one of them, "it's Lady Anne Causton's 'Lindy'!"

Miss Georgiana said over Clare's frothing head: "We had such a beautiful Borzoi in yesterday." One of the Young Men (Monsieur Michael) went to the woman opposite Clare, untied the bag on her head, and without a word beckoned her to follow him. As he passed out another victim lifted a scarlet-glinting claw and boiled gaze to stop him. Was she "dry" yet? her look said. He shook his head, twitched his hips, gave her a smile which, with faint contempt, entreated patience. She sank back, condemned to yet another eternity.

"What a terrible fog!" said Miss Georgiana.

"Yes," said Clare, thinking of the shape of Laval's nostrils and the way his underlip curved over like the lip of a cream jug. A pity, she thought, that with a clear head and keen senses one's heart (heart, or imagination, or whatever it was) should be so incalculable. And curious, she reflected, as Miss Georgiana poured the rinse over and a fragrance of vinegar for a moment hung in the heavy air, that it was so necessary to be in love and so vital, for happiness, that love should be an intoxicant and not a tonic, a drug and not a food—that there should have to be that decomposition of sanity which breeds poetry, that distortion of physical simplicities that makes for a complex and insatiable hunger.

"Will you come this way?" said Miss Georgiana, and Clare went with a blue towel round her head into the other room and seated herself at the shrine of Monsieur Paul.

Miss Georgiana unveiled her, and Monsieur Paul, who looked, except for his neat grey suit, much like Lady Hamilton as a bacchante, began his ministrations, remarking in Michael Arlen English that the weather really was *absolutely* frightful, wasn't it?

Clare resigned herself with confidence to his perfect hands, knowing that once he began his competent ministrations he would be silent. (Not so Monsieur Louis, on her left, who kept up, with his smiling-toothed client, a ping-pong of gossip about Frinton; or Monsieur Pierre, on her right, whose blond beauty was animated by his discussion with the elderly actress who depended on him to ameliorate the nape of her neck.)

“The back will soon want cutting again,” said Monsieur Paul.

“Yes,” said Clare, looking past her own reflection and seeing, on the side of the room behind her, the row of pinkish ovals (each a face that had launched, she supposed, at least a canoe) tended by a figure in a lounge suit.

A girl with the sacramental blue towel still round her head passed across Clare’s Shalottian vision. Pretty; a rounded face and clear eyes. Yet merely incipient woman. Jeanne de Belfort said that Frenchmen ripened their women, and Englishmen desiccated theirs. Her observations, Clare reflected, always had some truth. The ordinary Englishman had infinitely less subtlety in possessing a woman than in holding a cricket bat. But then he had no doubts as to the moral justification of cricket. Not the least of Henri’s charm for her in the beginning, she reflected, had been simply that he wasn’t—so strong had her reaction been—an Englishman, and that her quality of being desirable in his eyes added to, rather than cast an indefinable slur on, her prestige. (His only scruple had been that she was unmarried.)

Monsieur Paul twisted the final curl above her left ear and fastened a net over her head. She went back to the drying room.

“Would you like a cage?” said a high priestess in white. Clare eagerly accepted, cages being preferable to bags as a form of capital imprisonment.

Once caged, and the hot winds roaring round her ears, the manicurist came and set a table before her. Clare resigned her hands on to the gleaming little table. As the girl began to strip the scarlet off her nails and reveal them in their pale nakedness Clare wondered whether she would pretend to Mark that she had, in fact, lunched with Laval. His own curt and inexplicable refusal to lunch with her had made it possible for her to do so; but she could see no wisdom (since one must, she believed, be wise in love if in nothing else) in admitting to him that having met Henri her comparative indifference to him, strengthened by her essential and unshakable loyalty to Mark, had prevented her accepting his invitation. She believed, at times a little wearily, in the theory that she must let Mark be sure, but not too sure of her. . . . That her confessions of—what were, as nearly as possible, her real feelings (made when delight or sadness or tranquillity made her most natural) must be tempered by a certain amount of sexual trickery. The theory, as Mark himself pointed out, was simply the American girl’s “creed” of keeping a man guessing. Yet certain vulgarities had, she perceived, their justification—and, remembering her younger contests (as with Leonard Raikes, who talked so plausibly of mutual trust), she inclined to believe that too much

confidence either destroyed all vehemence in love or was destroyed by it. The problem, after all, she thought—

“. . . You like them pointed, don’t you?” said the manicurist.

—was to keep love itself alive. But that was another cause of their disagreeing. For Mark said that it was just her emphasis on this problem which proved her “emotional limitations.”

“Would you mind dipping that hand, Madame?”

# CHAPTER X

The Board Meeting of the Thames Investment Corporation was at 3.30.

Frederick Nicholson entered the pine-paneled board room at 3.25, allowed the clerk to take his overcoat and bowler, and sat down to smoke a cigar with five men, three of whom were balder than himself. Frederick had known four of them for so long that he automatically considered them good fellows. Ted Dalrymple had married his cousin Sally, Walter Houston and Edgar Goff had been at Cambridge with him, and poor old Salthrop had been his fag at Eton. The fifth, the swarthy Australian, Harper Elbrook, Frederick respected for his success and mistrusted for his intelligence. It was Elbrook who had dubbed Frederick "the Member for Glaxo" and Elbrook who now greeted Frederick with such sounding congratulations on his speech of the night before that Frederick suspected irony, and grunting "Thangyer" turned his back on Elbrook and began to talk to Salthrop about Fancy Free's chances at Manchester.

Houston joined them, saying that he had canceled his bet on Sister Sally, as the going was so heavy.

As they talked the places at the long table were filled up, the chairman arrived; the secretary, Malin, who looked like President Wilson, took his place. The minutes were read in Malin's slow nasal tones. The air deepened with the hyacinth-blue smoke of cigars, the chalk blue of cigarettes.

Frederick saw Houston drawing thistles on his blotting paper and began to make marks on his own with a newly sharpened pencil. The marks looked like a scaffolding. The agenda were read. Salthrop coughed. Houston made a noise like "chm chm" whenever the managing director paused in his list of recent investments. Elbrook sat back in his chair, his arms crossed, his beetle-browed monkey face expressing, in repose, his two salient characteristics, confidence in himself and an ironical acceptance of others.

A discussion followed on reinvestment. Frederick was consulted. What were the prospects of the Government Conversion scheme? Would he, pressed the Directors, advise further purchase of Government securities?

Frederick, sitting back, tilted his head very little to one side, glancing, with an irony of his own, at Elbrook opposite (who, however sharp he might be,—a Fleet Street jackal, Frederick considered him, a climber, a showman

with his money, an exploiter of silly women, an adventurer, in short,—lacked the thing that Frederick felt emanate from his own comfortable person—the Authority, the natural prestige which caused the chairman to say, "We should very much like your advice, Sir Frederick").

Frederick's thumbs crept snugly into the armholes of his waistcoat. He "strongly recommended" purchase. "The increasing stability of the Government," he said, "is inspiring confidence throughout the world. The result is that surplus funds are going into gilt-edged securities!" He added, looking round with pleasure at the attentive faces of his colleagues, "Money is cheap, and is, I think, likely to continue to be so for a long time."

"Chm, chm," said Houston.

Salthrop shifted in his chair.

But Elbrook, still sitting back, said, scarcely opening his long monkey mouth, that the reëstablishment of confidence in America was going to mean higher money rates there, and he would advise reinvestment—to some extent anyway—in that quarter.

But Frederick disagreed, saying weightily and, he felt, with the full concurrence of his colleagues, that he felt there was no knowing, as things stood now, what was going to happen in America.

As Frederick said the word "America" his car, containing his wife, her fur rug, her foot warmer, passed the humble and unfrequented Underground Station of Hyde Park Corner. At that moment Blanche's fidgety fingers were searching in her bag for the little gold pencil which she had used for years to make lists of things to buy, to do, to read, to remember. The car crawled among the dim shapes of the traffic, and as they passed Heath's Blanche found her pencil. The memorandum tablet was covered in grey leather to match the upholstery of the car. Blanche wrote, "Ask Matron about Bttles?—Box—Choc. Fortnum—Goldsmith's." She could just see the policeman at the top of Sloane Street. What *was* the name of that book that Mrs. Torrington said was so excellent—something about Morning—Early Morning?—No. . . . Morning something? By quite a young author, but a change, Mrs. Torrington said, from most modern novels, which were so depressing and morbid—And "Flowers," she wrote down. Chrysanthemums, she thought, for everything else is so expensive just now—"Marshall's," she wrote (but doubted if she'd have time). If she didn't Mary must take those gloves to-morrow. Of *course*—*Young Morning* was the name of that book!

The fog is less thick here, she thought, for on the right in Kensington Gardens she could make out shadows like trees. And sometimes she wondered, especially at this time of year, if they had been wise to move to Westminster, for in many ways she'd liked Queen's Gate better and there was no doubt that being so near the river must be unhealthy. But, of course, it wouldn't have been nearly so convenient for Frederick now (and she often said to visitors, "We really live on the very threshold of Parliament").

The Albert Memorial, monument to the Age of Cruets, presided in dingy grandeur over the thickened and slowed-down currents of traffic moving below its steps. The sight of it reminded Blanche of the first years of her marriage, when she and Frederick would take a stroll together on summer afternoons, and pass the Memorial on their way to Kensington Gardens; and Frederick would always stop to examine the carving of the figures round the base and point out the lifelike appearance of the camel and the singular likeness of the statue's features to the portrait of Albert in the National Portrait Gallery. But she didn't like the Albert Hall and had agreed with Clare's six-year-old comment that "it had a tummy all round it and no head!" Frederick had always championed its architecture; but then Frederick was inclined to like anything in architecture that looked what he called "solid and well built." He had always had, she knew, very much less real taste than herself—and when he wanted to annoy her maintained that he'd rather have Edinburgh Castle than Versailles any day.

In Kensington High Street the windows of John Barker's were full of light, as of water; and the crowd, pressing past, saw in these aquariums wreathing colored seaweeds that seemed like trails of feathers, swirls of blues and greens and mauves, cascades of silk, whirlpools of satin, dark polyps that looked like hats, headless sea beasts, ledges hung with crystal and pearl, and waxen fauna, gleamingly scaled, with waving pink flippers and the simpering faces of suburban blondes.

Blanche, wrapping her squirrel coat more closely across her chest, tapping one foot under the rug because it seemed as if the traffic block at the bottom of Chapel Street would never stop, was struck once more by the "horridness" of Kensington High Street. (For the Sensitive, the Snobbish, the Artistic, the Elegant, the Discriminating, have this feeling—that "High Street Ken" is geographically, æsthetically, emotionally, spiritually abominable; thus marking Themselves out as some sort of an élite.) Though your real Londoners, which includes Mrs. Perrott on her afternoon out, little Mrs. Thirsby from Putney, Mr. Kay, one of the clerks (engaged to be married) in the Thames Investment Corporation, the Nannie and baby from

Iverna Court, the fox terrier from Scarsdale Villas—all these push and loiter, in a hurry yet spellbound, gazing into the glittering submarine fantasia of the great windows, and seeing (as Mr. John Barker and the God of their innocence meant them to see) gold in the gilt, splendor in trumpery, and life itself (as distinguished from life in the fog, on the pavement) in the infinitely rich exotic and gleaming uses of advertisement.

Blanche put her little pencil back in her bag. She leaned forward and, keeping the rug close round her knees, picked up the little box marked Russell and Allen, in which Rose had packed the little coats. She looked in and counted them to make sure. Two blue, one pink, one white with a pink border. At Netting Hill the car swung so sharply round the corner that Blanche found herself staring at the face of a man who hadn't shaved and wore his coat buttoned up and was standing on the edge of the pavement selling honesty. And, mechanically, he said something and held up the sheaf of bright ghostly little wings. But Blanche couldn't hear him through the closed windows of the car; nor did he, who had spent other days, weeks, and even years offering cheap flowers on pavements, really suppose that the lady in the black Daimler would stop to buy honesty from him in the yellow and choking dimness of this four o'clock in the afternoon. So his hand went down mechanically as the Daimler was followed by a "31" bus, and he turned his back to the traffic and once more waited, with his heels on the kerb, in the belief that if anyone desired honesty on such an afternoon, it would be one of those who go on foot and who are suddenly moved—either because they are superstitious, or sentimental, or in love—to buy from a fellow being whose body is visibly so much colder than their own.

Meanwhile Blanche's thoughts, though they had quivered at the sight of the man's face and the honesty, were charitably engaged. As the car drew up outside the Mary Beck Babies' Hospital she was trying to decide whether, as a member of the committee, she ought to make her annual donation into a fixed subscription of, say, ten pounds a year. Last year, of course, she had been able to give twenty pounds, but this year even ten had been difficult, and Frederick had complained, and if things went on as they were she didn't really see—

Cox opened the door and took the rug off her knees.

"I shan't be more than ten minutes," she said, and saw Matron's face at the bay window and nodded and hurried up the steps to the front door, which stood four feet above the level of the grass in front of the house.

And Matron, who had been expecting Lady Nicholson since half-past three, said, in answer to Blanche's apologies as they stood together in the dark green painted beeswaxed hall, that of course she knew how busy Lady Nicholson was and that it was so very good of her to come at all. For Matron (called Florence by her sisters and Flo by the young man who had thrown her over in 1915 and been killed in 1916) was trusting, in spite of all her worries, and girlish at heart, although she was forty-two; and, in the meekness of her soul, a snob. So that Lady Nicholson, with her soft and troubled gaze, her charm of feature and fragrance, her squirrel coat and her car and her prestige, was a figure in whom graciousness was unquestionable, weakness inconceivable. And the little coats! . . .

"I hope this pattern will be more satisfactory," said Blanche, and the lid marked Russell and Allen fell to the linoleum, was picked up by a probationer, and laid reverently on the hall table.

"Oh, but Lady Nicholson!" said Matron. And the nurse in her rejoiced, for the coats were light and roomy and yet fastened securely with only two buttons. And the mother in her saw her babies ("My babies will love these," she said) in pink, in blue, in white edged with pink. While her simplicity rejoiced in such goodness—in titled knitting needles, in the naturalness with which Blanche (who was indeed diffident and always felt embarrassed by Matron's awkwardly suppressed admiration) said, "You really will tell me if you'd like them still a little longer, won't you, Matron?"

The probationer, carroty-haired, with a dark petticoat showing at the back beneath her pink print dress, took Blanche's coat while Matron said, "All the babies are expecting your visit!" and Blanche explained that she mustn't stay very long and Matron rather flushed, said that she did hope that Lady Nicholson would be able to stay for just a cup of tea.

"Just a *cup* then," said Blanche, realizing that once more the staff must have prepared a spread of crumpets, buns, rock cakes, and Swiss roll, which she found it so impossible to do credit to, and so difficult to refuse. So—

"First I want to see the babies," said Blanche, and Matron, apologizing, preceded her upstairs and along the green corridor to the infants' ward.

"We're quite full up just now," said Matron, and as she put her hand on the door her shyness left her and she added, in a tone leveled and soothed by her own sudden assurance, "We've had four cases of marasmus in since October. There are more of these wasting cases every winter. Those and tubercular. It's the unemployment telling on the families, you know."

There were eight cots in the white room. Blue check curtains at the three long windows, blue covers on the beds, a fire at the far end of the room. One of the cots was screened round with screens made of the blue checkered cotton. A young nurse sat by the fire giving a bottle. A baby in one of the cots kept up a rhythmic tired wail of pain. The room was warm and clean and pervaded by the smells of washed wool and disinfectant and vomited milk. Blanche, overcoming a distaste which she didn't admit to herself, went to the cot where Matron stood looking over the bars.

"This one's getting on nicely now," she said. Blanche looked at the big skull pressing through the downy white skin, the round forehead, the pronounced pinched-looking features, flaccid mouth, the violet marks under the closed eyes.

"We didn't think we'd save him," said Matron.

In the next bed a six-weeks-old baby moaned and struggled in an uneasy slumber. Matron pointed out the rash on its face and hands.

"She suffers terribly, poor little Barbara."

Blanche looked, and looked away.

The next had dark eyes and a skin like a snowdrop and lay still, staring upward. Its fingers uncurled little narrow petals.

"What a lovely little thing," said Blanche.

"She's the last of nine," said Matron. She paused, looking down at the baby. But its dark stare was fixed on the ceiling. Matron turned and examined the chart above the cot, gave a troubled look at the baby again, and moved on.

The next was black-haired and might have been flipped from Egypt into a white cot in North Kensington. He was propped up and swathed to the chin with flannel. He smiled at Blanche.

"He's just getting over bronchitis," said Matron. He heard her voice and turned his face to smile at her.

Blanche said to the young nurse seated by the fire that her baby seemed to be enjoying its bottle. The probationer smiled down into its tortoise-like little face with the flat forehead and prominent eyes and wide drawn mouth.

"We're very proud of him," said Matron at her elbow. "He started life with everything against him. His mother died of sepsis three days after he

was born, and he came in here to be operated (pyloric stenosis) the same day. Now he's doing splendidly, isn't he, Nurse?"

"Dear me," said Blanche.

"Another case of bronchitis," said Matron, pointing to the screens; and went on, as she and Blanche moved past the remaining three cots, to explain in the plump unimpassioned manner of her official self how Maisie (the one who was giving those screams) would have to go on to the Orthopædic; and Betty ("All girls this side," she said), whose auburn curls and blue eyelids and long dark lashes made her look, at four months, like a doll made in imitation of Sarah Bernhardt, who had had pneumonia but was getting on beautifully, would be able to go home ("Her father's a commissionaire at Whiteley's") next week.

. . . "We could be full up twice over if we had the room," said Matron, as they went down the steps, past the operating theatre, to the ward for bigger children. And when they came out, and Matron, deferential again, spoke of tea, Blanche was deciding that, after all, ten pounds a year wasn't so very much.

But she drank her tea standing, while the probationer in pink with the dark petticoat fetched her coat. And when Matron pressed her to buns with Devonshire cream she explained that she really hardly ever ate anything at tea time. "But your tea is delicious!" and she had, she was afraid, so many little things to do this afternoon that she must really hurry off— But before she went she wanted to ask Matron just one little thing; it had come up at the last committee. Did she really think it necessary to have three visitors' days a week? After all the parents must anyway be busy people and it surely made it easier for the staff if there were only one, or at most two afternoons when the mothers could come?

But Matron colored, and in quick anger (for she knew just whom this trouble came from) said:—

"I'm afraid that's Mrs. Barclay again. She's been on about these visitors' afternoons ever since she came in and found me giving poor Mrs. Church a cup of tea. She made out that was what was making the running expenses so high. . . ."

Blanche saw that she had put her foot into hotter water than she liked—and since she herself disliked Mrs. Barclay she soothed Matron with the assurance that indeed it didn't seem to her that there could be any harm in visitors. . . .

As she left and Matron came out to the car she remembered about the stone hot-water bottles. "Would they be useful? Perhaps just for airing the cots?"

And Matron, the tip of her nose reddening in the cold, was more than grateful. And, as Cox shut the door of the car, thanked again for the lovely little coats, thinking to herself how sweet Lady Nicholson looked in that velvet hat with just that touch of blue in the velvet bow at the side.

"Where to, m'lady?" asked Cox.

"Fortnum and Mason," said Blanche, and "Good-bye, Matron. And thank you so very much. I shall come again very soon."

"If I hadn't put these godets," said Ruth, "I'd 'ave got it done in half the time."

May was sewing the paste clasp on to the belt. "It wouldn't look so pretty without them," she said.

Ruth nodded, a pin in her mouth, and glanced at the clock. "Anyway, it isn't five yet. Quarter to. I shan't start dressin' till half-past seven."

"Where's 'e givin' you dinner?"

"Cue-ree-osity!" said Ruth. "The Piccadilly, if you wanter know!"

"Ooo I say Mum, 'ow lovelee!"

" 'Tisn't so bad," said Ruth, pinning, bending over the stuff whose rose and scarlet lights were beginning to tire her eyes.

"What'll you 'ave fer dinner, Ma?" May asked. Her question wasn't only prompted by her taste for glamour. She was hungry; and hoping, against her own severe conscience, that Mother wouldn't eat anything more before she went out, in which case there would be all that bread left and the margarine and that half tin of Father's anchovies.

Ruth lifted her face to the light.

"Depends what's on the menew," she said, showing off a little as she often did to May. But the idea of what (and secretly—my goodness *how*) she would eat enlivened her.

"Soup first I s'pose!" said May, who had often listened to her mother's accounts of meals with Mr. Hermann, and knew exactly what they had had

for lunch the very first time he took Mother out, that time at Bournemouth, when Father was at Lewes.

"Consommay," Ruth corrected. "You don't 'ave 'soup' in the evening."

"And fish?" said May.

"Yes. Unless I have an omelette or eggs of some kind. Depends if I have oysters first," she said, slowly taking up her sewing again.

"What sort of fish, Ma?"

"Sole or red mullet—or whitebait," said Ruth.

"And then?" said May. "Then a steak, Ma? Or chicken?"

"Chicken you *bet* and plenty of it, *and* all the doings!" exclaimed Ruth. "They do you chicken *lovely* in some of those swell restaraws, lovely sauces and I don't know what. I often say to myself I don't wonder if some of the women you see there get fat when you think they feed like that every day of their blessed lives! Not that I should mind it fer a bit meself, just to make a change," she added. And, "I could do with being a bit fatter," she said, feeling at her hips and waist. "Mr. Hermann noticed it once and said"—here Ruth deepened her voice, puffed out the lower half of her face, and pronounced gutturally, " 'You could be a liddle vatter, my dear!' "

May, delighted out of her sangfroid, cried, "Oh Ma, is that 'ow 'e speaks?" She had heard this and other imitations before, but she was always newly excited by her mother's facility (that she was usually too lazy or sulky to use) of exerting at the same time her entrancing powers of mimicry and her strong personal attraction.

"—Yes, and whatever was it 'e said to me *last* week?— Oh yes, it was when we was at the theatre and he said to me, 'Root, you haf more zeggzabeal than all de Budy Gorus put togezzer.' "

"Does *all* Germans speak like him?" asked May, her voice shaky with giggling.

"I dunno—I s'pose so," Ruth snapped, and lapsed into silence, because, although she knew that Hermann was a German (and was only over here as an agent in connection with a business, iron or something in Duisburg), she didn't like to hear May say the word "German" (whereas she would have liked quite well to hear "Frenchman").

May, who understood her varieties of temper, though not always their cause, was quick to change the subject, and came naturally, and with easily

sustained interest, back to:—

"What'll you have *after* the chicken, Mum?"

Ruth was unwillingly beguiled.

"Rum omelette," she said.

"And then?"

"A cheese savory."

"Welsh rarebit?" said May, her mouth watering quite painfully at the thought.

"It'll be called something 'oh fromahj' whatever it is. Fromahj means cheese."

"Why do they always put menews in French, Ma?"

"For style," said Ruth, beginning to sew again.

"Do French people write their menews in English then?"

"Of course they do."

"And Germans?" asked May. "What language do they write their menews in?"

"Goodness knows what Germans do—you'd better get on with that belt if you imagine you're helping me."

"I 'ave sewed it on, Ma. Both sides."

"Oh all right. You can get me stockings then, the fish-net pair, and see if they need any mending. I won't go out the way some girls do!—Diamonds isn't too good for upstairs—but a hole in your stocking or a tear in what you've got underneath—that's nothing."

May fetched the stockings.

"Couldn't you ask Mr. Hermann what Germans do?"

"What d'you mean 'what Germans do'?"

"What language they write their menews in."

"No, I can't," said Ruth, exasperated by May's lapse into childishness. "We've better things to talk of, I assure you."

May wondered, sitting down to mend a hole in the heel, what they did talk of at these glamorous meetings in restaurants lit by pink lights, domed

with carved ceilings, and fragrant with the scents of highly spiced, inconceivably delicious and delicate, yet plentiful food. A part of their intercourse she knew well enough (though she couldn't have told you how she knew). The gamut of activity from hand pressing and waist pinching to gurgling and struggling on a bed she accepted as one of the conventional alleviations of adult life. But what they talked about, and what other uses Mother and Mr. Hermann made of their luxurious freedom, what sights they saw, what jokes they enjoyed, what discoveries they made, she couldn't piece together at all.

"That's the last godet—isn't it?" she asked.

"Mm," said Ruth.

"When's Father comin' back?"

" 'E said Monday—or Saturday."

May hoped that it would be Saturday, because he would have spent less of his money. She hoped this against her inclination, for her idea of happiness was to live alone in the flat with her mother, and (in weak moments) pretend to herself that her mother was a movie star and she was her maid.

# CHAPTER XI

When Clare came out of Antoine's the light from the shop windows suffused the thick raw air, overlaying the pavements, the traffic, the hunched silhouettes of the passers-by with a pinkish-gold dust. And since she could go home at any moment (unlike Gladys Daniel, whom she passed at the corner of Dover Street and Piccadilly, and who had only just come out, and reckoned to stay out, in a coat which, in spite of all its fur trimming, wasn't warm enough), Clare decided to walk.

She walked easily and quickly, and, in an unfeminine mood, cared not at all for men's glances that touched her face and let her go uneasily, as if they had seen her before.

But she thought, "In two minutes, between Dover Street and Albany Court, between Dover Street and Piccadilly Circus, a hundred, perhaps two hundred, people have gone past me. And not one of them looked happy, not one of them looked alive, and if I were to walk all day up and down the streets in a fantastic search for an expression which says 'I am happy,' 'I am alive,' should I find, among those people who are none of them in extreme poverty or acute sickness, any one exception? (Perhaps one? Perhaps six?—on a sunny day.) . . . They are like a collection of patients suffering differently from the same disease, some symptoms of our time and civilization. . . ."

For she saw, crossing Piccadilly, moving down Regent Street, either stupidity (the tissues of their spirit already dead and the mind festering with vanity) or fear (the spirit sickened, the mind palsied, the blood itself slow and uncertain). And there were reasons enough, she admitted, for all, save the perfectly stupid, to be afraid; for in the nature of life there was nothing that Time and Misfortune couldn't take from them; and almost nothing that they could hope for in return. But somehow they seemed (either because she saw them with sudden lucidity, or because the fog weakened the defenses of their expression) stupider or more harassed than it is natural for man to be in the face of so familiar, though such admittedly overpowering, enemies. Their eyes and lips and uneasy walk betrayed a perpetual, hardly conscious defiance; as if they had recognized the perpetual need to fight against the reënforcements that in our time supplement the accustomed slings and arrows of Fortune: the virulence of a financial system; the guerilla attacks of

noise and speed on their nerves. For they fought, it seemed to Clare, not only as men had always done, against Time and Disaster,—whose enmity had, at least, created a tradition of gayety in youth, courage in age, and a demand for beauty in things and moments,—but, as nineteenth-century-bred, twentieth-century-nurtured human beings, against a force whose powers of destruction were unrecognized, because they worked subtly, undermining their "morale" through the fabric of their own thoughts.

Looking at them you saw the signs of that curiously despairing alertness, the dreary tension of people sapped, drained, rotted inwardly by their own conventions, destroyed nervously by the fear of artificial dangers; worn out, even in youth, by fighting for the unnecessary, and struggling for the undesirable. In their minds, and caused by the mental diet of their childhood, was the cancerous convention of *what they should be*; and to be so, what they should need, own, think, and, above all, seem. There was the expense of nerves, the straining of nature, the toughening of precious sensibility. "For nothing is so important," their Masks cried, hurrying past her, "nothing matters so much as to do this, have that, believe this; to get on, or in with; to own, and show off this and that (this house, that sum of money, this woman, that position). What is peace?" they gibbered, crowding endlessly up Regent Street, down the Mall, along the pavements of Trafalgar Square, "what is peace compared to the importance of greeting,"—and here their scrannel cries conflicted,—"getting that twenty pounds? that invitation? that appointment? that brooch? that prestige?" And pressing through the gold and pink fog, Mask after Mask cried out that happiness was just round the corner, and that getting it (if you considered the strides made in our time by Science and Education; if you compared our Civilization with life two hundred years ago!) was simply a matter of getting round the corner fast enough, and when you were round it, finding another corner ("For that is Progress!" they hushed, crossing themselves) to get round.

Clare thought, pausing at the corner of Whitehall and Trafalgar Square: "They—we—have this obsession that all activity making for complication of life must increase Happiness, which is why I must have twenty dresses, travel half the earth, have scent in my bath, and read every new book before it has been published a fortnight; why Mother must have dinner parties and Father a constituency, and Henri a private aëroplane and clothes from London; and even Mark, the apostle of unscrupulous simplifying (for he said 'Why work if you can inherit?') must have an account at Hatchard's, a car (of a sort), and a servant whose conversation drove him to take exercise."

She walked slowly past the Treasury thinking that indeed "Complication" had its delights—its richness and its supreme and beautiful justifications. But it must be complication achieved by imagination—not the complications offered, in differing degrees, by Woolworth, Selfridge, Fortnum and Mason, and achieved by money conforming to the dictates of whatever snobbery it could afford. And since you couldn't impose, scarcely even induce, imagination, wasn't the problem, as Mark said, to try to institute some sort of simplicity? The present state was induced by artificial creeds and artificial deprivations of necessities; and you had only, Mark said, to eliminate political nationality and industrial restriction of output—to abolish, in fact, the paradoxes of the present system. A system of starvation and rotting corn, overcrowding and empty houses. And to achieve, at least, a simplicity which eliminated struggle for surplus food, competition for empty houses, and value-snobbery in regard to Things.

At the corner of Bridge Street a woman was selling roses. Clare stopped and bought them.

"How lovely they are," she said.

Minnie thanked her for the odd sixpence. Her voice was husky, her face red, her body hugely heavy, bred from generations whose "unfit" had been eliminated with methodical certainty by tests of dirt, disease, semi-starvation. Her eyes were small and glass-bright. Her very fitness for her circumstances gave her a sort of gayety. She sat her life easily. And Clare, taking the roses from her, recognized that ease, discerned that gayety, and, crossing Bridge Street, considered, though lightly, whether the curse on all the bourgeoisie, for the last hundred years, hadn't been the increasing power to preserve unfitness—and so lower the standard of vitality and zest.

At the corner of Smith Square she met the shape of Mildred taking the shape of Brisk for a walk.

George came home again to say that Mr. Fenwick wasn't back yet and that Mrs. Fenwick had been "gracious enough" to ask him to call back on his way home, to-night. . . .

Lily had just laid the tea. She made no comment. Somehow she'd had a feeling that George would come back disappointed.

When Amy and Edward came from the other room to tea they stopped talking and climbed silently into their chairs. Only the baby went on and on screaming in the next room, for he hadn't been satisfied with his last feed,

and Lily thought to herself that she would have to start giving him a bottle. It was all very well for Sister Bray in the Clinic to talk about water drinking and putting your feet up after lunch, and, after all, Mrs. James's baby was getting on lovely since she put him on the Tinfood, and wasn't any trouble at all.

"Shut that door, can't you, Amy?" said George.

"It is shut, Dad."

Lily put the teapot on the table. "Go on, eat something," she said. "But you'd better not stuff yerself," she said to Edward, "unless you want to be sick again."

Edward looked at her with pale small eyes and waited for his tea.

Lily poured out George's first and pushed it over to him. "Come on."

He took it and started sipping. The electric bulb hanging directly above him made his whole eye sockets look black. Lily put her elbows on the table and leaned forward to take the weight off her back.

"I shan't go round again," said George.

She looked at him without speaking. She gave way to a feeling that she hardly cared whether he went or not compared to the longing that had grown upon her, hour by hour, of the long dingy aching afternoon, to lie down, to let her neck, her arms, her back, her legs, slump on to the mattress, to shut her hot eyes—and to sleep.

"It's evident 'e don't mean to 'ave me," said George.

Lily nodded.

"Ain't it?" he insisted.

She stared at him, repeating,—

"Ain't what?"

"Whatever's up with you?" he said. "Didn't you hear what I said?"

At his tone she closed in on herself. Became small, sad, and mulish. She looked down at the teapot.

"I heard you," she said untruthfully.

George grunted. Gave her a sideways look.

"Now you're in a temper."

Lily closed her pale lips and went on looking down at the teapot. Edward snuffled. Amy looked anxiously at her father.

"What's up?" said George. "Eh?" he repeated, disconcerted by her refusal to look at him. "What's up, Lil?"

His tone modified her expression. Still stubborn, but with an air of conceding that he had a right to question her, she admitted:—

"I got a 'eadache."

"Bad?"

"No."

"*Sure?*" Suddenly the idea of her being ill roused him to a state of extreme and unreasoning fright. He had a general fear of illness which was intensified by a power to imagine other people's physical suffering, and this power in him was morbidly intensified by his affections. So that every time when Lily was confined he was in a state bordering on hysteria, refusing to eat or speak, and walking up and down outside the hospital groaning under his breath and clenching and unclenching his hands. And when Edward had bronchitis,—though he wasn't really a devoted parent,—he had been hardly able to swallow food, and hung over the cot breathing like the child himself with quick difficult gasps; and sweating as if he himself had a temperature.

"I'm all right," Lily assured him, urgently now, for she realized that he'd begun to be frightened about her.

"Are you *sure*?"

"Don't be silly, George!" She smiled.

"I don't think you'd better go runnin' round again to Smith Square at six o'clock," he asserted, with a swaggering yet touching air of authority. "You ain't fit for it. You better stop here and keep warm. It isn't a fit night for you to be out."

"Go on. Don't be silly." Lily poured herself out a cup of tea and started sipping it. "This'll cure me!" she said.

But George didn't take his eyes off her. Now that he'd started thinking about her health he saw her pallor (that he'd taken for granted all day) as a symptom, and the bluish circles under her eyes as betrayals of a state that might, at any moment, become terrifyingly serious.

"I'm feeling better already," she added. And indeed for the moment the appalling weight of sleepiness seemed a little less suffocating.

George lapsed into a doubting silence, which Amy, who had lost interest in a conversation about a headache, broke with:—

"If you was to get ever so much money, all of a suddin, Ma, like in that picture, Ma, what would you do with it?"

The magic question for a moment lightened Lily's exhaustion and calmed George's disquiet. What would he do? What would she do?

"Buy a lorry," said Edward.

Lily's ideas were almost as ready and precise.

"Buy a cottage in the country with a garden, and git a children's nurse—and buy you a nice car with a chauffeur, George Cashmore!"

"A nurse for *us*, Ma?" said Amy, trying to imagine a natural relationship with one of the proud-looking ladies who sat and knitted by shining prams in the Park.

"Yes," said Lily. "And for Baby," she added with faintly venomous tenderness, listening for him again. (But he'd stopped screaming now and must be asleep.)

But George didn't like the trend of Lily's imagination. His former fear gave way to a jealous vision of Lily—idle-handed and luxurious, deputizing her natural duties.

"And what would you do with yerself then, I should like to know?" he demanded.

Lily smiled. "Oh, I should find plenty to do. Gardening for one thing. And I wouldn't really mind doing nothing—for a bit," she mused, seeing "her cottage" again; but a little bigger, a little more dignified, set back at the end of a gravel drive, instead of being up a little path (and no sign with "Teas")—and a lawn, quite a big green lawn, with flower beds round, and the children playing about all in white, white shoes and socks too, and ever such a smart nurse with them. . . .

"Just sit about and dress yerself up," said George, "like Mrs. Findlay."

Lily couldn't help smiling at him. But the mention of Mrs. Findlay jerked her back to a real world which contained her headache, and her dragging back and glary lit kitchen, and incessant, innumerable, enough-to-kill-you little worries and problems—while Ruth Findlay on the opposite side of the buildings could stay in bed till ten, half starve her child, varnish her nails, and make herself a scarlet dress to dance in.

“I don’t know that I should mind being Ruth Findlay either,” she said.

“And ’ave Jo Findlay for a ’usband! I dessay you’d like that too?”

She saw, with almost unbearable weariness, that George was letting his nerves get hold of him again.

“Don’t be silly!” she said, and repeated, deliberately smiling,—for he must be off in a minute, and if he started a fuss he’d never get started,—“Don’t be so silly, George. If you can’t understand a joke . . .”

Amy was still pursuing the same train of thought.

“What would you buy, Dad?” she intervened.

He got up. “We’ve ’ad enough fairy tales for one tea time.”

“Tea, Frederick,” called Blanche through the open door, to her husband in the morning room. “Tea, dear,” she announced to her daughter, who was already in the room but seated on the fender stool, and at so great a spiritual distance that her mother, glancing at her, wondered if by any chance Clare was unhappy.

“Thank you,” said Clare.

Her mother leaned to the end of the sofa on which she sat behind the tea table and switched on another lamp. Its light fell on the roses that Clare had given her and Ackworth had just arranged so nicely in the Ming bowl. Blanche gave a pinched vague smile at the roses and said “delicious.” She was wondering if she would broach the subject before Frederick, whom she had heard cross the hall, came back from the cloakroom. She coughed and got out her little handkerchief.

“—The chief difficulty,” she said to Clare’s profile, “would be the servants. . . . You see already this morning Ackworth spoke to me . . . just before lunch, and said she supposed I wasn’t thinking of engaging Mrs. Cashmore. . . .”

Clare looked up. The lamplight lit one side of her face.

“Ackworth is a monstrosity,” she said.

Frederick came in. It had been cold in the cloakroom and the warmth and lovely light in the room made him say, “Well, well, there’s nothing like tea on a winter afternoon.”

Blanche handed her daughter her cup.

"What sort of an afternoon have you had?" she asked her husband.

He let himself down into his chair.

"So-so . . . I saw Harry after the meeting. He tells me they're having to sell Frant."

"Oh dear . . ."

"Question of upkeep. Knight, Frank and Rutley are putting it up sometime in the spring, he tells me. I never liked the place myself, but they've always been fond of it. He tells me he's keeping the shooting, though."

"Oh well . . ." Blanche put down his cup in front of him.

Clare asked, "Did you tell him we were giving up a kitchenmaid?"

"A scone, dear?"

"No thanks. A sandwich for me."

Clare couldn't remember a tea time when her father had eaten a scone. She saw that her mother was agitated. Sometimes other people's misfortunes encouraged her to minimize her own. Sometimes they only turned her imagination to the "boat" in which she felt herself and her kind to be perilously at sea. Her frequent phrases about "pulling together" and "sinking or swimming" showed how often this conventional metaphor expressed for her the doubts and fears which her imagination had no power to express or understand.

"Oh, yes," said Frederick. "What about that woman? Has she been yet?"

"No," said Clare.

"Not yet," said Blanche.

He stretched out his legs and looked at the cake stand.

Clare stopped his next sentence with,—

"Mother was just considering . . ."

"I was saying that really perhaps, as the servants feel rather strongly . . . after this morning . . ."

"D'you mean to say that you think that after what happened this morning there could be any question of having the woman?"

Blanche was relieved. Clare had been so uncompromising. But of course Frederick thought as she herself did. She felt relief as one unaccustomed to

silence, and who has had to endure it, is relieved to hear the accustomed rumble and roar again.

"No—indeed." Indeed, so that was settled.

"You feel just as Ackworth does, Father?"

"Ackworth? What's it got to do with Ackworth?"

"Ackworth doesn't approve of misfortune."

Her father said, "Don't be silly, Clare. You can't employ a person who isn't fit. From what I saw of this morning's little drama, either the woman's not well enough to work, or else she's a humbug."

Blanche said quickly, "Oh, I'm quite sure she isn't that."

"You never know," said her husband. "You can't tell with these people. It's like the beggars you used to see round church doors in Italy. They like to 'put it on' a little to make you sorry for 'em. . . . No, no . . . when she comes tell Ackworth to tell her that you've decided she won't do. . . ."

Blanche looked at her daughter. "I'm sure that's best." She hesitated, softened now that she felt sure of Frederick's support. "But I should like perhaps to give her something."

"You've already given her bed and breakfast," said Frederick.

"One of our small eggs," murmured Clare. "What d'you *want* to give her, Mother?"

"Or, perhaps," temporized Blanche—for she remembered a phrase "never give money"—"we could help in some other way."

Clare said in the small monotone that her mother disliked, "She seems chiefly to want work."

Blanche sighed. She looked at her husband. He was sipping his tea and at this moment thinking of something else. She remembered the woman's face lying below her on the rug—the streak of hair across her eyes, the smallness of the face.

"After all," said Clare, "even Ackworth must have fainted sometime." She checked herself. She must say something to help the woman. "She may be a very good worker; she brought two good references. . . . And once she's in work and eats more, she'll be stronger."

She saw that her father had withdrawn into a state of healthy boyish blankness. She knew that no thought of any consequence lay behind that

blue stare and rosy frown. It was the expression he wore in the House during a long debate. It was the expression, she felt sure, that he must have worn in his pram, and which made envious nurses exclaim, “What a lovely contented baby!”

Blanche, filling up the teapot, said, “Certainly, when I think how badly she needs the money I am almost inclined to tell her that I’ll engage her, if only for a week or so when Mildred leaves. . . .”

She placed the little silver kettle back on its stand, and as she did so her face was reflected in the silver bosom of the teapot, minute and rose-colored and distorted, so that her nose ran down her face as if it had melted off her forehead and the outer corners of her eyes were fastened to her ears . . . the small mouth of the reflection opened and became suddenly a ring of pink rubber opening and closing over a square of gleaming teeth.

Her husband helped himself to another sandwich and slowly sat down again in his chair.

“That isn’t the point,” he said. “And anyway,” he added, “she isn’t the only woman who needs money in these times—as you and Clare seem to believe.”

His glance linked them together in what he liked to feel was a characteristically sentimental conspiracy—which it was his business indulgently but firmly to confound.

“As one knows only too well,” sighed Blanche, remembering the babies that she had seen at the Mary Beck this afternoon.

“Don’t you either of you ever read the New Testament?” said Clare.

Blanche looked at her anxiously. Her father decided not to deflect her remark with a joke about the devil quoting Scripture for fear she might have ready some quotation of apt, if unsound, pithiness. So he said: “You’ve got to look at the matter from both sides. If you give this woman the job then you’re depriving another woman of it.”

“Quite true,” said Blanche. She helped herself to one of Mrs. Perrott’s little rock cakes. She tasted it and then handed the plate to Clare. “Do have one, dear.”

Clare said, “But anyway, it’s only a matter of two hours a day.”

“Exactly,” said her mother, letting the word flutter dove-like toward her husband and daughter.

Frederick Nicholson repeated "Exactly"—changing the dove to an eagle. "But it's not a question of hours, it's a question of principle! If you take an applicant who isn't fit for a job out of sentiment, then you're acting wrongly because you're turning off the applicant who *is* fit for it."

"Yes, indeed," Blanche agreed.

Clare's monotone was acrid.

"But there's no proof that Mrs. Cashmore is unfit."

"Then what was she doing in the spare room this morning? What were you doing running about with smelling salts and lighting fires and what not? What's a healthy woman doing anyway in bed at eleven o'clock in the morning?"

"Mother was in bed, too," said Clare.

Her father angrily cut himself a slice of plum cake.

Her mother flushed.

"Clare always thinks I cosset myself."

Clare didn't answer. She looked at her mother and saw how pretty she was with her soft starry blue eyes and imperious little head and the quick color in her cheeks. Her bitterness ebbed. She got up and went to her mother and took up the small ringed hand. "We all cosset ourselves," she said smiling. And this cosseting, she thought, is what has kept her exquisite and innocent and heart-breakingly futile—has preserved her prettiness from the malice of old age; and her mind from the tiredness of living, and the dreadfulness of knowing. She let the fingers go. But Blanche, a little embarrassed, a little moved, grasped after her daughter's hand and patted it.

"Dear Clare," she said.

Frederick, who had been evolving a new argument, noticed some sort of reconciliation and said trenchantly, "Well, I think that's settled, isn't it?"

Clare moved away from her parents, over to the windows. She pulled apart the curtains, always drawn in winter at half-past four. The fog had thickened again. She could just see the muzzy gleam of the street lamp below the window. She leaned her forehead against the windowpane. She remembered Mark saying, "*How can theirs have been a good world when they were all such hypocrites?*"

Her mother's voice asked,—

"How is the fog?"

"Just the same," she answered. She saw a silhouette pass below the street lamp. She heard footsteps, hesitant, slowing down. The click of the area gate.

# CHAPTER XII

Ackworth said, “Mrs. Cashmore to see you again, m’lady.”

“Just show her into the morning room, please, Ackworth.”

Blanche got up. She hesitated. “Perhaps you might come with me, Clare.”

“Very well.”

Frederick joked. “Now don’t you two go in there and be soft-hearted.”

Clare followed her mother into the morning room. Mrs. Cashmore was standing by the fire. When they came in she moved away from it quickly.

Blanche said, “Well, good evening, Mrs. Cashmore.”

Lily said “Good evening” and looked at Clare. “Good evening, miss.”

Blanche sat down.

“How are you feeling now?” she asked.

Clare stood behind her mother’s chair. How rotten the woman looked.

“Quite all right, thank you . . . m’lady,” she added hurriedly. “I can’t get over being so stupid. I don’t know how I came to do such a thing.”

“Well, I expect you aren’t very strong . . . and with such a young baby!”

Clare thought she saw something happen to the woman’s expression. She said quickly:—

“Oh, but I’m ever so strong. I bin used to workin’ all my life.”

“Yes . . . of course,” said Blanche. “And of course we all felt so very sorry for you this morning. I hardly felt, really, I ought to have asked you to come round again this evening . . .” she broke off and then, with an apologetic little smile: “Only it seemed so difficult to decide all in a moment.”

Clare saw the woman swallow.

“We’ve just been talking it over as a matter of fact,” said Blanche, “and I’m very much afraid that I’ve decided you aren’t strong enough—yet, for the work.”

“Yes, m’lady,” said Lily. And after a dead second added, “I’m sorry,” and with a quick look round said, “I oughtn’t to be here troubling you.”

Blanche rose, lighter-hearted than when she had sat down.

“Please believe I’m so very sorry too, Mrs. Cashmore. But I really do feel that perhaps just now it’s for your own good, too . . .” She felt in her bag. Her experience at Flower Shows and Prize Givings stood her in good stead. “I should like you to accept this . . . just to help a little.” She held out a ten-shilling note. Lily hesitated, took it mechanically, and colored when she saw the note in her hand.

“Thank you. You’re too kind . . .” She looked touched and frightened, fidgeting to get away. “Thank you, m’lady.”

“I’m sure there’s some little thing the baby needs!”

“Yes, thank you, m’lady.”

Ackworth showed her out by the back door and they went back into the drawing-room, where Frederick was reading the *Evening Standard*.

“I gave her ten shillings,” said Blanche.

He looked up vaguely. “What? What? Oh yes,” and went on reading.

Clare went back to the fender stool and sat down facing the fire. She said without looking round, “Didn’t you see her face, Mummie, when you actually said it?”

“Said what, darling? About the baby?”

“No,” said Clare, and burst into tears.

“Clare!”

“*My dear Clare!*”

Clare could feel their discomfiture. She tried to stop. “I’m sorry,” she choked. “I—I’m being hysterical. I think I’ll go upstairs.”

“We’ll both go and have a rest before dinner,” said Blanche, rising to what seemed to her a baffling occasion. But Frederick exclaimed: “What’s the matter with the girl? What’s the matter, Clare? I should have thought we’d had enough hysterical behavior in this house over that charwoman!”

Clare felt that the mere comic (however indecent) attitude of her father’s mind, the mere word “charwoman,” might start her laughing. She muttered, “Nothing. I’m tired,” and ran out of the room and up the quiet stairs and into her own room, which was dark and friendly. She sat down on her bed.

There had been so little light in the woman's face, anyway, that Mummie hadn't noticed when it went out.

A curtain of red serge hid George Cashmore and his upright piano from the audience of the Royal Cinema. To them his presence was implied only by the dim glare reflected upward from the light fixed above the music stand of his piano, a glare that seemed to rise from a half-extinct furnace in which a metallic music was shaped into a succession of cracked tunes. Their gaze, lifted to the screen high above George's head, saw no lower than the aspidistra and the four pots of ferns put there by Mr. Keene, the owner, in a not very concentrated effort to convince his clientele that they enjoyed for the maximum price of 1/- Admission, including Tax, all the advantages of a West End Super Cinema de Luxe.

George took his place at five past six. At ten past some children came down the gangway and installed themselves in the threepennies, the other side of the curtain. They came in shivering, for the hall was only heated by an oil stove, and the red brocade paper walls, valiantly adorned with alternative gilt wall sconces and medallions of goddesses in profile, had dark patches of damp.

George began to play a selection of tunes ready loaded in his fingers, but his mind was still preoccupied with Lily's last remark, that there was a good deal to be said for being like Mrs. Findlay. He played the "Chocolate Soldier Waltz," and changed it, after two repetitions, to "Johnnie Get Your Gun," thinking that though of course it wasn't anything but a tantrum of Lily's, yet it wasn't like her to have tantrums, and it looked to him, after her fainting and everything this morning, as if she ought to go and see the doctor. Maybe all she needed was a tonic, he wondered nervously, as the hall darkened and the light streamed from its socket far at the back of the balcony on to the screen, and his fingers conjured "Tea for Two" off the cold keys. More people were coming in, and their sniffing and coughing cut across the steady buzzing that filled the air, as if the darkness had been a signal for an invasion of bumblebees.

The children cheered through their toffee, and George, glancing up, saw the familiar shape of Felix. He might have brought Amy with him, if he'd thought. He wondered how Lily was getting on now. Six o'clock, she was to be there. But if he was to get this job off Fenwick, he thought, he wouldn't let her stop on there, anyway. He wondered if he could rely on Fenwick

letting him know, or if it was just what Lily thought, just another way of putting him off.

The reel of Felix was so old as to be blurred and spotty—as if the fog outside had blown over the frontier between Fact and Fancy—and Felix himself must achieve his swift and resourceful triumphs in a climate which could hardly have fostered the juicy flora and lithely optimistic fauna of his surroundings. George accompanied his exploits with a series of marching tunes, and the liverish atmosphere failed to discourage a massacre of natives followed by colonization in the finest traditions of imperial enterprise, and Felix established in a wattle Government House for the rest of his life.

Followed a gay drama of the American domestic scene in costumes of 1919. Bowler hats, soda fountains, check tablecloths, paunches, wise-cracks, broken crockery, cats, mothers-in-law in aprons, couples in flivvers, gum on bedposts, legs on sidewalks, antimacassars, kisses, and rocking-chairs. The hall had filled up. The air warmed and thickened. George kept the bass going and got a lozenge out. He wondered why anybody should want to see this stuff. Somewhere to go for sixpence, he supposed. Not that they were all quite so bad as to-night. That Wild West last week wasn't so bad at all. But as he'd said to Lily, when you compared those old things to what they were doing now!

He played a polka for the educational film which showed, with highfalutin captions that allowed themselves an occasional snigger and exclamation mark, the mating of two butterflies. "The Lady pretends that she does not understand His Advances!"— "Perhaps it is as well that they have now sought the greater seclusion of the Rose Bush!"

The big picture followed. George shuffled through a pile of music. He'd never liked blues. Waltzes were his favorite. He began with "Destiny," which seemed to him to suit the dramatic quality of the picture. "The False Witness" sprang in Gothic letters on the screen. In one of the best American houses (1920 style), Turkey carpets on marble, a Butler (English stage version) announced to an American Mother (blue-rinsed marcelled, corseted from thigh to bosom) a Young Girl (Fauntleroy collar, style 1915, black velvet frock, gold curls to shoulder blades, baby eyes), the poor daughter of an ex- (because poor) school friend of American Mother who comes with a note from her dying mother. The American Mother, who has no theoretical objection to poverty, is considering how she may help the Girl to find work when her son (American College Boy) enters through the lace curtains of the French windows and falls in love with the Girl. But he is already engaged (George changed to "Good Night, Sweetheart") to the Vamp (date of type by

external evidence) who stops at nothing (being the daughter of a man who is a Soap Flake King from having stopped at nothing), not even slander, to keep Her Man.

George felt drowsy and though he played "Give Me the Moonlight," "Kalua," "Dancing Time," and "I Want to Go Where You Go" pretty fast one after the other, whenever he looked up the same sort of nonsense was going on. A good film was all very well, but this! He'd be infinitely better off driving Mr. Fenwick's van round, for, apart from anything else, there wasn't any art in this, strumming away on this old tin piano. He thought of Amy's question at tea. Well, if he was ever rich, one thing he'd do would be to have a Grand of his own. He tried to imagine what the tunes he was playing ("I'll See You Again," at that moment) would sound like if he was to play them on a Grand!

Clare sat on her bed staring at nothing.

Neither her thoughts nor her feelings were explicit. She felt as if her mind had a temperature.

She thought "I can't stay here any more," and then "How idiotic. Of course I shall." She thought "How can they be so complacently brutal?" and then "But I shall still go on having frocks that cost twenty pounds." She thought "That woman's only a symptom. If I played the nineteenth-century game of charity with her or the early twentieth-century game of equality with her, I should only be trying to cure a symptom." She thought "But she's a person too. And I liked her. I should like, like Scrooge, to send her a turkey." She thought "But I must do something now, because now I mind, now I'm miserable about her—and to-morrow I shan't care so much, and the day after I shall have forgotten." She got up and took her bag off the dressing table. She had cashed a check yesterday—the last, she reflected, for some time; and four pounds and about fifteen shillings remained. She took out the four notes and the ten-shilling note and put them in an envelope. She powdered her face, combed her hair, put on some more lipstick. She put on a small veil with her hat. She remembered that she was dining with Mark and took out a pair of clean gloves. She went downstairs and on tiptoe across the hall, and as she shut the front door behind her she heard the dressing gong and outside heard Big Ben beginning to chime and thought "Big Ben is right by Ackworth. . . ."

She didn't take a taxi, for she knew the way now and imagined that she wanted time to think.

But when she arrived at Provost Buildings she hadn't thought and was still wondering how she should give Mrs. Cashmore the money without making her feel that she, Clare, was embarrassingly kind. Clare wondered if it wouldn't be better to slip the envelope under the door.

She went through the arch into the courtyard.

As she passed one of the ground-floor windows she looked in, for the curtains hadn't been drawn, and there was firelight. She saw a young man sitting by the fire with a child in his arms. They were quite still, both of them, staring at the coals. The man's gaunt boyish face with a dark lock of hair on the forehead was bent close to the child's head, and one of his hands was clasped round its arm. Beyond them a door was half open into a kitchen where a woman stood at a table, mixing something in a basin. Clare moved on, slowly, wondering what momentary tenderness or helpless instinct had brought those two, the boy and the child, together by the fire, condemning the child to life, and the boy, who was his father, to such a swift desperate maturity.

She went slowly up the Cashmores' staircase.

The gas jet was turned higher than this morning. When she got to the door the impulse that had sent her died out and she stood thinking, "I'm just like Mummie. How will this really help them?" She felt the notes in her pocket. She heard voices inside the door—a child's voice, a woman's voice—talking and then singing a few bars of "Rose Marie" and then breaking off to say "Oh, you *have* done that nice!" Clare remembered that the husband wouldn't be there. He'd be at his cinema. She rang and heard "Oh drat!" good-temperedly.

"Oh—*miss*!" Lily stood back. Clare saw the same kitchen, but tidier, less bleak than this morning.

"I felt I wanted to see you again, just for a minute. I do hope I'm not disturbing you."

Lily reddened to her temples. "Won't you come in, miss?"

Clare heard the gasp in her own voice (so like Mother's when she felt anything was "awkward") as she said:—

"I—no please, don't bother. . . . I really don't want to disturb you. . . . I expect the children are just going to bed." (The children were behind Lily by this time and Amy stared at this notion.) "It's only that I'm so dreadfully sorry, about the job. I—I wish my mother could have taken you on. . . . And I wondered if you'd let me help."

Lily saw the envelope in Clare's hand. She was touched, agitated, perplexed, and in one corner of her mind amused by the queerness of the young lady. But she thought "Gracious, they've been good enough to me," and shook her head violently.

"Oh *no*, thank you. Really, miss, I think we had enough off you. . . ."

Clare said, "Oh but please do." ("She must have it," she thought. "I can't just let her be a lady about it.") She hesitated, then she smiled, using the manner that she kept for getting what she wanted. "Take it because I want you to."

Lily felt the power of that manner. And she felt more and more awkward; and she wanted the young lady to go as much as Clare herself longed to be gone and out in the street again.

"Please." Clare held out the envelope. "I wish it was more."

Lily took the envelope without looking at it. "I don't know how to thank you, miss. You're too kind." Her sense of Miss Nicholson's kindness worked uncomfortably below her embarrassment.

"Well then, good night," said Clare, and turned and hurried down the staircase; and Lily stood at her open door listening until the rapid footsteps had died away across the courtyard.

"What's in that envelope, Ma?" asked Amy.

Lily shut the door. "Don't you be so inquisitive," she said.

"What'd the lidy come for?" asked Edward.

"Come on, son, and 'ave your supper and don't ask so many questions."

Blanche had sent down a message by Rose that she didn't feel up to seeing any other applicants, and that if anyone came they must be asked to return to-morrow morning, after eleven o'clock, and then had lain down until the dressing gong sounded.

At its sound Rose, in Mary's absence, came to help her dress, performing the ritual with a virtuosity which made Blanche reflect that Rose would really make an excellent little maid—and that later on, if Mary left next year, to get married, she really would have no misgivings in promoting Rose to be head housemaid, in spite of her youth.

Blanche put on her blue velvet tea gown with the chiffon sleeves, and the platinum chain with aquamarines that Frederick had given her last Christmas, and her little silver shoes with the paste buckles. And Rose put a lace-edged handkerchief in the little bead embroidered bag which Blanche had bought at a sale meaning to give it away, but its blue and silvery beads had gone so well with this tea gown that she had decided to keep it for herself after all.

Frederick put on a dinner jacket, partly on the principle that faithfulness to Mrs. Grundy in small things implied faithfulness to the whole tradition of the British Empire, partly because he had always changed for dinner and would not have known what else to do between the dressing gong and the gong for dinner— If he had given his reason for changing from one thick suit into another he would have said that he thought it was "slack" not to, and that anyway he liked to change out of respect for his wife.

Thus the two of them met again with a certain formality downstairs in the library, each with that vague sense of increased self-respect that comes from unnecessary washing, fresh linen, and redundant adornment, each pleasantly hungry for the meal which Ackworth would presently announce. Frederick smelt of soap; Blanche, faintly, of scent. "Their hands were clean, their hair was brushed, their clothes were clean and neat." . . . And when Ackworth had lit the candles in the dining room and opened the library door and announced "Dinner is served, m'lady," Frederick, as usual, stood back for his wife to pass, saying, "Come, my dear," with a courtliness whose genial nature was caused, to some extent, by a sudden fragrance of soup.

# CHAPTER XIII

As Clare slipped her latchkey in the door of the flat she decided not to say that she had lunched with Henri, and, relieved by the rightness of her decision, broke in on the silence saying, “Darling, how *lovely* to see you again!”

For a moment Mark didn’t look up from the writing table. When he did he glanced at her vaguely, smiled impersonally, and went on writing in his customary hunched attitude, as if his long limbs and wide easy shoulders by gathering themselves together could give more force to his pen.

He was working.

Clare stood still, disconcerted.

She knew him well enough to be sure that he wasn’t (as she herself might have been) pretending to work. He was subtle, sensitive, and occasionally secretive. But he never pretended. He was as completely absorbed now by his writing as he had been by her, last night. Even this morning, when she’d telephoned, she could tell by his voice that she was alive to him.

Now she didn’t matter.

His work, on the rare and quite incalculable occasions when he did it, made him spiritually impenetrable and more or less insensible to noise, hunger, warmth, or cold. His character combined an intense power of concentration with an unwillingness to apply himself to any task at regular hours. He detested routine; but had a passion, in whatever he did, for thoroughness. He spent lots of sleepless days and nights, spaced in between idle months, on his monograph on Metternich; spent a fortnight in St. Tropez subsisting on black coffee and underdone beefsteaks writing it, and finally put it away for “reference.” He had planned this book, on the Nineteenth Century, four years ago. He had begun to work on it, collecting references, material, two years ago. Out of those two years he had done probably a hundred days of violently concentrated work. He said that the book needed writing; that he was capable of compiling it but probably not of writing it. It interested him to try. He tested everything, all books, problems, places, people (even herself, Clare thought), by their power to interest him. He was easily interested. But he had an intolerance of mediocrity which amounted to

mania, so that many people and places failed him before he had time to find out the complex reasons for their dull or conventional appearances. He was less perceptive about people than Clare, because he applied idealism where she used intuition. He judged character by behavior, whereas Clare judged behavior by character (condemning the same act in one person and not in another). He delighted in fine qualities; and liked people for actions proving such qualities. The result of such a point of view, Clare thought, was an inhuman attitude to humanity.

Clare took off her coat and hat and sat down by the two charred logs in the fireplace. He was at work. And she didn't exist. (Therefore didn't need either warmth or companionship.) If she were to tell him now that she had lunched with Henri he would look up and say "Yes" or "Did you?" and go on writing. And he wouldn't remember afterwards what she had said.

From where she sat on the fender stool she could only see the back of his head and his hunched-up shoulders. He had a cigarette in his left hand and the ash fell on the carpet.

Clare lit one of her own cigarettes. She shivered. Now that she had taken her coat off she felt cold in the room. She poked a log with the toe of her shoe. It rolled over, showing a charred belly. Mark sniffed and cleared his throat. She supposed he hadn't got a handkerchief. She got up and leaned over him from the back and poked her own handkerchief down into his breast pocket. He took it automatically and blew his nose.

She moved away from him on tiptoe. But when she realized this she began to walk about normally, even accentuating her footsteps. She went out to the kitchenette and fetched the bottle of methylated. She brought this back into the room, poured some of it over the logs. No spark was left in them and they didn't flare. She lit a match and threw it after the methylated. There was a blaze and roar. The chimney was filled with thin blue-rooted fire; the room rocked in its light. This pleased her. The flames, steadying, grew smaller, shrunk to little flames that licked and played round the log like baby lions round a black panther.

Clare settled on the fender stool again. Mark was still in the same attitude. It was possible he would go on writing all night. The idea that he should do so made her angry. But she was amused, too, at the way he repaid her for her half-real caprices by his rare but perfectly real eccentricity.

He added a sheet to the pile of manuscript. She began to feel a boredom that was intensified after another twenty minutes by the realization that she was hungry. She hated the feeling of hunger, even for a short time. It had a

direct effect on her spirits. It reduced her, by a sharpening of her perceptions and sensibilities, to a state of violent depression. She needed three nourishing meals a day to believe that life was worth living.

She decided to interrupt.

"Mark."

He went on writing.

"Mark!"

"Yes?" He didn't look round.

"Why did you ask me to dine with you?"

"Darling, can't you read or something?"

"No—Letterpress when toasted loses its good looks."

He sat back but didn't look round.

"—There's *Adventures of Ideas* there. Can't you read that?"

"No. I couldn't even read *Vogue*. I'm hungry."

He turned round slowly. Looked at her with a vague impersonal resentment.

"Can't you get some milk?"

"Darling. You asked me to dinner."

His gaze became only a little more personal.

"I really am very busy, darling."

"I see. I know. But you could have worked all day."

"I couldn't. I flew this afternoon and after that I went to tea with my sister, and after that I had my hair cut."

"What an odd day to fly!"

"The best sort of day."

"How's your sister?" Clare kept up the conversation as if, sentence by sentence, she were pinching him awake.

He put down his pen now.

"Absolutely happy."

"Why?"

"She always is. She adores her husband, loves her children, and has the Faith in which she was brought up—and they have three thousand a year after they've paid Income Tax."

"Of such are the Kingdom of Heaven."

"Mother was there. I've arranged to go home next week and stay down there and work."

He lit another cigarette.

She asked, "For how long?"

"I don't know."

"I see."

He was out of his work now and moved. He met her look with a deliberate impassivity.

"Shall you—shut up this flat?"

"Yes."

"When did you decide this?"

"At tea."

She looked at the fire again. He sat down in the armchair and watched her. After a pause she said, letting him only see her profile:—

"I had lunch with Henri to-day."

His first reaction was reflex. The usual thudding heat rushing from his stomach to his head, and then slowly receding, and leaving him trembling and physically cold. But his knowledge of Clare had grown since the days when a mere implication that Laval existed knocked him out by the effort of his own violent control.

He knew Clare well enough now not to wonder why she should have produced this fact at this moment, when she clearly needed a weapon against him.

He said, "I don't believe you."

She turned to him, staring. (How does he know? Was he at the Ivy? Or his mother?) She smiled uncertainly.

"You're quite right not to."

He felt an intense secret relief. But he said, “Why don’t you want me to go home?”

She turned her face away from him because she felt the tears coming. (Once you had cried in a day it was too easy to go on.)

“Naturally I don’t.”

“Why ‘naturally’?”

“Naturally, because I love you.”

“But you don’t love me as naturally as that.”

She kept her face turned away.

“I know what you mean.”

“Of course you do.”

“But if I did marry you it wouldn’t alter me.”

“It would. But I don’t mind, if it didn’t.”

She paused to get her voice steady.

“But if it didn’t. And I made you miserable?”

“I’d rather be miserable with you than equable by myself.”

“I know.” The tears were dripping down her cheek.

“And if you won’t,” he said, “I’m going to try to stay away from you.”

She felt furtively in her bag for her handkerchief. He said:—

“I know you’re crying,” and lit a cigarette to prevent himself going and putting his arm round her.

She felt if only he would come and kiss her she could stop crying and everything would be all right.

But she had often felt that and he had often kissed her; and Mark, watching her shoulders and bent head, reflected that it had never remained all right. He said, as lightly as he could:—

“Perhaps while I’m away you’ll come to a decision.”

“You know I shall. That’s why you’re going. Only it seems so illogical.”

“What does?”

“To do—what you want— And anyway I don’t believe you really know what you want: and you think what you want is marriage, because it’s what you haven’t had.”

She turned her face to him, her eyes blurred, her lower lip uncertain. She rubbed her nose and sniffed.

He said: “Yes, I do know what I want. I want a real life with you. Not an amorous picnic. I don’t want you in snatches. I want you wholly and permanently and safely in my life—so that,” he hesitated, “I can ignore you when I want to work—and make up for ignoring you when I want you again.”

She watched his face and felt his words. Their sense moved her.

He said:—

“And if we must have difficulties I want them to be incidental and not thematic.”

She gave a sigh that was still half a sob and held out her hand to him:—

“I suppose I want all those things really.”

He took her hand.

Ruth shivered as she dressed, for she wasn’t used to bare arms and the draught swept in under the bedroom door and the stove hardly seemed to give any heat at all. She pulled on the dress over the new pair of cami-knickers that Frank himself had given her and she’d kept in a package on the top of the wardrobe for fear Jo should start getting suspicious, and fastened it in front of the wardrobe glass that always made her skin look a shade darker and her face somehow all queer— But May, coming in from the next room, where she had been tightening the buckles on that wretched old pair of black shoes, exclaimed:—

“Oh *Ma*, it’s *lovely*!” And Ruth caught sight of May’s face in the glass, and couldn’t help being pleased.

“D’you think it’s all right? Really?”

“Oh *Ma*!” said May, circling round, gazing at the scarlet figure that seemed to her to epitomize all that her mother ought by rights to be (and wasn’t, through some obscure, though inevitable unrighteousness, vaguely connected with her father and a chronic circumstance perpetually referred to by both her parents as “a run of bad luck”).

“Is my hair all right?” asked Ruth, staring at her own reflection with a mixture of pleasure and pettishness. “It looks *awful* to me. I left it to set *too* long this time, and it looks as crimped up as I dunno what.”

“Your hair’s all right,” said May, still gazing, but recovering her equilibrium. “Those curls have come out lovely.”

Ruth turned to look sideways at herself over her own bare shoulder.

“I like the back all right, it really isn’t so bad,” she said. “Until I get it all among the Paris Creations,” she added, “and then it’ll look like three farthings all right.”

“No it won’t, Ma. Really it won’t. It looks ever so smart!”

“Oh well, it’ll have to do anyway,” said Ruth, and started putting on her coat. This squirrel coat was a possession given her by Jo, seven years ago, at a time when he was flush and so crazy about her that he used to come back suddenly when he’d said he was going to be away, expecting to find her with some man in the place. (A period when they had the flat opposite Harrod’s and Jo was making as much as thirty and forty pounds some weeks.)

“ ’Ere’s yer gloves, Ma,” said May.

Ruth took the new white gloves and folded and slipped them into her bag. “They’re all nosey enough already, without their seeing more than I can help,” she said. She gave a last look at herself in the glass, a last pressure of lipstick on her mouth, and a last curl up to her eyelashes.

“Well, enjoy yerself,” said May.

Ruth was reshaping the curl on her forehead.

“I hope so,” she murmured.

May watched her cross the room with the gait of a mannequin and thought what a pity it was about those old black shoes. Still, people hardly looked at shoes, and the dress was so long they didn’t show much.

“Well, so long,” said Ruth, and went out without looking round. But May ran to the window and, pulling the curtains apart, watched her mother’s silhouette disappear across the courtyard.

Mary saw Jim before he saw her, for he was looking towards Leicester Square as she came down Coventry Street from Piccadilly Circus. And when

she touched his arm, he started and stared at her just as if he hadn't been standing there expecting to see her for the last twenty minutes.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting," she said, and she explained how her sister Janet had come in just as she was leaving, and she hadn't wanted to go without having a chat with her, for Janet didn't often get to London because of leaving her little girl.

But Jim didn't care, now she'd come, why she was late, though he'd been giving way, before she arrived, to an idea that she must be meeting another fellow and that all women were the same and that if she did come along now he would just raise his hat and say good-evening and leave her standing.

He took hold of her arm.

"You're looking all right," he said, even before they got inside the restaurant and he could see her flushed cheeks and her bright soft looks. Her hand tightened on his arm.

"So are you, dear."

They went upstairs and found the table they'd had twice before in the far corner, and they ordered coffee and sardines on toast and cakes for her, and tea and steak and kidney pie and meringues to follow for him, for he liked things sweet. They sat at right angles to each other. Mary took off her gloves and held his hand while they waited, and the band was playing a waltz that Mary knew but couldn't remember, a lilac and Tokay Viennese waltz (that had been written the year that Mary's mother went into service as second kitchenmaid at Milford Place near Saffron Walden), and Mary, looking at Jim's ruddy handsome profile, sipped the red gold and breathed the too sweet fragrance of the music (unaware, because she was young and a housemaid and more or less ignorant, that the Tokay was too old now, and the edges of the lilac flowers already brown).

He kept her hand in his until the sardines on toast came, saying "How've you been gettin' on?" and "I thought you wasn't going to turn up," but not bothering to notice if she replied, which she only did in careless phrases, "Fine, thanks," and "Didn't you?"

"The steakankidney's on order," said the waitress, and Jim said to her:—

"Thank you, miss." But her smile and her trim little waist held no interest for him because Mary had deprived all other women of their mystery, concentrating, for him, all the female magnetism of the universe in her warm oval face and nine and a half stone of solid-boned sensuous body.

When she took up her knife and fork he said:—

"I got tickets for the picture at the Capitol," and the waitress brought the steak and kidney pie and the coffee for him and Mary's tea, and Jim started eating, for he was hungry. He had lunched at twelve-thirty and been on a job —an old 1923 Buick—ever since one o'clock, knocked off after six, got back to Walham Green and shaved and changed his things and got to the Maison Lyons on the tick of seven, only to wait, under increasing nervous stress, for nearly half an hour.

Mary's delight at his remark about the tickets was out of all proportion to her interest in pictures (she liked pictures, but they were a part of the routine of any outing and she seldom saw one by which she was more than pleasantly entertained), and her quick brilliant smile said simply—what she couldn't and would never have tried to say—that tickets for the pictures were yet another affirmation of Jim's perfections and her extraordinary bliss.

"How's your pie?" she asked.

"First rate."

"I'll have to learn to make steak an' kidney pies." She added, still rosy, "Mrs. Perrott, our cook at 59, you know, makes them beautifully. I'll get the receipt from her. I think Sir Frederick likes them."

"Him and me agrees then. . . . But I dare say it's about the only thing we agree about. I don't think much of what 'e's bin saying in the 'Ouse of Commons lately."

Mary's respect for her official master struggled with her admiration for the Mechanic-Adonis who possessed her soul.

"What's 'e bin saying?"

Jim's powers of speech, limited in love, were fairly expert in politics, and Mary changed for him from a woman into an audience, as he began a slow, caustic tirade against "stick-in-the-mud die-hards," who had the wind up about Communism, would like to see all the Unions smashed, and started gassing about Bolshevism being taught in schools just because one in ten teachers had the sense to tell the children that the Russians were getting on all right without a king and a plutocracy—

Mary wished, privately, that Jim wasn't a Socialist, because she disliked truculence, especially in Jim, who was generally in a state of glowing good temper. Politics, she thought, always managed to make people angry. But she couldn't help being impressed by Jim's command of language when he

did speak (of course he was clever, and they thought no end of him at the garage)—and her sense that he could so abruptly forget her presence added to his glamour and made her feel pleasantly inferior. She poured out his tea while he was talking, and pushed the cup so that the handle was close to his hand.

"In another 'undred years," said Jim, "it'll be your old Sir Frederick what'll go on the Exchange!"

Mary accepted this as a piece of admirable fantasy. She knew that Gentlemen could never go on the Exchange, but she managed with the pragmatism of an amorous intelligence to reconcile this knowledge with her conviction that whatever Jim said was true.

"Drink yer tea," she urged, respectfully, putting her hand on his arm. Her touch blurred and finally effaced his picture of Sir Frederick Nicholson standing with collar turned up in just such a queue as waited at the Exchange near by the garage from eleven till one every day.

"Your ring looks all right—don't it?" he said.

Mary nodded.

"You don't look too bad altogether," he said.

She felt the sudden emotion that prompted the words.

"—And as fer that dress and hat, I never seen you look better," he added, translating the Song of Solomon into the only language that he knew.

# CHAPTER XIV

Franz Hermann had kind, softly bulging brown eyes with pouches below them, a squat heavily built torso, and short slender legs that bowed in toward the ankles. He waited for Ruth in the lounge of the Piccadilly. He looked very like a blond pug in a dinner jacket. He had even a pug's underhung melancholy jaw.

But when he saw Ruth advancing with her stiffest mannequin walk the melancholy changed to eagerness. He hurried to meet her, breathing more quickly (even if a little uneasily) and smiling up into her face with a violent emotion caused partly by affection and partly by appetite.

"I'm all right, thank you," said Ruth as he took her arm. "Hope I'm not too *terribly* late," she said in a manner at once coy and carefully bored, in case she should be overheard. "I hope you're getting on all right?"

"I haf already a table," said Hermann. "But first you will haf a cogtail, *nicht*?"

"Aee don't mind," simpered Ruth. "Raeetyeuare!" and gave a quick look round, hitched a shoulder strap, and preceded Hermann to a small table, implying by her manner that she was insolently at home here as anywhere else. She sat down slowly, arranged herself in her chair, took her flapjack out of her bag, and looked in its mirror. She did this slowly, never looking at Hermann, who kept talking to her, complimenting her on her appearance, asking her what she would like to drink, telling her how relieved he was to see her because he had feared at the last moment that his wife might decide to stay at home and demand his company at dinner. (The Hermanns belonged to an extensive German circle who dined heavily and often at each other's houses and made up week-end parties to go to expensive country hotels and play golf. Hermann's relation with Ruth was made possible by his wife's frequent visits to her family in Hamburg. When she was in London he could only see Ruth at lunch time or by taking her with him on his business trips.)

He ordered two "side-cars" and Ruth began to nibble potato crisps with forced inattention. They were fresh and delicious and she felt she could have crammed the bowlful into her mouth. He produced a box of cigarettes that she had told him were her favorites. They were tipped with purple silk

riband. Ruth smoked languidly. She didn't really enjoy it. Out of the corner of her eye she watched the women on the sofa next to them and appraised their dresses and felt a furious discontent with her own. Next to their respective pink and white satins she felt hers branded "home made," and the glances of the men round were no consolation to her, for she knew, with contempt, that it wasn't her dress they were looking at.

When the cocktails came she looked at Hermann for the first time this evening and said "Cheerio." He lifted his glass.

"Bring two more," he said to the waiter. Ruth slipped a glance up at the young waiter from under her lashes and wished it was he and not poor old Frank (who certainly didn't look up to much even in evening dress) who was sitting beside her on the gilt and velvet settee. She gulped off her cocktail. Hermann sipped his, goggling his eyes at her. "That is a very priddy dress you haf on!" he said.

"Think so!" she said with scorn, for of course he too wasn't really looking at the dress. "Guess you wouldn't care to have your wife going round in a rag like this!"

"She would not look like you do," he said simply. Nor indeed would he have liked her to, since he loved Bertha as she was, plump, fragrant, richly dressed, and devoid of make-up. Only with Bertha as a background could he enjoy these little lapses "*en garçon*." If Bertha were ever to leave him he would stay at home to die slowly of a broken heart.

Ruth sipped her second cocktail and sat up with an increase of real confidence and consequent easing of manner.

"That's a smart dress if you like!" she said, nodding in the direction of a flashy woman who had just come in with a very young man. "That's style if you like."

Hermann admired also. Indeed she was a type (smaller and fatter and still more blonde than Ruth) to which he was addicted. His gaze dwelt on her plump arms.

"There's nothing like a good brocade," said Ruth, imagining herself in that shimmering lime green.

"You are ready yet to eat?" asked Hermann, summoning the waiter and paying for the cocktails and overtipping him.

"I don't mind," said Ruth, and got up swimmy-headed and began to walk with dignity towards the dining room. Hermann noticed her walk with

amusement. He didn't let Bertha drink, except wine at meals (and champagne at dinner parties). But the intoxication of women like Ruth accorded with his convention of bachelor gayety. When they sat down opposite each other in a corner he took her hand and patted it and said:—

"We are going to haf a jolly evening, darling, *nicht*?"

"Oh go on!" said Ruth, smiling vaguely and carefully undoing her table napkin. ("These bloody cocktails on an empty stomach!" she thought.)

He ordered the food, consulting her, and the champagne as a matter of course. When this was done he stroked her hand again and said how pretty she looked and how pleased he was to see her. Ruth smiled back at him with a mixture of archness and affection, for now that she was seated the swimmy feeling had gone and she felt a glow of pleasure in the warm luxury of her surroundings, the bedecked elegance of the people, the savory scents and alluring tinkle of dishes, the gay and sensuous music played by the band at the other end of the room.

When the waiter brought the soup Hermann let go her hand, tucked in his napkin, seized his spoon, and leaned forward for action. Ruth, both despising and envying the rate at which he gulped and sucked up its creamy goodness, sat up straight and sipped carefully from the side of her spoon. When he had finished he untucked his napkin and said:—

"How iss your husband?"

"Oh, he's all right. He's gone off to Manchester this time."

"And de leetle girl?"

"Oh, she's fine."

"Goot. How iss business for your husband?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh—as bad as ever. He says we'll have to give up the flat in Brompton Road if things go on like this."

"The City iss bad for all at present," he said.

"So you all say," said Ruth.

"But id will get better," he asserted, smiling at her indulgently. He was amused by her belief that he was "taken in" by her story about having a husband. He knew that she had never had a husband (and that the child was illegitimate). Her accounts of her husband's business in the City were in

themselves sufficiently unconvincing. And she would never give him her home address (which he only knew to be in Brompton Road). Whenever he pressed to know more about her husband's business she evaded his questions. And when he had once suggested (since she had said her husband was away) driving her home, she had become so agitated and defensive that he had immediately guessed that she was kept (though not, poor child, very well) by some other or several other men.

But he pretended to believe in her marriage and her jealous husband. He knew himself. He was easily prompted by accesses of sensual sentimentality to speak of marriage. Indeed he liked to do so, or to fancy himself on a honeymoon with the youthful mistress of the moment. This tendency had led to several difficult situations, scenes, and reproaches. As long as Ruth, whom he was fond of and wished to retain indefinitely, pretended to a husband at home she could make no claim, as the others had done, on his idly depicted dreams.

The champagne was brought. Nothing in these evenings gave Ruth so distinct a sense of putting the salt of reality on the tail of fancy as the sight of the silver gleaming bucket and the gold-necked bottle packed in ice inside it.

The waiter poured it out. The wide glasses filled and sparkled. Ruth lifted her glass.

"Well, here's luck," she said, and Franz lifted his glass also and smiled so that the pouches deepened under his bulging brown eyes and his ears lifted a little; for he also was feeling extremely gay.

There was a shop at the corner, only just down the street, which stayed open late, and Lily really never knew what time it did close. So she slipped on her coat and ran down the street and was in the shop almost before she had thought what she wanted.

But when she got there she knew at once, for the very first thing she set eyes on (and no wonder, for Mrs. Cary stocked a quantity of it) was a tin of salmon.

There was something, she couldn't resist the feeling, quite specially significant and she believed prophetic about just happening to see that tin of salmon. George himself was particularly partial to it, and partly for that reason, and its dearness, it had come in Lily's life to symbolize frivolity. But though the primary it wasn't the only reason.

Its peculiar glamour (if Lily had cared or been able to analyze it) was due to its association in Lily's mind with Royalty—and with Royalty in its most endearing, touching, and wonderful manifestations. In short with the Queen, and Princess Elizabeth.

Firstly, Lily and George had had occasion to eat smoked salmon on the very day that Princess Elizabeth was born. (George had made some extra playing the week before at a Flannel Dance in Birchington.)

And secondly, it was on the day that Lily had been to a sale of tinned stuff at the Army and Navy and was walking along Victoria Street carrying two tins of salmon that she looked up and saw little Princess Elizabeth in a car, in a yellow coat and no hat on, and with her, talking to her as naturally as anything and dressed in grey and silver (and not even troubling to look out of the window or anything), was the Queen herself! Lily had stopped, stared, gasped, craned her neck—and while she did so the big black car turned from the stream of traffic in Victoria Street and slipped up a side street (up Petty France, Lily supposed afterward); and since it was past four o'clock in the afternoon, and the big car seemed to be making for Buckingham Palace, Lily had allowed herself to imagine, her mind suddenly aglow with reflections of Royal Cosiness, that the Queen and her little granddaughter were "going home to their tea."

So Lily, when the big black car had altogether vanished, had gone on, had crossed Victoria Street, gone down Great Smith Street, imagining (with her two tins in a parcel under her arm) an epitome of all tea times. The scones, the cakes, the plates of thin bread and butter, the teapot, the tea service, somehow combining an incredible grandeur and delicacy of quality with a superb and deeply moving naturalness; the preening golden teapot, emitting a delightfully familiar steam of tea leaves, the shadow thin cups filled to their golden brims with a strong brown liquid, the priceless plates heaped with jam puffs, cream buns, hot scones (such as Lily herself could make), the thinnest bread, thickly buttered, and a plum cake.

Not long after Lily had bought Amy that photograph of the two little Princesses.

So that Lily asked Mrs. Cary with zest for "a tin of pink salmon, please."

Mrs. Cary was standing behind the counter with her coat and a shawl and gloves on (for the shop was right on the corner and you never seemed to be able to keep the door shut).

"—And half a pound of butter," said Lily.

“Half a pound of butter?” repeated Mrs. Cary, friendly but anxious, for Mrs. Cashmore didn’t usually get butter.

“Yes,” said Lily, “and a tin of peaches and some of them chocolate biscuits.” She pointed to a glass-lidded tin. . . . She looked round— “And a box of that cheese,” she said—and then, after a moment of hesitation during which Mrs. Cary decided that Mrs. Cashmore must’ve got a job all right, Lily plunged:—

“How much for them chrysanthemums?” she asked.

Mrs. Cary stocked flowers occasionally, but it was hardly ever the married women of the neighborhood who bought them. These were a last bunch of yellow ones.

“You can ’ave them for sixpence,” she said.

Lily nodded.

Mrs. Cary took them out of the tin vase and wrapped them in newspaper. “ ’Ow’s the children?” she asked.

“All right, thanks,” said Lily.

“Better to-night, ain’t it?”

“Not so bad as last night,” said Lily.

She took the flowers and the parcel and pushed the ten-shilling note over. Mrs. Cary counted out seven and twopence halfpenny change.

“Thanks,” said Lily, pushing the money into her old purse. “Good night,” and got out of the shop before Mrs. Cary, who was one of the gossips of the neighborhood, could start asking her questions.

Lily stopped in at the pub and bought a bottle of port. Mrs. Creasy was there, as usual, but Lily didn’t stay to talk and hurried out and up the street back to the Buildings.

When she got in she put her parcels down on the table and went into the bedroom to see if Amy and Edward had started to get undressed yet as she’d told them to.

They hadn’t. They had made a tent with the blanket and Amy had tied a piece of her blue and pink riband round Edward’s head and was making believe he was a young lady and she was a gypsy telling his fortune.

But as they hadn’t woken Baby, Lily hadn’t the heart to scold them, and let Amy pretend to tell her fortune in the tent. (“There’s money coming to

you," said Amy, "and beware of a dark man and a woman that wishes you no good!")

Then Lily packed them into bed and gave Edward a dose of the medicine the doctor at the hospital had given him for his sick attacks, and a chocolate biscuit after to stop him sniveling. When they were tucked up she went over to Baby, who was in a beautiful sleep, his fist up against his mouth, and tucked the shawl in more firmly each side of him. Then she put out the light and went back into the kitchen.

She hadn't used her flower vase for ever so long, and she got it out and washed it, for the cut glass was silted with dust, with a feeling (founded on four paper notes and some odd silver) that things had taken a turn for the better. She rubbed it over with a rag dipped in a drop of methylated, and set it glinting and winking and full of crystal water. She arranged the chrysanthemums and put the vase in the middle of the table and stood back to admire the effect. They changed the look of the whole room! And she thought, as she got a clean tablecloth, that one of the worst things now they'd got so little was not being able to afford to keep the place looking nice, or even as clean as she liked to see it, with cleaning things costing so much and milk gone up again and Amy wearing out her boots going to and fro to school.

She stood up the bottle of port on the clean tablecloth and laid George's place and got out the tin opener. The pink salmon wasn't like the Crosse and Blackwell, naturally, but even her impulse to celebrate couldn't drive her to spend elevenpence when she could get something that would do for fivepence halfpenny. Flowers was different, she told herself; but with a growing misgiving as to really how "different" they were. The salmon lay, rosy and tempting, on the dish. She wished she had a bit of parsley. She arranged the chocolate biscuits on the dish with the crest on they'd got that day at Brighton, put the yellow peaches in a bowl, and took the butter out of its paper and put it in a saucer with the little glass-handled knife beside it (that was left over from the set her sister had given her). She cut the bread in slices and decided she would toast them when George got in. Finally she got out of a box one of her pink wineglasses that she'd got, she couldn't remember how many years ago, at a jumble sale at the Clinic.

Then she stepped back and admired the whole effect and stood, with a quickened color, imagining how George would feel when he came in and set eyes on it, and what a change it would be for him from his everlasting bread and cheese.

She looked at the clock. He wouldn't be back for two hours yet, anyway, if he was going round by Fenwick's (which she believed he was in spite of his grumblings).

In her excitement she had almost forgotten that she still had to tell him about her having lost that job in Smith Square. But even now that she remembered she wasn't really depressed, and that odd four pounds (in spite of her knowing how little it was and how short a time it would last) had roused her only too facile optimism. And she sat down in the armchair to wait for George, indifferent now to her back and her headache. She lapsed into daydreams which merged gradually into sleep.

At ten o'clock Ackworth brought the tray of drinks into the drawing-room and set it on the low table by the window, at the opposite end of the room from the fire.

When she had gone out and closed the door Blanche finished her sentence.

"—After all," she said, "if you really reckon up."

Because he wasn't interested, in fact annoyed by now, by the whole subject, he said, "It's for you to decide, my dear." He got up and went over to the table and poured himself a whiskey and soda.

"Water, Blanche?" he said.

"Yes, please, dear. You see, Frederick, by the time I've paid her insurance as well I don't see that it's worth all the trouble and uncertainty. . . . And Mrs. Perrott seems so contented with Mildred."

"Do as you please, my dear. Do as you please." He brought her glass and gave it her and stood before the fire sipping at his own and rubbing his nose with his large white handkerchief. "I'm in for a cold," he said. "I've been afraid of it all evening. Got that feeling in my head and eyes, y'know."

"Dear me," said Blanche. "You really had better take some quinine at once."

"No quinine for me," said Frederick promptly (it was one of their oldest conversations). "It's better to let a cold take its course."

"But Frederick, dear, I'm sure that quinine and a hot drink when you're in bed—!"

“No thanks, my dear. It’s no use trying to persuade me. No drugs for me,” he said, feeling the vague pride that comes from publicly spiting yourself for a principle.

“Oh dear,” said Blanche. “I wish you weren’t so obstinate. If you don’t do anything you know your cold will get worse and then you’ll be in bed with bronchitis!”

“Don’t you worry about me, my dear,” said Frederick, his eyes clouded with self-pity. “I shall be all right. Of course I shall keep going as long as I can,” he brooded. He looked at Blanche, for this was her cue to protest that at least if he would do nothing else he must stay indoors and keep warm.

But his suspicion that she had unaccountably lost interest—a suspicion which made him cough and rub his nose and cough again—was confirmed by her next remark.

“I really think I am right about Mildred,” she said. “After all, we could always make another arrangement later on. . . . And—” She caught sight of Frederick’s expression and stopped short. “I’m sorry, dear,” she said.

“I suggest we stop discussing your domestic arrangements and mention something else.”

“I’m sorry, dear.” Blanche had little tact, because so little intuition. With all her real and conventional devotion to Frederick she had never learned to soothe him. Having found a subject, such as his cold, which perennially interested him, she had abandoned it in favor of a matter which must inevitably irritate him.

He blew his nose, finished his whiskey and soda, and sat down in the high-backed Italian chair which he disliked, to go on reading a novel which he had described earlier in the evening as trash.

Blanche finished her water and got up saying that she thought she would go to bed early as she had had a tiring day. Frederick cleared his throat. She put her knitting in her work bag and laid her book, a translation of a Swedish novel which she was finding very depressing, on the writing table. She looked at him and hesitated, feeling that she couldn’t go to bed without an amicable good-night. This feeling was partly spontaneous, partly conventional.

“Well, dear, I’m going up now.”

He looked up from his book. His moods of irritation were irrational and vehement but evaporated soon. He got up, book in hand.

“All right, my dear. I won’t come in and disturb you. Never can sleep very early with a cold, anyway,” he added firmly, but without resentment. He bade her good-night, bending over her and kissing her cheek lightly, and then went and sat down in his own armchair.

When she had gone he fetched his pipe from the morning room and drew his chair closer to the fire.

He told himself he didn’t feel sleepy, and that as Clare said she’d be home he might as well wait up for her. He was still vaguely disturbed by that scene after that wretched woman’s dismissal. He wondered where she’d dined and what she was doing now.

Blanche was glad to get upstairs to the peace and the firelight in her bedroom. As she undressed life seemed to focus round her again, assuming the pretty and nice properties of her own room. Frederick’s pettishness began to seem less worrying. And as she sat brushing out her hair with a rhythmic and accustomed gesture, the thought that, after all, Mildred was staying on flickered up, glowed, and finally irradiated the whole texture of her thoughts. Though she still felt tired and had, though her cold was better, still the suspicion of a sore throat, she gave a little sigh of contentment, a dumbly breathed *Nunc Dimittis* after such a difficult and really very, very wearing day. To-morrow morning she would speak to Mrs. Perrott and then to Mildred herself.

She rang the bell.

Rose found her mistress serene in her quilted dressing gown, her hair already tied back for the night.

“Will you please tell Mary,” said Blanche, “that I will have my breakfast in bed again to-morrow morning.”

“Very good, m’lady,” said Rose.

When they came out of the pictures, Mary took Jim’s arm and they crossed the Haymarket and went farther down the pavement to get the bus.

While they were waiting Mary said, “That was the best picture we’ve seen yet.” But she was thinking really of the sweet suffocating darkness with Jim’s arm round her and his fingers pressing her arm and his cheek so near she could feel its heat, and far off across the dark the screen with its gold lights and shadows and metallic patterns of sound.

But now they were outside again Jim seemed preoccupied, and looked down at her when she spoke but didn't say anything. She buttoned up her collar and wondered if he'd got anything on his mind suddenly, or if it was only that they'd got to say good-bye in another ten minutes now and he was so mad about her, like she was about him, and there was never any place in London they could be together. For Jim's landlady was like everybody else, old-fashioned and suspicious. And Mary knew, with a certain humor, that it wouldn't be any use Jim talking to her about what they did in Russia and freedom of the sexes and all the things he'd convinced her about. (Mary's heart and senses being such willing pupils, and her intelligence, which was largely instinctive, telling her that whether Jim's theories were right or wrong Jim himself was all right.)

The bus came and they got in and found the first seat behind the driver empty. Jim let Mary get in first and then sat down beside her and got out his money. He never let her pay even bus fares for herself. (For Jim was for both the protection and the freedom of women, thus ranging himself, unconsciously enough, among the few men who are truthful in thought and chivalrous in conduct.)

As the bus circled in the creeping, peering procession of buses through the blur of Trafalgar Square, he said:—

"It seems pretty certain I'll get that rise after Christmas."

"Oh Jim!"

"Yes. The boss spoke to me to-day. Practically said I could count on it."

"And before he said he wasn't certain, didn't he?"

Jim nodded.

"Oh Jim!"

"Pleased?"

She nodded, the sense of what it did mean rising and brimming. "In January?"

"Yes." He took her hand again now, gripping it suddenly.

"You're certain, dear, aren't you?"

"Jim, of course."

"That's all right."

After a moment he added, "We'll get that house then!"

"The one we saw with the plum tree in the garden?"

"Yes."

"Oh I say, Jim!" she breathed, hushed in the presence of her own happiness. No more leaving each other, she thought. No more leaving him like she'd have to now, in a minute or two (for they were halfway down Whitehall now). No more just Thursday afternoons and every other Sunday, and she'd start making up that piece of blue stuff she'd put away, the same pattern as Mrs. Perrott's perhaps—no more counting the days till next Thursday—no more hole and corner business, she couldn't help thinking.

"So it isn't much over six weeks," he said as they were getting out.

"D' you mean that we'll get married at once?" said Mary.

"I should just think we will."

She smiled up at him as they crossed Bridge Street.

The fog had thinned and they could see Palace Yard and the Houses of Parliament in outline. Big Ben glared high above them as if its white day face had been painted with phosphorus.

"That means you'd better give your notice the end of this month," he said.

"Goodness!" said Mary, but her feeling of compunction toward her mistress only lasted a moment. For a second and longer moment she thought of Miss Clare and Brisk, but after all— "I'll have to tell Mother and Dad—and Janet," she said.

"Tell whom you like," said Jim. "I don't care so long as we get married."

Mary stopped, as usual, at the corner of Great Smith Street.

"Well, dear—" He took her in his arms.

She lifted her face and he started kissing her mouth, gripping her and breathing quickly, and for the first moment she let herself go. But then she pushed him away, looking up into his shadowed face (for he had his back to the street lamp). "Jim, dear—" The tones of her voice said that she wanted him too, but that now, at any rate, this leaving each other, wrenching apart from each other, needn't be so hurting.

He saw her face under the hazy lamplight. Its beauty, strange like a flower under water, startled a feeling in him that was like fear. His hands fell off her.

“Mary—”

She felt the change in him without understanding it. She felt safe in touching his arm now.

“Only six weeks,” she said.

He nodded. But he wasn’t thinking of time.

“Good night, dear.”

He drew her to him and kissed her quickly on the lips and let her go. Then he muttered “Good night” and she turned and went down the street, and he stood watching her until her silhouette turned the corner into Smith Square. He fancied that a minute later he could hear the click of the area gate.

# CHAPTER XV

Everyone, by some phrase or garment or gesture, betrays at some moment the self that "would be if it could be." The little photographer's assistant going off to the Palais de Danse with a band of Diamente round her cheap "perm" would, if she could, be "purring" past in a tiara. The errand boy speeding madly without his handlebars down Queen's Gate is (doesn't he know it!) a "village" Lindbergh. The elderly and somewhat contrary lady who makes her square foot of garden grow and glow at the back of her villa ("Le Châlet") in Clapham would (if she could) spend herself in lawns and borders covering the acreage of the common itself; while Marie Antoinette, for instance, and a dozen others have imagined happiness in shrinking walls, ornamented cottages, hens for companionship, grunts for music. The young man, earning his two pounds a week with difficulty enough, who throws sixpence into the river—just to "show" his girl (who wouldn't let him squander it on those violets)—would have lit a cigarette with a banknote—Your Member of Parliament, once educated, attrited by routine, detail, career, picks up the Sonnets, reads, remembering, sits down to read again, and would, perhaps, if he could, be the young man again who read them twenty years before (there's the name, the writing clearer, rounder—at the beginning). . . .

Mrs. Perrott's nightdress in rose satin, lace encrusted, falling from that row of pin tucks over her majestic bosom down to her black felt slippers, betrayed to the mirror that Mrs. Perrott (if she could have changed incomes with Blanche Nicholson, for instance) would have been—to say the least of it—sumptuous. Her palate for rich things (that found so incidental and vicarious an outlet in the concoction of creams, sauces, elegant and savory dishes) would have found its satisfaction in fur, brocades, costly warmth, elaborate "daintiness"; in a certain complacent extravagance and a delight in self-adornment combined with an untroubled awareness that the self was stout and plain, though wholesome in every feature.

Not that the nightdress, now that it was finished, pressed, and put on (with such a real thrill, such a gasp in the unlaughing face of mirror), managed to be both symbol and achievement. Or rather it was an achievement to Mrs. Perrott, who found it excellently good and hardly different from what Miss Clare herself wore. But to the mirror—and the

theorist—it remained Mrs. Perrott's own creation, a betrayal. Good stuff, beautifully sewn, nicely pressed. But home-made. (The magic that is made on the one hand by strained eyesight and hardly paid endless hours, and on the other by guineas tipped out of a fat purse was not in Mrs. Perrott's nightdress.) A symbol, therefore.

Mrs. Perrott, having turned forward, sideways, and looked over her shoulder at a back view that resembled nothing so much as a giant penguin adorned for its nuptials, sat down carefully on the edge of her bed, exchanged her dressing slippers for a pair of white and pink bedsocks, and, still moving carefully, got into bed, settled herself on her back, and prepared to sleep in the stuff of which (at any rate some of) her dreams were made.

But before she slept she prayed, briefly but seriously, laying one large plump stained hand across the incrustation of the nightdress, holding the other over her eyes.

For many years (occasionally this too established weakness of the flesh made her feel dimly guilty) she hadn't knelt to pray, communing rather perfunctorily with her Maker on her back, her mind, even in those moments, half occupied with other things. To-night, as her firm and kindly lips muttered her hope of daily bread and forgiveness, she was aware of the soft and delicate texture of the stuff under her shoulder, the smooth folds over her thighs. What a difference in the feel! "For ever and ever," she murmured.

She put out the light. As she did so she heard Big Ben strike a quarter to. Her hands felt slowly and with a placid yet surprised pleasure down the slopes of her own satin flanks. . . . What a difference indeed, in the feel! After fifty-six years of flannel in winter, cotton in summer—

Sleep deepened round her, the satin dying away under her touch in a dim, a final, a vanishing gleam of sensation.

Before Big Ben struck eleven she was asleep.

Florence Ackworth prayed, on her knees, beside her bed. She knelt before her Maker in curlers and ripple cloth the color of pink sealing wax. "Our Father which art in heaven," she murmured, as usual, with the same perfunctory reverence with which she announced earlier every evening that dinner was served.

Rose, sitting on her bed on the opposite side of the room, paused in the stripping of her second stocking, her gesture awkwardly frozen as in a

snapshot. Her gaze was fixed on her Aunt Ackworth's massive back and small behind. It did not occur to her that Ackworth's proportions were those of a little kneeling elephant. The broad rounded soles of her slippers accentuated this look.

"—For ever and ever Amen," remarked Ackworth—her daily bread now ensured, her trespasses forgiven. She ended, as she had begun, without humility. Her common sense believed that she got her bread by work and had no need to be forgiven. Her Christianity was orthodox in the sense that it was conventional; a part of the respectability which she respected in herself.

She rose to her feet stiffly, and Rose pulled off her second stocking, hung it with its dark limp fellow over the back of "her" chair. Standing in her chemise, she took her white flannel nightgown from under her pillow and pulled it over her head. Under its cover she pushed down her chemise, trod it off her feet, and slipped her arms into her sleeves. She dressed by an inverse process in the morning. Thus neither she nor Ackworth was ever offended by the sight of her body—which was like a child's body drawn slowly out on the rack of Time.

Ackworth took off her dressing gown, looked under her bed, and then got into it. She lay back heavily, with an air of oppressing her pillows rather than abandoning herself to them.

"Did you remember to post that letter for me?" she asked.

"Yes, I took it at nine o'clock," said Rose. She put her coat on over her nightgown and went across the passage to the bathroom. (She hadn't yet the age and status to possess a dressing gown.) When she came back Ackworth was lying on her side and had her eyes shut.

Rose locked the door, according to her aunt's rule (for one must never, Ackworth believed, relax open vigilance against Burglars or Men Made Cunning—even to the extent of lurking under beds—by an Unspeakable Lust).

Rose prayed, barefoot in her overcoat. She prayed silently but emotionally. As her thin lips moved (shaping the words of which her lips made little more than a pompous "how d'you do—nicely thank you") little twinges of pain pinched her heart, symptoms of some spiritual sickness which appeared whenever she was released "from routine." . . . "And lead us not into temptation," she whispered, a choking sensation rising up her diaphragm—though, indeed, temptation in any form was not what she feared; and perhaps the lack of it, the absence of all lurid beams on her flat grey horizons, the low windless sky that stretched across her days, was what

made her subject to these empty shiverings, like a pallid untenanted house with draughts and rattling windows in the centre of that sober unlit plain.

She rose from her knees, laid her coat over the end of the bed, switched the light out at the door, and came back to slip between the cold sheets. Her toes found the hot-water bottle. A little shudder of warmth ran up her body. She got the bottle between her feet, grateful for its fraternal warmth. Her dim emotional tumult began to die down. She remembered her ladyship's words, praising her for the way she had helped her dress this evening. A glow in her head answered the warmth at her feet. She'd tell Mother about that, when she went home to-morrow afternoon.

She wondered if Gertrude, her girl friend, had been able to change her day, and would come in as she'd promised, and then they could go together to the Social. Rose liked to go about with Gertrude. She dressed nicely and didn't look fast and they agreed about most things, and Gertrude had been treated badly by the boy she was going out with.

Mildred took the little packet wrapped in newspaper out of the pocket of her apron and laid it opened in the corner of her bedroom just beside the wainscoting, and then ran back on tiptoe and sat on her bed until, after hardly a minute, he came out, his eyes like black dewdrops, and advanced, pausing (even with Mildred) to look round, fearful, by dreadfully wise instinct, that some hostile force threatened to cheat him of his delight. But again the Fates that spin the destiny of Mice and confound their plans (together with the less comprehensible projects of Men) were kind (or possibly indifferent), and—as Mildred held her breath, and next door Ackworth prayed and Rose was petrified in her stocking, and next door on the other side Mrs. Perrott lay lapped in darkness and unprecedented satin—he took his last step, bent his head over the platter of newspaper. The fragment, had he belonged to the Great Reading Public, would have informed him that Mrs. James of more or less obscure address in Lincolnshire had received a telegram from the King, congratulating her on her hundred and fifth birthday, and that Mrs. James had celebrated her birthday very quietly but had been able to enjoy her cake. But he would anyway have cared little about Mrs. James and her cake compared to his own violent two-months-old joy in the scraps of bacon rind and crumbled toast. He consumed one piece of rind in his first uncontrollable ecstasy, but dragged the second piece back, across the linoleum to his hole (caused originally by Mildred's habit of eating biscuits in bed).

Mildred's greenish eyes were as bright as his black ones. As he came back for the crumbs, she whispered, " 'Ello, Tick!"

He stopped. Looked up. She leaned forward from the bed and held out her hand.

"Tick?"

He kept on looking at her. Mildred often wondered if he really did see her. To-night she realized, for the first time, that she would be leaving him at the end of the month. Just when she'd got him so used to her. For a moment she let herself imagine that she might entice him into a cage and take him with her. But she knew that Mother wouldn't allow him in the house at home, and whatever place she got next there wouldn't be any chance to take him there. And anyway—it would be cruel to try to keep him in a cage!

He bent to nibble a crumb. Then he retired again, taking an unwieldy piece with him, and fixing her as he did so with his black, dewy, defiant gaze.

Mildred got off the bed and started to unpin her apron at the back. Then she paused again. He had returned, with an ease and confidence this time which made her crouch slowly down smiling and holding out her hand.

"Come on, Tick!"

He came a little nearer.

"Come on," she whispered.

He came still a step nearer. But then his courage failed. He blinked, he shook his head and ran for the wainscoting, glanced once over his shoulder and disappeared.

Mildred sighed and got on with her undressing, reflecting that if she'd been staying on she might have tamed him altogether.

He took Clare back in a taxi towards Leicester Square, but halfway she felt she didn't yet want to leave him and leaned out and told the driver to go along the Embankment until he came to a coffee stall. Mark said:—

"Darling, you'll freeze standing about."

She shook her head. "This is the beginning of our simple life."

As they stopped, the lit-up coffee stall across the road looked like a child's shop which had just been unpacked and opened to show its shiny

bright miniature wares, its rows of little cups, its tins, plates, saucepans, heaps of toy sausages and little imitation eggs, its piles of little brown crusted humps of bread, its lifelike jam puffs and slices of cake.

As they got out of the taxi, a man passed them limping and muttering to himself, his shoulders hunched under his thin coat. A lorry passed, shaking the Embankment with a mad racket of noise. Clare took Mark's arm.

They stood at the flap which made the counter. The man in the white coat said good-evening with a gruff, preoccupied amiability. Clare had cried so much (why? she wondered, now that she was out of doors and the air was cold; with relief perhaps, because she thought she saw how calm and luminous marriage would be, how sane and dignified, like getting into a lovely house after living in hotels) that she was hungry and wanted a hot sausage. The first mouthful tasted good; after that it was like eating salty baked custard wrapped in warm brown paper.

Mark chose a hard-boiled egg and Oxo. Clare tried the coffee. It had a definite taste, but not of coffee.

Mark glanced at Clare. The glare of the lamps, intensified by their tin reflectors, made her look paler than usual. She was tasting her coffee with a preoccupied expression. With exactly the same expression, he thought, that she'd had when she said (an hour—two hours ago) she'd brought herself to believe that he meant to go away to the country, without her. She turned to him now and said "darling" vaguely, and then put out her hand and touched his arm. The proprietor of the coffee stall glanced at them in turn and said:—

"Fond of dogs?"

"Yes," said Mark.

"So am I," said the man. His mouth shut enigmatically in his round red face. After a pause he said: "But if I'd a dog I wouldn't keep it shut up in a room all day. Cruelty."

"Yes," said Clare.

"And let it go on howlin' and barkin' day and night so as none of the neighbors can git any sleep."

"Yes," said Clare.

"Stands to reason," said the man. He turned his beefy head toward Mark. "Don't it, sir?"

"Yes," said Mark. He paid. Clare left her coffee. They said good-night. The man answered abstractedly. As they left, two taxi drivers came up out of the darkness and ordered cups of coffee.

Clare said, "We can walk back." She slipped her arm through his—the fog had grown thinner. They stopped on the way to look down at the river. It looked like molten black metal moving under the mists. As they went on he said:—

"To-morrow you may have changed your mind."

She shook her head. "Not now that my imagination's changed. . . . One can only really want what one can imagine."

"And now you can imagine staying with me always?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Perhaps because you've made me." Looking back, she saw the gradual, but accelerating degrees by which Mark had taken shape and gained vividness in her thoughts. It seemed to her that if she had any "self" identifiable among the physical moods, nervous sensations, the ebb and flow of "being" which made up her life, that self (whether you called it spirit or imagination) was the inner vision with which you saw things and which had the ultimate power to make them, things or people, real to you. So people, she thought, were real (and therefore interesting or lovable) to the extent that they could keep your imagination focused on them. The emotion, only vaguely in her mind, came out obscurely in her words.

"Perhaps you become the person that you love. Or because they're so real to you—that you copy them—unconsciously, and in the end—you can't tell when it happens to you—you find your thoughts have got like theirs." She hesitated. "I think, with me, it's the test of whether I care or not. . . ." She smiled. "Like very dog people get to look like their dogs."

Mark took her hand and kissed it.

When George got in he found Lily asleep in the wicker chair, and though he wanted to wake her and tell her the news he stopped short, checked by that respect for sleep which in a lesser way is like the respect for death which hedges the sleeper with a sudden divinity and makes the onlooker, by his mere sense of the other's immunities, feel a little vulgar and conscious of a certain pettiness and coarseness in his own state of being alive.

George put his hand on her chair, but refrained from touching her shoulder. He glanced at the alarm clock on the shelf above the gas stove, then at the table. He saw the flowers, lighting and changing the quality of the tank-like room, catching the poor garish light from the bulb above them and shaping it into clusters of slender yellow flames; he saw the white cloth, the pink rosy glass, the salmon, the yellow peaches in the cut-glass bowl, the bottle of port. Among all his superficial conjectures that he was dreaming, that Lil had gone mad, that she had won a lottery he knew nothing about, he could find no believable explanation, the effect of the table itself being so astounding that the sight of a genie, a dwarf or angel with feather wings, standing beside it would hardly have added to his astonishment.

He went up to the table and touched the chill bright pink flesh of the salmon with his forefinger. He turned slowly to Lil and as he muttered her name her eyes opened. "Is that you, George?"

"Lil!"

She sat up, pushing her hair up from her forehead. She saw him now, standing beside the table.

She smiled.

"Feelin' like some supper?" she asked.

"*Whatever—*"

She smiled again, her quick touching smile that ended by her closing her lips hurriedly over her teeth. She got up and came and pulled his chair out ready for him.

"It's a miracle," she joked.

He sat down automatically. He had even forgotten his piece of news for her. He stared at her, puzzled, subduing his impulse of delight and making way in his own mind for misgiving—and, if necessary, anger. (For whatever, he began to ask himself, could have sent her squandering—getting into debt even . . .?)

Lily took the cork out of the bottle and poured port into his glass.

"Miracles or not, I'd like to know . . ."

But she knew, naturally enough, his train of thought and broke in:—

"It's paid for all right." She hesitated, bottle in hand, remembering now how the money had come and that her explanation, when it came, was as dreary and ordinary as the same old table under the festive tablecloth. She

put down the bottle. She might as well tell him. And as she thought out a way of doing it, she remembered that, of course, he'd probably come home with just the same tale to tell her.

But his spirits had jumped up when she said that it was paid for, and suspecting her of a stroke of luck of some sort he was reminded of his own luck, of the fact that he'd brought home, wrapped up in his thoughts, like a present.

"Well, I don't mind a glass of port to celebrate," he began . . .

But she had, of course, all the wrappings off in a second.

"You got that job off Fenwick's?"

George nodded.

"Oh *George*!" She colored, paled again; but a flush stayed in her cheeks.

"Yep. I dropped in ter see them on me way 'ome."

She could hardly take it in yet.

"Oh I *say*. Well, I never! Isn't that a bit of luck!" And behind her quick exclamations she felt a preliminary relief, for now George had got this it wouldn't be quite so bad telling him.

"An' now when I come 'ome there's a slap-up supper."

"The young lady—at Smith Square, she give me some money—" Lily hesitated.

He'd forgotten all about Smith Square, but now he put in quickly:—

"Did yer get the job?"

Lily shook her head.

He sat back relieved. "That's just as well," he said, "because I wouldn't've let you keep the job if you 'ad."

He looked and spoke with a certain romantic annoyance which was natural to him, but which the grinding uncertainties of the past years had subdued or changed to little snarling bouts of temper. "I told yer," he added, "I've always said I didn't like you goin' out to work, leavin' the children, and never havin' time to look after the place."

"It was only for three hours," Lily murmured. But she enjoyed his assumption of masculine tyranny, and her relief which followed slowly on her full realization of George's news became so intense that she sat down

suddenly on the other chair at the table, and sat staring down at the cloth, motionless in her efforts not to cry.

George only saw that she had sat down beside him, and cut himself a slice of salmon.

"Well, this *is* a treat. Ain't you goin' to 'ave any?"

She shook her head, still looking down.

"Come on, Lil. 'Ave a bit to keep me company."

She shook her head. "I couldn't eat anything."

But he insisted on her having a sip of his port,—since she refused a glass of it,—and he drank down the rest and filled his glass again, and started talking about how he'd be able to chuck up this wretched job at the movies now, and Lily watched him, charmed by his warm awoken glances, amused by his jokes and his talk, but too tired herself to join in.

He ate all the salmon, two slices of bread and butter, half the peaches.

"Butter!" he exclaimed.

She nodded. She told him how the young lady had come round and given her the money. He said:—

"That was decent of her!" swallowing down his port and filling up his glass.

He looked so much younger and fatter than he had this morning that Lily could have fancied they were back in the old Margate days. He made her have another sip of his port to buck her up. It ran sweet and warm down into her diaphragm, whence it seemed to spread and irradiate her whole being.

"Well, every cloud has a silver lining," he said, and sat back to light a cigarette. "Keep the home fires burning."

"When does Mr. Fenwick want you to start work?" Lily asked.

"The first of December."

"What's 'e goin' to give you?"

"Two pound fifteen."

"About what I expected," said Lily, and her first relief, which had coiled back in a wave of incredulous emotion and remained piled up in her consciousness, broke and rolled forward, and submerged her in a sensation of happiness. Its deep warm tide went on flooding round her, bathing the

kitchen, the flowers, George's face, flushed and suddenly handsome, the very crockery on the table. George's hand reached hers. He was saying that she was a good sort. His slow, gentle, childishly excited smile swam towards her, rippled round making shivering rings of light. He held her hand down on the table now, put his rough slender fingers across her wrist.

"Things've taken a turn," he was saying. She murmured a vague affirmation.

"Try a bit of the cheese," she said. She saw the cheese, too, lying like a minute chunk of grimy marble under the translucent tide of her happiness.

# CHAPTER XVI

*12.00 o'clock midnight*

Clare found her father in the drawing-room, and saw that he wasn't reading, but waiting for her. But he said:—

"Fog any better?"

"Yes."

He had all the lights on. She came in and stood in front of the dying fire. She said:—

"Mark Petre brought me home."

"Did he? Well, I'm glad he bothered to do that." The grumble was irritable, but not violent. He was wondering how to get round to the subject of the charwoman.

"Darling?"

He was surprised by the intensity of her tone.

"Yes, my dear?"

"I want to say something and—I do want you to be—" she searched for a word—"to be understanding."

"Well," he said. "Well, my dear?"—he was even amused—"I'll try."

"I'm going to marry Mark Petre."

She looked at him and saw him color like a child who has no words ready to explain a painful feeling. When he did speak he simply repeated the name.

"Mark Petre!"

She knelt down and seized his hand: "Don't say all the things you think. I can say most of them quite quickly. He's got no money and his family are Papists and he's got no principles (as you know them) and he writes nonsense and he doesn't work at anything . . ."

"And you think he'll make a suitable husband for you?"

She could feel his knees shaking. She still held his hand and said:—

“No. Not a bit. But I don’t want a ‘suitable husband.’”

He barked, “I don’t understand you.”

She said slowly, “I could have had several suitable husbands. But I didn’t want to live with them because they were dull men. I do want to live with Mark, and so I’m going to marry him.”

She waited, wondering if he was trying to understand even that, or whether that set expression and staring blue eyes simply indicated an effort to control his words.

“I should have thought you had more sense. What sort of life d’you think you’re going to have, married to a young man like that? What’s he got to offer you?”

“Nothing.”

“Exactly. And what are you going to live on?”

“What I live on now. Grandfather’s money that he wasted his youth and health acquiring—and yours, that your father got by large-scale swindling—”

“And how much has he got, I should like to know?”

“Three hundred a year—out of what his family earns from acres of slum property. . . . Our ideal ménage will at least be founded on all the traditional injustices. That ought to console you.”

He repeated:—

“Three hundred a year . . .”

She said, “Anyway, I think marrying men is a depressing way of getting money.”

“And what happens if you have children?”

“It won’t happen.”

“I see.”

“At least, not yet,” said Clare, wondering if they would ever want a child and if it would look like Mark, and what it would cost to keep a nurse, and if little girls would ever have long hair again.

“How long have you had an idea of marrying him?”

“Not long.”

“Your mother doesn’t know, of course?”

“No. And you’ve got to help me tell her.”

He ignored this tactic, but she felt his hostility lessen.

“She’ll be broken up by this.”

“Mummie’s not like Humpty Dumpty. She mends very easily. She’ll be desperate at first and cry and be nervy and apprehensive; and then she’ll begin to think about a wedding reception and what an old family the Petres are—”

“You little devil!” said Frederick. He looked at her. “He’s a lucky young man.” The thought made him angry again.

“He isn’t really,” said Clare.

“I don’t know what you mean by that! Unless you mean he’s too conceited to know his luck; which I should think from what I know of the present-day young men is pretty likely.”

Clare shook her head. “I didn’t mean that. I think he knows what you call his luck—” She hesitated, looking at her father, and a sudden thought made her say:—

“Did you think you were ‘lucky’ when you married Mummie?”

He stared. “What a queer question! Naturally I did.”

“Were you never in love, before that?”

He took in her words, and in the moment that he hesitated she felt his hand slacken in hers. In that moment he saw Lise’s profile with the long lashes and tip-tilted nose and piled-up auburn hair outlined, in the frame of a lace-festooned window, against dark blue glacé of the Mediterranean . . .

“No,” he said, and remembered how, when he dropped the pistol, it splashed and fell down through the green water to where he could see it on the white sand by the side of the rock . . .

Clare said without anger, “Nothing you say, or Mummie feels, will make any difference.”

For a moment, and because he was only half listening to her, he managed to understand, and she was surprised by his:—

“I don’t know. You may be right.” He looked at her. But he didn’t really see her. She said:—

“There *is* only what one feels is right.”

He came back now to this business of Clare and Mark Petre. Automatically he thought of it again with resentment and caustic doubt. But his judgment faltered in backing up his prejudices, for, a moment before, he had heard some other self in him, saying to her “You may be right.” (Right, he meant, to let your heart dictate to your head. Queer thing for him to be thinking; and queer remembering Lise, and all that business. . . .) He felt suddenly tired, out of sorts.

“I don’t know,” he said. “You seem determined . . .”

Clare bent her head and laid her forehead for a moment on his knee. The movement surprised and touched him. He laid his hand shyly on her hair. He thought “Perhaps she’s forgotten that she was so angry with me about that wretched charwoman business. . . .” He said:—

“I dare say, as you say, Blanche’ll soon get used to the idea.”

She looked up; she smiled; she said “Of course she will.” She got up and fetched a cigarette and lit it.

“There’s twelve o’clock striking,” he said, feeling miserable. And the twelve chimes dropped like bars between him and his vision of Lise’s face laughing at him. And it was he who was behind the bars, and Lise in a blue dress who ran away, laughing back at him over the big tulle bow under her chin. And he saw her waist and her hips and her piled-up glowing hair speed and sway and vanish, leaving a garden with a fountain and palm trees and the taut unbelievable sunlight of forty years ago.

Big Ben struck twelve.

Blanche didn’t hear twelve o’clock strike. She was sleeping peacefully, her window open a few inches at the top.

Mildred slept too, her round lips open in her plump face.

Mrs. Perrott snored on her back in her new nightgown.

Ackworth and Rose slept with clear consciences and cool hearts.

Mary moved, and half-awake imagined that she lay in Jim's arms with his mouth on hers; and smiled to herself, and fell again into a warm, sweetly troubled sleep.

Amy Cashmore dreamed that she was lying in a basket all lined with pale blue and somebody bent down to her and gave her an egg in a silver egg cup, but just when she was going to crack it to see if it was real or one of those Easter eggs with chocolate in, May came and pulled her out, saying, "Teacher's asking wherever you've got to."

Lily Cashmore turned over, and in the faint glare from the lamp in the courtyard outside she could see George lying on his back with his arm flung up and the back of his hand across his forehead. Looking at him with affection, she reflected, as she often did, on the queerness of men, who never seemed to get tired of "what they wanted." She remembered about George starting with Mr. Fenwick after Christmas— That was a bit of luck. She turned over to try to get a bit of sleep before Baby was up to his tricks again; for he always seemed to wake again between one and two.

Franz Hermann, lying under the red silk eiderdown and watching Ruth dress, said:—

"I wish dat I wass free to take you with me to Paris, Root."

Ruth looked at him from under her lashes. Her square underlip pouted skeptically. She picked her dress off the chair. It didn't look much, off, specially not in this room with all the mirrors and mahogany.

"I mean id," he said, his brown eyes goggling affectionately at her.

"Well, it isn't any use discussing it, is it?" said Ruth, putting her dress over her head.

"Next week I bring you that pair off shoes from Paris, *hein*!"

"Thanks," said Ruth.

"Come an' gif me a little kiss before you tidy your lovely hair," he said.

She came, tired but good-natured.

“You’re never satisfied, are you?” But when he started pulling off her dress again she said, “Oh goodness, you might let me alone now. I’m dead beat.”

So he let her alone at once and got up and put on his black quilted dressing gown and gave her her taxi fare home. And she hugged him before she went, for she was really very grateful to him.

Mark lay looking into the dark.

Now that he was alone he tried to shape his emotion, at the thought of his life with Clare, into a realization of just what that life, day after day, with her, would be.

Would he know her better? See her more or less clearly? Would this passion to possess her time get him, in the end, any nearer to knowing and possessing the thing that was real in her, the burning wire which lit the perpetual flickering film of her behavior? . . .

He turned restlessly, wondering if Clare too was awake. Did she lie questioning her decision? Trying to see the future? Tormenting herself with doubts of certainty, permanency, reality? Did she, as he did, suddenly and dreadfully doubt her own hopes, question her own character, and turn again on her pillow aching for the false—and yet so certain—relief of his hand touching hers, and his voice sounding near her in the dark? (“Who can ever possess what he loves? What are kissing and embracing but the struggles of an exquisite despair?”)

. . . An exquisite despair! . . .

Clare was asleep.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Breakfast in Bed* by Sylvia Thompson]