


**PORTRAIT
BY CAROLINE
SYLVIA
THOMPSON**



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By Sylvia Thompson

THE HOUNDS OF SPRING
THE BATTLE OF THE HORIZONS
CHARIOT WHEELS
PORTRAIT BY CAROLINE

PORTRAIT BY CAROLINE

BY
SYLVIA THOMPSON



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PART ONE

I

Peter Stanley lay on his back on Jane's lawn. His head reclined on a cushion which one of her children had offered him. "Would you like a blue cushion?" it had said, leaning over him with an intent expression.

The September sunshine bathed his eyelids and drenched his body. He gave himself up to a delicious lassitude. Scents and faint sounds drifted across his mind like clouds across a pool; thoughts, disjointed memories, stirred momentarily in its depth, rippled the surface, dived again with silver agility, and disappeared.

He didn't even want to smoke.

The tinkle of glasses on a metal tray approached across the lawn. Peter turned his head and gazed through his eyelashes. A footman loomed up anæmic and chronically surprised, in Jane's yellow livery.

"Put it on the grass beside me."

The youth obeyed. Peter noticed a spot on his chin.

"Tell Mrs. Krebs that I'm out here."

"Very good, sir."

Peter turned on his side, raised himself on one elbow, and helped himself to a whiskey and soda. Jane thought of everything.

It was now half-past twelve. He had been riding with Jane and five of her children since ten o'clock. A cavalcade headed by John, a thin, sunburned boy of twelve, and rear-guarded by Ginevra, aged five, on a pony as fat and deliberate as herself. Ginevra looked like her mother, he thought—that blunt-lipped, square-jawed, American-angel type. But she lacked Jane's devouring vivacity. He thought, with an amused tilt of his mouth and eyebrows, that perhaps in temperament Ginevra resembled Krebs.

He put down his glass empty, and lay back again on his cushion. What a bore that she had those people coming to lunch! He enjoyed being alone with Jane. He enjoyed the beauty of her house and the luxury of her life, just as he savored the rare and yet flagrant quality of her mind. He enjoyed being one of the men of whom she demanded nothing; neither flattery, nor sentiment, nor even paternity.

"Hello, Peter."

He turned his head. She came from the direction of the house dressed in a bathing suit, shaking her maize-colored curls rather consciously in the sun.

“You look comfy,” she said. “No—don’t get up.”

“Are you going to bathe?” He shaded his glance, looking up at her, and saw in perspective her neat chin, wide red lips, arched nostrils, and grey brilliant eyes.

She shook her curls again.

“No. I’ve been doing physical jerks in the sun parlor.”

She ran her right hand down her left arm, thoughtfully.

“You’ve never seen me on a trapeze, have you?”

“Alas, no. I shall to-morrow, if you’ll let me.”

She said, “Hadn’t you better change for luncheon?”

“What shall I put on?”

“How about white flannels? You always look well in flannels.”

“Who’s coming?” he asked.

“The Vernons. Not that it matters very much, but Caroline is beautiful, you know, and I want you to look pretty for her; see, Peter?” Her laugh broke out as if somebody had knocked a cluster of small discordant bells.

“What are you laughing at, Jane?”

“At the idea of you being—pretty.”

He smiled and clasped his hands behind his neck.

“You don’t admire my looks?” he asked.

She stood with her hands on her narrow hips. “Your looks are all right, darling, in a he-mannish irregular sort of way. But you’re too Nordic for my taste.”

“You’re in a Mediterranean phase?”

She nodded. Her gaze became absent. Her eyebrows took on a dramatic inflection.

“Well, if we’re going to get ready,” said Peter. He got up. The stable clock chimed one.

“What does Vernon do?” he asked, as his hostess strolled barefooted beside him towards the house.

“He’s the doctor at Ditch Edge—about two miles from here.”

“Did you say *Maurice* Vernon?”

“Yes.”

“There was a Maurice Vernon who used to be my fag at Eton. I wonder if he could be the same. He’d be about thirty-four now.”

“Maurice is about that. He looks less. He’s very good-looking.”

“I think he must be the same. I knew him quite well; or rather as well as anybody knew him. He was quiet and very clever. As far as I remember he was going in for research. His father had died of some obscure germ, and Vernon had dedicated his future to medical research on that account.”

Jane said, “It must be the same. Caroline told me once that he gave up the research idea when he fell in love with her, so that he might get married when he’d collected a practice.”

They went into the house by the side door, and through an anteroom into the hall.

The air was cool after the sunshine, and freaked with the scent of roses; the figures on the tapestries had a subaqueous dimness.

He said, “Rather bad luck.”

“What? Who?”

“Having to give up research.”

“Oh—you mean Maurice,” Jane said, pacing up two stairs at a time. At the top of a flight she turned and looked at Peter over her bare shoulder. “I guess a live woman’s worth a dead bug any day,” she remarked.

Caroline Vernon came into the hall, leaving Maurice to drive the car round to the garage. She saw Peter Stanley coming down the staircase.

Her impression was of a heavily built man, who moved lightly, of weather-browned features expressing a pleasant sophistication. The lower part of the face showed the civilized animal, the senses developed to the finest savoring of their prey, while the eyes and brow, a heavy brow above lucid thick-lidded eyes, seemed to lodge imponderable reserves of thought and feeling. She felt immediately, but with reservations, that she liked him,

and this definite, but qualified, sense made her shy. She felt that it was typical of Jane to leave her guests alone.

He came and shook hands with her.

“I’m afraid Jane’s still dressing.”

Caroline said, “Jane’s always late. My name’s Caroline Vernon.”

“I know. Mine’s Peter Stanley. Won’t you come into the library until Jane appears?”

They sat upon a Charles II sofa upholstered in maroon velvet. On the wall opposite was a portrait of Hamilton Krebs, a muffin-faced little man in a pink coat and admirable top-boots. Peter began to explain to Caroline that he had known her husband at Eton. Caroline observed him closely. While he talked he had a way of raising one of his slanting brown eyebrows higher than the other. The blunt bridge of his nose was stained with freckles. (He must have been fair as a baby, she thought. She always tried to make pictures of people as babies. Only the people she liked survived this ordeal.) His hair was brown, his teeth very white, his nails well shaped and well cared for. She could smell that he used the same shaving soap as Maurice, but smoked Turkish cigarettes. His voice was deep and full of notes, betraying powers and sensibility, and yet at moments, by its dramatic possibilities, hinting the sentimentalist. Every now and then a gesture, an expression, gave her a hint of a force in him that was either bad temper or high spirits, she couldn’t make out which.

When Maurice came in the two men occupied one another, each with an inner comment on the changes wrought by sixteen years. Maurice perceived that Peter had become in all sorts of ways weighty and worldly, even to the visible liking of “his glass of port,” while Peter’s view was that Maurice had retained an outward boyishness, was still fair, taut, slender, and even a little diffident, and had inwardly gained, by the accretions of experience, an interesting hardness and complexity of character.

Caroline, watching them, found a charm in the mutual pleasure of their meeting. They forgot her presence in their past. They circled and pawed round one another like two big dogs preparing for a game. She smiled over fragments of their talk.

Peter said: “You cooked sausages worse than any fag that ever breathed. They were always like sticks of charcoal. . . .”

Maurice screwed up his eyes with delight.

“D’you remember when you threw the three sausages and the plate out of your window and they hit Bulkeley?”

“I do. I can see Bulkeley’s face now, glaring up at me. Luckily for me, it only broke his hat.”

“Poor Bulkeley . . .” said Maurice.

“It’s curious we should never have come across each other since then,” said Maurice. “You went to Oxford, didn’t you?”

Peter nodded.

“I was settling down to the idea of a ‘first,’ with the laudable ambition of getting a history Fellowship, when the war broke out. I suppose you joined up later?”

“In 1916. I was invalided out just before the Armistice and went to Cambridge the next summer term.”

Caroline observed them while they talked. She was interested by the contrast. Maurice, lean and quiet, his features changing perpetually with the coming and going of his attention; Peter Stanley, certain in manner, trenchant in speech, the quick strength of his gestures breaking out spasmodically.

He turned to her suddenly and said, “You must think me very rude, Mrs. Vernon, becoming so absorbed in our sense of the past.”

“No,” she said, “I like seeing you enjoying yourselves.” She met Maurice’s glance and smiled.

Jane came in, apologizing. She kissed Caroline. “You must all be famished,” she said. She looked at her watch. “Why, it’s nearly two o’clock!” She rang for cocktails, and began to question Caroline.

“How’s that darling Anne?”

Caroline said that Anne was well and had learned a new nursery rhyme.

“And how’s that darling mother of yours?”

“We’ve just left Anne with her, on our way, to spend the afternoon there. And, by the way, Mamma says will you and Hamilton dine with her next Sunday, if Hamilton’s going to be here still. She says that some grouse she’s had sent her will have been hung just long enough.”

Jane put down her glass. “Come on into lunch, darlings. I’ll ring up your mother, Caroline, and tell her I’d adore to go on Sunday. Hamilton won’t be

home, because he's sailing for New York on Saturday, poor darling."

They followed Jane into the dining room. The walls were stippled white; the carpet was white; the curtains and pelmets on the three long windows were made of white velvet.

They settled at the table designed by Jane—a circle of looking-glass supported by three hexagonal glass pillars. A bowl in the centre looked like an island overgrown with white roses; the blooms on the edge bent to stare down at the reflection of their big fragile faces.

Jane sat with her back to the windows, Peter Stanley opposite her. Maurice and Caroline faced each other. Caroline said, "Like four points of the compass."

The notion pleased Jane.

"Who's north?" she said.

"You are," said Maurice.

She refuted this.

"Am I so cold?"

"Call it the magnetic north," said Peter Stanley with an air of absent-minded gallantry.

She flashed:—

"You're the warm south, then, Peter!"

The butler filled his glass.

"Hippocrene," murmured Maurice, looking at the sherry.

"And Maurice is west, and Caroline east," Jane continued, munching thoughtfully.

The room was filled with gold and green light from the garden. Jane began to talk to Maurice about the value of sunshine to health. She told him exactly how many minutes' exposure she arranged for each of her children. "Julian, the baby, is as brown as this bit of bread all over," she said.

"Heredity or environment, Jane?" interrupted Peter with a quizzical grin.

"Peter, darling—do you think I'd select the Aga Khan?"

Caroline found her mind edging away from the task of talking to Peter Stanley. She realized that she felt shy, and was annoyed with herself.

“Where exactly do you live?” he was asking her.

“A village called Ditch Edge, beyond King’s Norton. Maurice bought the practice four years ago, when we married.” She asked him if he knew this part of the country. He said he’d known it as a boy when he hunted with the Heythrop. Did she hunt?

She said no, she couldn’t afford to. Maurice had, at first, but now he never had time. It was a pity, she said, because they had enough stabling for twenty horses, although their house was quite small.

He asked her about her house. She said: “It was originally a farmhouse built in Charles the Second’s reign, in Cotswold stone. It’s rather lovely. It has sash windows in each of the two floors. They face south one side and north the other. On the south we look out miles over the country, and on the north the house is on the village street, opposite the duck pond. The surgery is a red brick annex built by a Quaker who had the house—I don’t know what for. The garden is rather lovely, and the orchard specially, I think—we keep bees there, and my little girl’s rabbits—”

She felt acutely that she was boring him and wished that Maurice would talk to Mr. Stanley and let her chatter to Jane.

“Do you still hunt?” she asked him, feeling that of all subjects, she had clung to the one she understood least. She wondered what he did “do.”

He said: “As a matter of fact, I’m looking round for a really small place with good stabling for this winter. I want to combine regular exercise with the modicum of isolation.”

“Why do you want to be isolated?” she asked, suspecting some masculine affectation.

“I’m working on a book—a life of Lord Melbourne. This neighborhood would suit me because I’m within thirty miles of the Bodleian, when I want to be.” He spoke to his hostess. “You’ll have to discover a cottage for me, Jane.”

Jane was busily expounding to Maurice, whom she chose to consider alternatively as medical expert and confessor, a theory about sex-determination. “It certainly does coincide with my own experiences,” she said.

Peter Stanley repeated his remark. She looked at him absently.

“You can live here if you want to,” she said. “Or you can find him a cottage, Caroline darling. You’re always roving about everywhere.”

Caroline said: "He wants the impossible. As far as I can make out, he wants a willow cabin with good stables."

Maurice said suddenly, eagerly: "I've got an idea."

Caroline, seeing her husband's vivid look, thought, "No, he can't live with us." It would be typical of Maurice to suggest such an arrangement. He was always asking people to come and live with them, and when they occasionally came, he became restive, resentful, and finally quite silent in their presence. She was relieved to hear him say: —

"There's a place, probably just the sort you want, in our village. It used to be a pub called 'The Quiet Woman.' When the publican gave it up, some crank bought it and modernized it, and lived there for a time, and then left it and went to live in Ravenna. He lets it now to anyone who wants it, and it's empty at the moment, isn't it, Caroline?"

"But it hasn't got any stabling," Caroline objected.

"I'm just coming to the point," said Maurice; "Stanley can use our stables, and share our garage."

"And live at The Quiet Woman," said Stanley, laughing. "I *do* like your idea, though," he said. "I like it immensely."

Caroline felt him look at her: —

"Should you mind, Mrs. Vernon, if Maurice's scheme really proves feasible?"

She was surprised to detect an inflection of apology in his manner.

"But of course not. I think the idea's excellent." She added: "Maurice can come round and cook your sausages."

Jane was enthusiastic. She tossed her curls and urged them to settle it at once.

Maurice suggested that Stanley should come over on Monday, before he returned to London, and have a look at the place. "If I'm out or called away, Caroline'll show you over it," he said.

They were still discussing the plan over dessert. Caroline, silent while the others talked, found herself admiring the way its details fitted and dovetailed, like the solution of an ingeniously designed jig-saw puzzle. She noticed that Maurice and Peter Stanley and Jane, who were fitting the pieces together, were exhilarated more by their own cleverness than by the ingenuity of the force which Caroline came later to recognize as its Inventor.

“And I’ll take your flat in London for Hamilton when he gets back,” Jane said. “It’s just what he needs, poor darling, for he hates the Chelsea house, and hasn’t got any place in town where he can stay alone in comfort.”

“. . . and there’s plenty of room for your groom, and a family if he has one, to live above our stables,” said Maurice.

“You seem to have decided on the house in advance,” said Caroline.

“Mrs. Vernon is being cautious for me,” said Peter, and she felt him look curiously at her again.

Jane took up the matter of dates and lease and furnishing. Caroline, leaning on her elbows, resting her chin on her hands, diverted herself by watching their inverted faces in the reflection of the table. They looked absurd, she thought, all chin and mouthing lips and slanted eyes; truncated narcissi pallidly suspended in a well of light below an island of white roses.

They had coffee in the garden under the cedar tree. Bathed by its purple shadows, they lay back in deck chairs, lazily sipping out of tiny cups, drowsily charmed by each other’s voices, idly responsive to one another’s talk. Caroline took off her hat and threw it on the ground. Peter looked at her. Her black hair was parted on one side, brushed straight across her smooth white forehead, and knotted in the nape of her neck. That cleft “du Maurier” chin was attractive. He observed her attention to his look.

Caroline’s glance slid to the brilliant distances of the gardens, the yew hedges, the rose-brick façade of the house. Peter Stanley was saying that there was no hope for Liberalism . . . that he used to be a Liberal, until the advent of the Coalition. . . . Maurice was arguing. Jane was always eager to argue. She took an impassioned though uninformed interest in English politics. She believed, she asserted, that the British Empire would save itself by imitating America. Caroline watched Jane’s peacock standing in the middle of her lawn. . . . So overdressed and such a vulgar voice. Jane thought her peacocks made her more than ever like a character in Henry James. . . .

“You aren’t interested in politics, Mrs. Vernon?”

Caroline turned her head and gazed at him for a moment.

“I think the whole population ought to be disfranchised. I should then give a vote to men and women over forty who could pass severe mental tests and examinations.”

“Government by the intelligentsia?”

“It might be an improvement.”

Maurice said, “It’s probably safest to have fools governing fools and leave it at that.”

Peter smiled. “It’s difficult not to agree. Active citizenship to-day consists in paying taxes and parking your car in the proper places. The ideals of the Greek city state linger on in various forms of misapprehension. One of them is the average man’s belief in his citizenship. He interprets this belief by voting for a party, or a man, or a programme, which appeals to his interests and his prejudices. He then relapses into his private life, secure in his fundamental faith that nothing drastic or sudden will or can be done. . . . If such men (and women) found themselves deprived of their franchise and governed by a set of individuals selected simply because they were qualified to govern, they would undoubtedly band together, united by their common natural trait,—a mistrust of efficiency,—destroy their rulers, and reinstate the image of Demos.”

“You are cynical, Peter,” Jane protested. “Or else you’re always posing as a cynic. I can’t ever make out which it is. . . . It seems to me,” she added, running her rose-red finger nails through her curls, “that nobody nowadays has any idealism at *all!*”

So Jane-like, thought Caroline—this obsession about ideals. Her idealism was like her trapeze; she swung on it as an exotic amusement.

Peter asked, “Enumerate some of your own ideals, Jane?”

“Oh, hell! I can’t tell, straight off—” She pondered, pulling at a forelock.

“Yes, Jane,” Caroline pressed; “what do you think matters?”

“Oh, well . . . I think kindness matters quite a lot . . . and . . . chivalry. And, well, if you’re kind to everybody and aren’t mean to anyone, that covers quite a bit of ground, *doesn’t it?*” she demanded, glancing at her three guests. “What are you laughing about, Maurice?”

“Nothing.”

She doubted him, but countered with vivid good-nature, “Now it’s your turn, Maurice.”

He paused; became abstracted; returned to earth. “I think truth matters. Not only speaking truthfully, which is easy, but thinking truthfully. I dislike cant and sentimentalism, and pretenses. I think kindness is a dangerous rule of conduct because it leads to pretending and evading.”

“Next,” said Jane. “Peter. Your code?”

“I think Jane’s right and Maurice is right, up to a point. But I believe that both their beliefs are subordinate. The important things are included in the proper use of power! The worst offenses are all, in some way, abuses of power—power over people, in groups, or more usually individuals. Most legislation has to exist because people abuse their power over one another. (I should include the misuse of one’s brains under the same category.)”

“A doctrine of mutual obligation?” Maurice asked.

“To some extent.”

Maurice shrugged his shoulders. “People must sacrifice each other sometimes. Individuals don’t matter so very much.”

“What about *you*, Caroline?” Jane demanded.

Caroline yawned. “The thing that matters most to me is that people should wash a lot and smell nice. And snobbery is boring and so is affectation . . .”

Jane was puzzled. She couldn’t make out if Caroline was serious.

“Don’t you think kindness matters, Caroline?”

“Oh, yes. Kindness to children and animals.”

“And truth?” Jane persisted.

“Nobody knows what it is.”

“Well—what Peter’s been saying . . . Using your power over people rightly.”

Caroline turned to Peter with a smile that was half apologetic and half impertinent.

“I don’t know what Mr. Stanley thinks constitutes power over somebody else.”

Peter proffered, “Official power, economic power, physical power, a relationship of some kind—most important, the power given by an affection or emotion . . .”

“Oh,” said Caroline. “I see . . . How ingenious . . . What about going to see the children, Jane?”

Jane always took her guests to see the Nursery House, as other hostesses take their guests to inspect their greenhouses, or admire their gardens. Facing south, built on what was formerly a cricket pitch, it was divided from the matriarchal residence by a belt of woods, but connected and controlled by that maternal ligament, Jane's telephone.

Stanley and the Vernons, following their hostess among the trees, along the winding path, noticed occasional gashes or scrapes in the tree trunks and scars on the turf, to which Jane gave historic significance by some account of a bicycle smash, or a particularly fierce internecine fight.

They strolled round to the sweep of drive in front of the house, and paused to take in the distances of the countryside. Down the vista of the drive Caroline saw two nurses in white uniforms wheeling perambulators. Beside them trotted two small stout figures which she recognized as Maximilian and Sofia Krebs, the four-year-old twins. (Jane sometimes referred to them vivaciously, but with a hint of mystery, as the Royal Bastards, and Maurice had reported that on the occasion when he vaccinated Maximilian, Jane had asked him whether he thought the boy had a Hapsburg chin.)

Stanley followed Mrs. Vernon's glance. She asked:—

“Which are in the prams, Jane?”

“Julian in one, and Perdita in the other. Perdita gets tired if she's allowed to walk with the twins, but she simply hates being babyfied and going in the pram. Yesterday she kicked the undernurse who was putting her in.” Jane laughed. She was proud of Perdita's temper, which she had inherited from a well-known sculptor.

On the verandah Ginevra was knitting placidly beside the German governess, her flaxen head bent, her bare legs dangling from the rocking chair. She glanced up for a moment at the visitors' approach, gave them each a hardly perceptible nod, and resumed her painstaking manipulation of needles and wool.

The front door opened into a long room which appeared to be a library and gymnasium combined. Bookshelves lined the two long walls, and from the high ceiling hung trapezes, ropes, rings, and rope ladders. In the centre of the room a boy of nine was swinging himself into a series of attitudes on parallel bars. He jumped off and came towards his mother's guests.

“How's your little girl?” he asked Caroline politely.

Caroline said that Anne was very well. He looked Caroline over with his friendly glance.

“I’ve got a book on astrology,” he said.

“Have you?”

Jane introduced her sixteen-year-old daughter, Comfort. The child’s beauty showed mistily through her shyness.

Jane said, absently arranging the riband on one of Comfort’s fair pigtails:

—
“You ought to let Mrs. Vernon see some of your painting, since she paints herself.”

Comfort frowned and said something about having to go and get tidy to go out to tea.

Peter Stanley turned to Caroline as they went downstairs, and asked why she hadn’t told him that she painted.

She was surprised by an effect of sincerity in his manner.

“The topic didn’t arise,” she said.

Maurice broke in. “Yes—she’s just had a show in London.” He named a well-known gallery. He slipped his arm through hers. “She never talks about it.”

Caroline felt the unaccountable resentment which the subject of her “art” always roused in her. Sometimes she wondered whether her shyness of the topic were a form of conceit.

“If I could paint the way Caroline can,” said Jane, turning on Stanley with her wide pert smile, “I might sell my children and turn this place into a studio!”

“Have you got a studio in your house?” Stanley asked Caroline, studying her features and coloring.

“Yes. In the attic.”

She realized that her words sounded curt.

“You must see it when you come over on Monday,” said Maurice, turning to his friend, wishing inwardly that Caroline’s mood hadn’t shown itself in Stanley’s presence.

As they returned through the wood Jane said:—

“If you come near here for the winter, Peter darling, I shall send Comfort to you for history lessons. It’d be a pity not to make use of a tame expert when there’s one about.”

Before going, Caroline went upstairs to make herself presentable to her mother’s fastidious glances.

In Jane’s bedroom the lacquer furniture waited, like Chinese councilors, about the impassive repose of the Jacobean four-poster.

Jane stood with her hands on her hips and watched Caroline’s reflection in a mirror copied from the Silver Room at Knole.

“I wish you could stay for tea.”

“So do I, but we’ve got to fetch Anne from my mother’s, and have tea there.”

“Wonder if Peter’ll take that cottage. Sounds perfect to me.”

“Maurice’ll be awfully pleased if he does.”

Jane looked at her.

“You don’t like him?”

Caroline put away her lipstick.

“I should rather say he didn’t like me; or anyway that I bored him.”

“My dear, his manner’s never exactly gallant. That’s what I like him for. You know where you are with him. He’s darn clever, though. Did you read his *Eighteenth Century*?”

“Of course.”

“Hamilton tried to read it, poor darling, and simply didn’t understand it. His idea of the eighteenth century is very décolletée women and Louis-fourteenth-street sofas.”

“Reading isn’t Hamilton’s hobby, though. You expect the wrong things from him.”

“I don’t think I expect anything from him.”

Caroline looked round the room. “You clearly get something, anyway.”

Jane was silent. Then she teased:—

“Are you covetous, Caroline?”

“In some ways.”

“Of my money, darling?”

“Of some of the things it gets you.”

“What, in particular?”

“Your children, for one thing.”

“You’ve got Anne.”

“I’d like a lot.”

“You could have some more?”

“We can’t afford it. I can’t let us afford it. You see, as soon as we’ve put aside enough money, Maurice can take up research again. It’s the thing he’s always wanted and cared about.”

“Not more than you.”

“No. But he had to choose.”

“Doesn’t he want any more children?”

Caroline hesitated, and found her explanation.

“They aren’t a man’s fulfillment, in the same way.”

“You’ve got your art.”

“Art. . . .”

“You enjoy that?” said Jane.

“Yes. Frightfully. But it’s a stimulant, not a narcotic, in the long run.”

Jane said, “I think you’re mixing up the artistic temperament and the artistic function.”

“Perhaps.”

“Do you know Philip Bertorelli?” Jane asked inconsequently.

“I think I met him in the spring, at dinner at your house in London.”

“Did you like him?”

“I thought him attractive.”

“He is, isn’t he?” Jane yawned, stretching her arms above her head. “By the way, do you like this dress?”

“It’s charming. I wish I looked nice in *garçonne* funny clothes.”

Jane looked at her friend.

“You’re voluptuous and statuesque, darling, which is much better, really.”

As they turned to go out of the room, Caroline noticed a photograph on the chest of drawers.

“Is this a new one of you, Jane?” She picked it up.

“No, darling. A very old one. That’s me at seventeen.”

“In a ballet dress?”

Jane nodded. “Mm. Didn’t I ever tell you? I was training to be a dancer. When I was sixteen Ducroix came over to New York and happened to see me, and picked me out in the part I was doing, in a big ballet. He told me he would make a second Genée of me. He was crazy about my work and he persuaded my father to let me go and train in Paris. You can imagine how thrilled I was!”

Caroline examined Jane in the photograph, poised like a bird on the edge of flight.

“And then?”

With an odd childish gesture, Jane snatched the photo. “And then I married Hamilton.”

“Why?”

“Hell knows—because I was in love with him and he wanted me.”

“You were in love—”

“Mmm.”

“How queer.”

“Isn’t it?”

“That was how long ago?”

“Seventeen years.”

Jane stood the photograph up again.

“I keep that photograph because it’s a sort of symbol to me of my other life.” Her laugh jangled faintly, sentimentally. Caroline gave her an uncertain glance. “I mean a life I could have had,” said Jane.

As they went out of the room she added, “I imagine nearly everybody in the end has two lives. The life they have, and a life they might have had.”

“And the one they might have had haunts them?”

“Yes,” said Jane, “like a ghost.”

II

A fortnight later Lady Snow descended to the drawing-room, fresh from her afternoon sleep. She rang for Hamlin.

“Miss Caroline is coming to tea.”

“Very good, m’lady.”

“Tell Madame André.”

“Yes, m’lady.”

Lady Snow took a book off the table.

“Will Miss Caroline be bringing Miss Anne?” asked Hamlin, carefully subduing her eagerness.

“I’m afraid not, Hamlin. Not this afternoon.”

Hamlin retired to tell Madame André that Mrs. Vernon was coming to tea. She informed her in the clear accents and stiff manner which she considered suitable toward foreigners, and which she had used toward her since the day, twenty-one years before, when M. André had entered the service of the Snows as chef, accompanied by his bride, as kitchen maid.

Madame André asked whether the little Anne was expected. Hamlin replied that she didn’t know, and departed to her pantry, her color higher than usual. She did not admit to herself that she was jealous of Madame André. (For Anne adored her grandmother’s cook, who sang to her and made her cakes adorned with every conceit that skill and icing-sugar and imagination could devise—sugar boats, sugar fairies, sugar animals and flowers, and, at Christmas, a pink and white sugar cradle with a baby in it.)

Madame André watched Hamlin’s retreating figure stump away down the flagged corridor. She had never felt any resentment of what she understood to be Hamlin’s dislike. She appreciated Hamlin’s value in the household.

The kitchen maid out in the passage, scrubbing, whistled in snatches.

Madame André padded across the kitchen into the scullery and took down her basket from a shelf. She readjusted the chef’s cap, which she had worn since her husband’s death both as a badge of office and a mark of sentiment, rolled down her sleeves, and changed her felt slippers for a pair of brown sand shoes. Having lined the basket with a piece of clean kitchen paper, she set off down the path to the kitchen garden. She would pick the

peaches herself to send up for Madame Vernon's tea. The gardener, *ce vieux* Hodges, was stupid. Pierre had always said it. He didn't understand fruit. Hodges and Madame André waged a guerrilla warfare round the hothouses.

Lady Snow took a parasol and her book and strolled out on to the flagged terrace on the south of her house. She caught sight of Madame André's crisp bulk, topped by the white cap of M. André, hurrying toward the walled garden. Lady Snow was grateful for the sentiments which made the devoted Frenchwoman stay in her service, despite the rural existence which she had adopted after Caroline's marriage. She would never get such another cook, trained by a chef who was both her lover and her culinary impresario. She was worth her incredible weight in gold, and one of the few anxieties in Lady Snow's existence was that Madame André's demise might precede her own.

For Irene Snow had two supreme interests, the pleasures of the table and the health of the body, the second moderating any excessive indulgence in the first. Her natural taste for luxury, combined with her good sense, had led her to marry a man possessed of money as well as intelligence. Harold Snow had followed a career of modest distinction at the Foreign Office, content that his young, pretty, sensible wife should conduct his social existence in their house in Pont Street. He was a man of mild character with considerable understanding of prints and etchings. Brought up by a violent-tempered mother, he found his wife's society a relief. He was in love with her according to his understanding of that condition, and neither wanted nor expected anything more than the passive and practical nature of her response. Irene Snow was never in love with her husband, or any other man. When she had produced one child, whose birth she prejudiced by excessive and panic-stricken demands for chloroform, she considered that the demands of nature and society had been satisfied.

She devoted herself to social pleasures and conventions, preserved her health and with it her good looks, and, as the years passed, became known as an authority on the fine shades of gastronomy. In 1912 she published a book of recipes called *A Chef Confides*. In 1913 Harold Snow died of influenza. In 1916 her chef, M. André, was killed on the Somme.

Lady Snow continued to live in the house in Pont Street.

After the war she entertained there for Caroline, who left school in 1919. Caroline became engaged to a guardsman and broke off her engagement. Then she went to the Slade for a year, to Paris for another year, and shortly after her return met Maurice Vernon. Lady Snow sold the house in Pont

Street, made over the proceeds to her daughter, and bought herself a small Cotswold house at King's Norton, eight miles from where her daughter had settled. She said at the time, "Eight miles serves the purpose of eighty from my point of view. It is too far for either of us to walk, in the ordinary way, and not far enough for either of us to make efforts to see each other." During her life Lady Snow had acquired that facile wisdom which comes to people who are more observant than sensitive.

In fact she saw Caroline frequently. Their relation, which had been stormy before Caroline's marriage, was now pleasant and satisfactory to both. Lady Snow never bothered to resent the inevitable or the irrevocable. Caroline might have made a better marriage; to be the wife of a country doctor was renunciation of amusement and success which Caroline's plea of "being in love" seemed in no way to palliate. Caroline's obstinacy about Maurice Vernon had seemed as inexplicable as her previous obstinacy about painting. But Lady Snow, placid and fatalistic, except where her own comfort was concerned, now extended her affections to Maurice, gave Caroline an evening dress once a year from Worth, where she got her own clothes, and put away her tiara for Anne. She thought it probable that Anne would marry well.

Hodges had arranged her chair as usual in the corner of the rose garden sheltered by a yew hedge and exposed to the mild afternoon sun. Lady Snow ensconced herself in exact comfort, laid the rug over her knees, and reflected that the "Betty Uprichards" were a great success in the round bed. All the roses had done well this year: it was now nearly the end of September and they continued to bloom in summer luxuriance.

She opened the book of memoirs which had arrived from the *Times* by the afternoon post. Mrs. Belville had recommended it as being terribly scandalous. Lady Snow, cool-blooded and automatically virtuous, had always felt the glamour of what she called "impropriety." She was instinctively attracted to the pursuit of scandal; a banned book roused her subtlest activities, and she could sniff out eroticism in a library as a terrier finds garbage in a dust heap.

When Caroline arrived she found her mother reading.

"My dear child, how are you?"

"Very hot, thank you, Mother. Maurice dropped me at Compton and I've walked from there." Caroline pulled off her hat and threw it on to the grass.

"Be very careful not to get cold there, darling. You'd better go and ask Vaughan for one of my little coats."

“No thanks, Mother.” Caroline looked down the vista of garden. “How lovely your roses are.” She stepped across the path and picked one. She plunged her mouth and nose in its cool crimson petals. She said, “Their scent makes one feel restless and empty and insatiable.”

“My dear child, what nonsense.”

Caroline pinned the rose on the lapel of her dress.

“It’s the incense of Eros. Being blind, he’s particularly sensitive to smells.”

“Is Maurice going to fetch you?”

“No.”

“Is he very busy these days?”

“Very. The school term’s started again, which adds to his work, rather.”

“And has that friend of his, Mr. Stanley, arrived yet?”

“He arrives next week.”

“I think he must be a nephew of dear old Lord Melchester. I seem to remember that Lord Melchester’s sister married Lawrence Stanley, who had something to do with Oxford. I forget exactly what.”

“His father was a fishmonger.”

“A fishmonger?”

“Yes. At Oxford.”

“You do talk such nonsense, Caroline. It really is time you stopped talking nonsense. Maurice tells me Mr. Stanley writes.”

“He’s written two books.”

“I’m so very interested. I always enjoy literary people, and I’m quite sure if it’s the Stanleys we used to know that Maurice’s friend must be delightful. You must tell me the names of his books and I’ll put them on my library list.”

Caroline said that she thought Mr. Stanley’s books would bore her mother. Lady Snow produced a notebook and pencil out of her bag.

“My dear child, I’m not nearly so easily bored as you are. Now what are the books?”

“One’s called *The Eighteenth Century*.”

“Oh! I shall enjoy that.”

Caroline made no comment.

“And the other?” asked Lady Snow precisely.

“The other’s a life of Guizot.”

Lady Snow was pleased.

“I always enjoy anything about the French Revolution.”

Caroline said: “He was later. It’s very interesting. I was reading it till two this morning. He had the most extraordinary career.”

“Oh, yes. Wasn’t he a lover of the Empress?”

“Which Empress, Mother?”

“The Empress Eugénie?”

“No.”

“Oh, well, I must have muddled him up with someone else.”

Lady Snow wrote down “Life of de Goncourt,” and put her notebook back in her bag.

Hamlin appeared and announced that tea was ready.

Caroline had often reflected that the drawing-room at Thorpe Cottage represented her mother’s powers and limitations. It was comfortable in every detail; the luxury of the armchairs and sofas was reënforced by small cushions of every shape, and footstools and reading lamps were placed exactly where they were needed. The room was prettily and tastefully overcrowded; innumerable little tables were covered with ornaments, photographs, books bound in vellum or suède, and vases stuffed with flowers; the curtains, which, with most of the furniture, had been brought from Pont Street, were of heavy brocade heavily fringed; the Sargent portrait of Lady Snow, painted soon after her marriage, hung above the mantelpiece.

Caroline sat on the fender stool, which had been her favorite seat ever since she could remember. She took off the lid of the muffin dish.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, with quickened interest, “how lovely, darling Choux!” (Caroline had called Madame André “Choux” ever since, at the age of eight, she had heard M. André addressing his wife by that endearment.)

Madame André had made Chilean sandwiches—a combination of toasted cheese and strawberry jam which Caroline particularly liked.

Lady Snow began to talk about Jane Krebs, who had recently dined with her.

“She tells me her eldest daughter, Comfort, is so very talented. You were very talented at her age, Caroline. Girls are much cleverer nowadays than they used to be, but I don’t really think it goes very far in the end.”

“What goes far, Mother?”

“Being clever,” said Lady Snow.

Caroline glanced at her mother’s face. The well-carved eyelids and nostrils and firm pink lips indicated to her experience of her mother’s character all the “cleverness” that practical life could demand. Caroline knew how well an intellectual laziness and a spasmodic helplessness of manner had served to camouflage her mother’s will, and to save her, at times, from uncongenial forms of activity.

Caroline said, taking another sandwich:—

“It not only doesn’t go far, but it doesn’t go anywhere. It doesn’t go at all.”

Lady Snow raised her eyebrows.

“What doesn’t go, my dear child?”

Caroline smiled. “Being clever.”

Lady Snow looked bored.

“That’s what I said. . . . Jane had such charming shoes on. She gave me the address of the place where she gets them. I’m determined to get a pair just like them.”

Caroline said: “Jane always has lovely shoes.”

When Caroline came in, Maurice was playing shopping with Anne in the drawing-room. Anne stood behind a counter improvised by two chairs and a tea tray; her long brown curls were pinned up on top of her head, and she wore one of Maurice’s handkerchiefs as an apron. She said:—

“Come on, buy some carrots, Dadda!”

Maurice bought a carrot, a book, and a piece of gold sealing wax. Anne received his halfpenny with a slow gratified smile.

Caroline rang the bell and ordered Maurice’s tea.

“Why didn’t you ask for it, darling? You must look after yourself. You’ve had a dreadfully heavy three days.” She took his hand and absently kissed the tips of his fingers. “I do hope no one’ll have a baby to-night.”

Anne said:—

“Come on, buy some carrots, Mamma?”

Caroline entered into a transaction, and Anne wrapped up two carrots in a piece of newspaper.

Rose brought in Maurice’s tea on a tray and put it on a low table in front of the fire.

“Come on, buy some carrots, Rose.”

Rose blushed, but Anne wrapped a carrot in a piece of paper and handed it over the counter. “Isn’t it a nice day?” she said. Rose smiled, blushed again, and went out carrying her parcel.

Caroline poured out the tea.

“There’s some of your special damson jam. Mother gave it to me for you.”

Maurice didn’t answer. He was wondering whether he had left the *New Statesman* at Mrs. Belville’s after he had shown her that paragraph.

“Hell—I believe I did!”

Caroline waited.

“I’ve left it at Mrs. Belville’s.”

“You mean the *New Statesman*?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll call for it to-morrow morning on my way to Banbury.”

“That would be nice of you, darling. There’s an article on disarmament I especially wanted to keep.”

Maurice collected newspaper cuttings. An entire chest of drawers in his dressing room was packed with cuttings which he meant to paste into albums.

Anne put a fat hand tentatively on the edge of the sugar basin.

“No, Anne,” said Caroline.

Anne looked from her mother to her father.

Maurice put his arm round her.

“No, Anne,” he said.

“I might give Ramsay a bit, mightn’t I?” she suggested, glancing at the Sealyham.

“Very well.” Maurice gave her a lump of sugar. She held it for a moment, felt its temptation, and then quickly bent down and pushed it between Ramsay’s jaws. “There you are, Ramsay,” she said, a little breathlessly.

Caroline said:—

“Fetch my workbag, Anne, would you?” Anne obeyed; grave and self-important, she opened the corner cupboard and took out the big brocade bag which she so admired. She was pleased when Caroline suddenly hugged her; her senses responded to her mother’s fragrant nearness. She rubbed her nose against Caroline’s shoulder and then drew away, ending her caress abruptly, like a small animal. Her look wavered for a moment on her mother’s face.

Maurice began to discuss an editorial in the *Times*. While he talked he spread damson jam very neatly on his bread and butter. Anne watched him: she was always fascinated by the precision and efficacy of his actions. When he made boats they sailed; when he drew things they looked exactly like the things; when for a great treat he gave her a bath, he always dried her all over. Anne made no conscious comparisons, but if she was attracted and beglamoured by her mother’s games and jokes and prettiness, she felt for her father a profound and increasing trust.

Maurice remarked: “Belville and I were arguing this morning. He’s the type of Tory we want least. His Toryism is nothing but a snarling defense of interests.”

“Is Mrs. Belville better?”

“Oh, yes. It was more the shock than the fall which laid her up. She wants us to dine next week when the Havilands are going.”

“Lady Haviland rang up this afternoon to ask if we’d play tennis on Sunday. I accepted provisionally for you.”

“Good. Did you say your mother brought this jam?”

Nannie came in to fetch Anne. Anne said “Good-night”; an unalterable ceremony which bestowed two kisses on each parent and was followed by a scamper to the door.

Caroline took up her embroidery, a curtain covered with a Jacobean design of birds and fruits and big-petaled flowers. She said, "I shall have to get Mother to match me some more wools when she goes to London next week. These real carnation reds are awfully difficult to get." She took up a skein of green wool for the edge of a bird's wing.

"Why don't you go to London for a few days for a change? You know you always enjoy it."

"Darling, I don't want to go without you."

He sprawled back in his armchair.

"You know I can't get away. Anyway, Peter Stanley'll be arriving and I want to be there."

"Jane's sending him some extra furniture, isn't she? The place is hopelessly badly furnished, and I should think Mr. Stanley's addicted to comfort."

Maurice chortled.

"I happened to pass The Quiet Woman this morning, and I saw a van with Jane's furniture being unloaded; the most astonishing collection of 'junk,' as Jane calls it. A Sheraton writing desk, Chinese Chippendale chairs, a grandfather clock, a tremendous French bed, a towel horse, the 'Venus de Milo' in marble—and heaven knows what else."

Caroline laughed.

"I think I'd better go round to-morrow and see it's arranged in some sort of order."

"Don't waste your time. You'd much better go on with that picture. How's it going?"

"It's going to be a failure."

Maurice came over to the sofa and sat down beside her. He put his arm round her.

"You told me yesterday it was going to be a crashing success."

Caroline's sulkiness was melted by his proximity.

"It went badly this morning," she said, laying down her embroidery frame.

"My practice wouldn't be very successful if I abandoned my patients after three days." He bent his head to rub her shoulder, as Anne had done.

“Darling, I do love you,” she said.

He was silent and remained still, his forehead against her neck. After a minute he said:—

“I wonder what it would cost to have new garage doors.”

III

It was past midnight.

Peter Stanley poured out another whiskey and soda and handed it to Maurice.

“You needn’t go yet.”

Maurice repeated that he had to go off early in the morning. He got up.

Peter said:—

“I shall start work to-morrow. I haven’t a shadow of excuse to do anything more to this place. You and Caroline and Jane have made it tremendously civilized. I shall settle here for life.”

“I wish you would.”

Peter looked round the low-ceilinged hall which he used as a library and study. (The dining room, ten-foot square and stone-floored, adjoined the kitchen, and housed a table, a chair, a corner cupboard, and Jane’s “Venus de Milo.”) The large mullioned window, framing in daylight a sweeping southward view, was hidden now by the long curtains, a brilliant deep green chosen for him by Caroline. The same green velvet (“like fathoms of *crème de menthe*,” Jane had said) upholstered the profound comfort of armchairs and sofa, which were redeemed from an appearance of luxury by the sobriety of smoke-brown cushions and carpet, and the farmhouse simplicity of the other furniture. One of the wainscoted walls was already hidden by books, while empty shelves, erected by the local carpenter, against the opposite wall had still to be filled from the two cases of books in the corner. The room was pleasantly lit by two lamps and cheered and warmed by the big fire on the hearth.

“Melbourne might take shape well here. My London flat was noisy.”

Maurice took up his overcoat.

“What’s your general scheme of life?”

“For the future?”

“Yes.”

Peter hesitated.

“I find however definitely I plan out the future it always becomes, in fact, exactly like the past. Don’t you find that?”

“No. I don’t think so,” Maurice added.

“I find life always progresses on some sort of curve, up or down.”

“Like a fever temperature?”

“Yes.”

“You’re lucky. Mine’s a perpetual normal.”

The subject interested Peter, but Maurice felt it was dull. He mistrusted generalization, and was soon bored by speculations which were not susceptible of proof. He said:—

“I suppose you mean to stay here until you’ve finished your book?”

“Yes. That means about six months. After that I may travel for the summer. I’ve had a plan for years, which has never yet been feasible, of buying a really small island in a really warm sea (that’ll mean the Pacific), where I can retreat when the stinking breath of a crowded world becomes too much for me.”

“You won’t find much of a crowd here. . . . I always imagine that having an island would be disappointing. One would soon find it an Elba, and crave for the mainland and a reasonable form of activity. After all, what can you do on an island, except bathe off it?”

Peter laughed. “Study the fauna and flora. Contemplate. Achieve friendships with curious birds and incurious fish. Let the sun smite you by day and the moon by night. . . . Learn how to think and forget how to speak. Make footprints which no one will follow, and poetry that no one’ll ever read. . . . Watch the stars in their courses, and listen to the wind talking in the trees. . . .”

Maurice said: “I should be driven mad by feeling that there was so much to learn and so much to be done in the world, and that I’d landed myself outside it.” He put on his overcoat. “You must come and dine with us soon—why not come on Saturday?”

“I’d like to very much.”

“I believe Caroline’s got some of our neighbors coming.”

“Short and black, I suppose?”

“Yes. Tuxedos, as Jane would say.”

Peter accompanied his guest to the door which opened on to the steep village street. Peter said:—

“What a lovely night!”

His voice echoed in the moon-drenched quiet.

“Good-night, Stanley . . .”

Peter watched Maurice go up the street and turn the corner at the crossroads. When he was out of sight he could still hear his footsteps receding past the post office towards Shipton House. Down the street three gigantic elms towered above a huddle of roofs, their branches barricading the stars.

Peter tasted the air. It had the quality of water in a mountain stream. He stood feeling the stillness of the night.

He turned and went back into the hall. He pushed a log with his foot, and the sparks flew upward.

. . . This draining of beauty through the senses . . . this perpetual thirst of mind. . . .

He stood, staring down into the embers. The Elizabethans had it—recognized it. . . .

Follow thy fair sun, unhappy shadow!
Though thou be black as night,
And she made all of light . . .

He went over to the bookshelf and took down the familiar volume of lyrics. Standing close to the lamp, he turned the pages. . . . “In Imagine Pertransit Homo.” He scanned the lines, knowing their music.

Follow those pure beams, whose beauty burneth!
That so have scorched thee . . .

The print was brown in the lamplight. His mind strayed curiously over the final stanza:—

Follow still, since so thy fates ordained!
The sun must have his shade,
Till both at once do fade,—
The sun still proved, the shadow still disdained.

He put the book down absently. As he did so, he knocked an ash tray on to the floor. It was the one Caroline had brought.

He put the ash tray on the mantelpiece. Caroline Vernon was interesting—as a character. She was at the same time reserved and impulsive. She

managed, with perfect ease, to speak only when she felt so inclined. She appeared to observe humanity from the citadel of her detachment, to note its characteristics, and to store up these notes for her own use. Peter had the impression that she used them rather for reference in her treatment of people than for the formation of any final judgment.

Jane had said that Caroline Vernon was beautiful. He didn't agree. Her eyes, clear and variable in color, were beautiful. The shape of her face, an acute oval emphasized by the dented chin, was attractive. But her skin was too pale, her mouth sulky, her cheek bones too high. Sometimes she moved gracefully, at other times coltishly, as if some impulse annoyed her into a demonstration of physical energy. This variation in her movements seemed to correspond to the alternation of sophistication and simplicity in her character. A difficult woman to live with, Peter conjectured. He wondered how far her devotion to Maurice Vernon checked a subterranean craving for excitement, which Peter had felt in her even at their first meeting. It was an appetite he'd found so often in women. It made them attractive, endowing them with a kind of subdued vitality—but it made them also, in the long run, ruthless and unstable.

He thought of Rosamund. He doubted if she was any happier now, after a year of her present marriage, than she'd been at the end of her six years' marriage with him. She was probably relieving the tedium of fidelity by yet another of those sentimental-sensual flirtations which ministered to her vanity and fed her desire for change.

Rosamund was prettier and less intelligent than Caroline Vernon; but Peter wondered, faintly curious, slightly amused, whether his friend's wife were made of any finer stuff. He was inclined to believe that, with few exceptions, women were functional creatures, their souls being no more than the spasmodic breath of their instincts, and their brain a plumage which they displayed with instinctive skill.

Caroline had spent the morning painting. She sprawled back on a chair, drummed her heels on the studio floor, and stared at her canvas.

The thing was good.

It had come off.

She screwed up her eyelids and looked critically through her lashes. It seemed right: the tones were right; the forms had a pleasing balance; the

creamy-tongued chrysanthemums were good against the canvas screen. Those specks of scarlet in the shadow were effective.

She began to whistle under her breath, raking the canvas with a critical glance. There was still something wrong about the shadow of the vase. It was too thick.

Easy enough to alter that. She jumped up and seized her palette.

As she began to work again her thoughts darted to and fro, hovering on one and another matter with an ephemeral tumbling gayety. Every now and then she sang in unmusical snatches.

The church clock struck one. Its chime roused a discordant reverberation in Caroline's mind.

At the same moment she became aware of Rose's conscientious footsteps coming up the attic stairs.

A knock at the door.

"Lunch is ready, madam."

"Is Dr. Vernon back?"

"He's just come in, madam."

"Ask him to come up." Caroline went to the door of the studio and shouted down the staircase over Rose's head.

He came up, wiping his hands and smelling of ether.

"Come and look at this, Maurice, and say what you think."

She watched his profile. He thought out his criticism. In the strong light of the studio she saw that he looked tired.

The perception slowed her mood. He did too much. His constitution couldn't stand it—so many broken nights . . .

"I like it very much indeed."

"Really?" She was pleased by his tone.

He gave her a rapid detailed appreciation.

"Any adverse criticism?" she asked.

He looked at her for a moment, measuring the dose she would take. (There were days when a hint of disparagement made her sullen.) He said:—

“Yes. One criticism. You haven’t made enough variation of color in the background. At least I feel that.”

She looked at the picture; then nodded. “Yes—I see exactly. You’re always right.” She glanced at him and smiled absently. The background ought to be a sequence of the colours in the flowers and vase and foreground—a pattern of very faint echoes—silver, cream, green, blue, pale brown. . . .

Maurice coughed. She said:—

“I wish you could throw off that cold. You forgot to take that whiskey and milk I put ready for you last night.”

“I didn’t want it.”

“You were very late, weren’t you?”

“Peter and I talked late.”

She asked, as they went downstairs:—

“What about?”

“Every kind of thing.”

“But what?” It amused her to hear what men talked about when they were alone together. Their conversation had a special nature, just as the talk of children, overheard, had its peculiar quality.

“Oh—every sort of thing.”

“Politics?”

“Yes.”

“Cars?”

“Some of the time.”

“Horses?”

“Yes.”

“Local scandal?”

“Yes.”

“You told him about Mrs. Belville’s three husbands, and Marjorie Haviland’s elopement, and Colonel Lane’s wife, and old Stradbroke’s peculiar habits—and Agnes Landon’s disreputable uncle?”

“Yes, most of those sagas. As a matter of fact I got on to rather thin ice before I realized what I was saying.”

“Oh. Is there any thin ice?”

“Yes—only I didn’t realize I was anywhere near it. I was talking about Mrs. Belville and I happened to say that according to Cupid’s classical curse, whenever she changed old loves for new she got a worse one, and that I’d heard that her first husband was extremely clever. Stanley said: ‘Yes, he’s an attractive man, but I shouldn’t call him clever. My wife ran away with him eighteen months ago.’”

Caroline said:—

“I’d no notion. How odd!”

“I had heard about it, but without any details. I imagine it wasn’t a success anyway.”

“Has he got any children?”

“Apparently not.”

“I wonder what she was like?”

“Come and have lunch, darling.”

“I wonder if she was pretty.”

Maurice had lost interest. “Come and have lunch, Caroline.”

That afternoon, Peter was arranging his books when he became suddenly aware that someone was standing in the doorway from the outer hall.

“Mrs. Vernon!”

She had a brilliant effect in the littered room.

“I came to see if I could help you.” She smiled; added, with one of her ungainly gestures, “What a muddle you’re in!”

He thanked her, protested that she shouldn’t have come, and welcomed her in. She threw down her hat and came into the middle of the room with the gayest air of taking on a job.

“Maurice has gone out for the day. So I thought of being a good Samaritan. What lovely books!” She began to pick up a volume here and there and look at its title. While she did so he observed her face and movements, and decided that she was more attractive than he had first

supposed. He remembered that at Jane's luncheon she had been quiet and rather shy, and almost, at one moment, disagreeable. He had been interested but not attracted by her. She had certain characteristics which he considered definitely unattractive. Her height was one of them. On the whole, Rosamund, his former wife, had embodied his idea of a physically attractive woman: small, slender, with a rose and white sophistication. . . . He didn't, on the whole, mind women being silly. He came near to counting their silliness as virtue, since it set them apart from a too serious consideration. He could have done with an apple-blossom Robot of a female, to be put away with his pyjamas. So he'd thought, at times. (The other half of his emotions demanded a Meredithian mate, who should give him "blood and brain and spirit"; a heroine to feed his vanity and exorcise his demons.)

He liked Mrs. Vernon's tallness at this moment, when she reached up to a high shelf; the taut line, the charming balance of her waist.

“. . . It's thick with dust—you can't arrange them in these shelves—”

She strode out to the kitchen and fetched a damp cloth in a tin basin. She demanded a chair to stand on; ordered him about with a vague boisterous efficiency that made him perceive her as much younger, and less to be reckoned with, than he'd first supposed. She stood on the chair and made him hold the basin of water. She began to wipe the shelves.

“You were going to plant your books in a positive flower bed. Ouf!” She thought how nice it was that his face and hair should be different shades of brown-like samples of different woods. Glancing down, she observed his face as a collection of knobs and promontories: the heavy temples, blunt nose, truculent chin. The eyes laughed, the mouth laughed suddenly, when she said:—

“I didn't like you at Jane's that day.”

He decided that this remark of hers was meant to be pleasantly provocative.

“Why?”

“I thought you too—self-confident. I didn't like your manner!”

“What is my manner?”

She smiled to his upturned face, partly because she was enjoying her sense of his light admiration, partly because she realized that, in spite of his cleverness and aloofness, he knew the simple pleasures of egoism and could enjoy an analysis of his character.

As she hesitated, he repeated:

“What is my ‘manner,’ Mrs. Vernon?”

“Well . . . You make rather a line of being virile.”

She was astonished by his outbreak of laughter.

“My—dear—Mrs. Vernon.” There was something utterly comic to him in such an accusation. “I may, one can never be sure, pose as all sorts of things—as a cynic, a philanthropist, a misanthrope. Most of us pose—occasionally. But to accuse me of posing as a man—”

She laughed too, but failed to see why he should be so deeply amused.

“All right. I withdraw that. But admit you pose, anyway? And that’s what annoyed me, in someone who was obviously made to be sincere.”

She said this with a sudden charm, with a mixture of gayety and solemnity which startled him to an active sense of her attractiveness. He found himself conscious of the shape of her mouth and eyes.

She turned away under his look and wiped the second and third shelves carefully; she realized that he had misinterpreted her manner. He thought she was flirting with him. . . . The idea astounded and then shocked her. She despised flirtation.

“You’d like me to be sincere? You think people ought always to say exactly what they think and feel?”

She got down from the chair, saying: “Those are clean, anyway—” Taking the basin from him, she added: “Yes. I do.”

“You despise all social pretenses?”

“Utterly.” She added a comment which later on he clung to as a clue in the labyrinths of her behavior. “Grown-up people are absolutely encrusted with pretenses,” she said.

Even at that moment he glimpsed in her, not childishness, not immaturity, but a child.

She sat down on the arm of the settee. “When those shelves are dry we’ll put the books in.”

He moved to and fro near her.

“I might take advantage of your scorn of pretense and say exactly what I feel at this moment.”

She perceived the signs of gallantry: the half-ironic, half-sentimental twist of the lips, the bright enameled stare. She despised him for it, but found herself irresistibly answering that she'd be enchanted to know what he was feeling.

He laughed—stupidly, she thought.

“That you're an interesting and unaccountable young woman.”

She got up.

“I'm not really—interesting, I mean,” she said. “I'm sort of specious really,” and wondered why she told him this.

He found himself liking her sincerity, and the detached way she fixed her grey eyes on his face.

“How few of us admit that,” he said.

She felt that the atmosphere between them had become unsatisfactory, though she couldn't make out why. She wanted to stay, but decided to go. She reminded him that he was coming to dinner two days hence.

“That'll be immensely pleasant.”

“Oh,” she said, “I hope it will—” She held out her hand. “Thank me for being useful—”

Her fingers were smooth and cool. Their clasp left him saying:—

“Thank you for being ornamental.”

She took in the tribute with a wide and intent look, as if she were examining its quality. Then, with a flash of her former awkwardness, she murmured good-bye and turned and went out.

Peter, alone in the littered room, reflected that Caroline Vernon was an amusing neighbor. He found himself liking her company (he had seen a good deal of her one way and another since he arrived) and enjoying the effect that she had on him—waking him up and unsettling his habits of mind like a sudden change in the weather.

IV

Peter came to dinner with the Vernons on Saturday evening, and stayed late after the other guests had gone.

While he and Maurice talked, Caroline sat in a tall armchair working at her embroidery. She enjoyed listening to the two men. She liked feeling their talk, which flickered like her carefully piled fire, and cast a glow over her without disturbing her isolation. Every now and then she took in the matter of their speech; at other moments she merely picked up a phrase, an expression, a gesture here and there, or found her mind idling down a vista of her own imagining. Occasionally one or the other of them would make a remark which presupposed her interest, and she was surprised to find that some extraneous sentinel of her attention had prepared a reply.

Caroline was lazy in forming any personal relation, and the prospect of a triangular intimacy in which she had only to play a passive part pleased her. It would give more than it demanded. She would be able to take or leave its pleasures. The neutral relation which she had accepted between herself and Peter gave her a sense of freedom. She disliked most human bonds because they deprived her of this sense.

At ten minutes past twelve the telephone rang and Maurice was called out on a case. Caroline and Peter were left alone together. Peter looked at the clock and said:—

“Would you like me to go, or shall I stay and talk to you?”

She had been wishing he would go, as she could think of nothing to say to him; but the directness of his question amused her. She got up and offered him a cigarette.

“Stay and talk.” She sat down again.

“What would interest you?”

He liked her pose with one arm flung out along the back of the sofa. She had some good poses: most of them deliberate, he thought.

She gazed at the fire.

“A lot of things interest me,” she said without enthusiasm. Then, looking at him, she asked:—

“What do you think interests me?” and smiled suddenly at an afterthought he couldn't divine.

“Do you want me to be polite?”

She shook her head.

“You don’t mind if I’m rude?”

“No.” She leaned forward, her eyes wider open.

“I think that you are chiefly interested in yourself. Most women are.”

She was silent.

“You think I’ve been rude?”

She said vaguely, “Oh, no. I was just thinking.”

“About my accusation?”

“Yes. I was thinking that you were right, but that you spoiled your diagnosis by adding that generalization.”

“True, all the same.”

“You only speak from your own experience.”

“Of course.”

She leaned back.

“The drawback about being interested in oneself is that the subject grows stale. One suffers from boredom so much.”

“Do you?”

“Yes. Why do you smile?”

“Only because I’m right about you.”

“Do you know,” she said with sudden life in her voice, “that letting yourself feel ‘clever’ about anyone is the end of learning anything about them?”

She was surprised to see him color.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean I’d summed you up. I couldn’t if I wanted to. I only meant I was right about that one thing.”

“About my being easily bored?”

“Yes.”

“That might be the key to an understanding of me.”

He refused the challenge.

“I haven’t asked for one.”

She said:—

“In other words, you’re not really interested.”

“That isn’t true. I’m tremendously interested. It would be interesting to have the key to any human being.”

She was silent, then she said in a different tone:—

“One of the most terrifying realizations is that there never is a key. We’re each of us locked up. Real intimacy doesn’t exist. People try every key: intellectual intimacy, community of work, community of an ideal, of an affection (like sharing children), friendship, physical passion—nothing’s really any use. We conduct even our most vital intimacies in the threshold of our selves.”

Peter asked:—

“Do you mind that? Do you think it’s a bad thing?”

She didn’t seem to notice his question. She said:—

“Even in the best marriage,—to take an example of all the forces of intimacy working together,—you can’t really share. The marriage service is wrong. It isn’t death that parts people, it’s life. Our divided deaths are only the end of our divided lives.”

“Is that a bad thing, Caroline?”

“I don’t know.”

“I believe that if intimacy between people could be resolved, it would become futile. It’s the perpetual movement which gives it force. The tremendous friction of human relations is like a power station, generating any amount of activity.”

“I like the idea,” she said, excited by its presentation.

He glanced at her as she spoke. She wondered what he was thinking. She enjoyed a general conversation which seemed to ambush particular instances. She made a cautious move.

“I shouldn’t have thought personal contacts meant very much to you.”

“To me?” he asked with a deliberate blankness.

She moved back annoyed, in doubt whether to acknowledge his skill or to find him duller than she supposed. She remarked:—

“I was only retaliating by an attempt at cleverness about you.”

“You’re capable of more cleverness than that anyway. You couldn’t be more mistaken.”

“They are important to you then?”

“What are?”

“People.”

“More than they are to you, though you won’t agree. To a woman a person is merely a potential adventure.”

“Your misogyny is apt to blind you.”

“You think so? You’re wrong. It’s the telescope to my blind eye.”

“Only a gesture, then?” she asked.

“Possibly; of defiance.”

She followed eagerly on this side track.

“People defy what they’re afraid of.”

“Or what they despise,” he said in sudden annoyance, and got up.

“You’re wonderfully rude when Maurice isn’t here to distract you.”

“Am I? I’m sorry. You see I wasn’t being personal, though the genius of your sex inspired you to think that I was.”

She looked up at him and laughed.

“If you were to use your telescope on the eye that sees,” she said, “your perception would be formidable.”

As Peter walked home he thought over Caroline’s talk. Her words and manner confirmed his opinion of her character. She was interesting, but fundamentally frivolous. She was charming, but essentially hard. Emotionally she was pliable, but resilient. When he watched her with Maurice he could see how she adapted herself by a facile responsiveness which seemed to yield so much and, in fact, gave nothing.

To be in love with her would be like trying to sculpture India rubber. . . .

The idea of being in love with Caroline Vernon fell across his mind like a shooting star. He saw it casually as it fell and vanished among the familiar constellations of his thought.

PART TWO

I

The first meet in November was at Arrowe Park.

Caroline drove over alone in the car. Maurice had gone ahead early with Peter. Good for Maurice, hunting again, even once a week, she thought. He looked better just now and he'd lost his cough. She changed gear badly; the car jolted and sped forward. She looked at herself in the mirror on the windscreen and found the car running on the grass track at the side of the road. She swerved it back, thinking what a bad temper Peter had been in when he and Maurice had started off, and remembering that she had forgotten to tell Amy to change the butcher's order.

Why did Maurice want her to go to Paris after Christmas with Jane? He was always thinking that she didn't have enough change and enough amusement. Mother worried him with that idea. . . . "Of course poor Caroline doesn't have much fun. . . ." He accepted some things simply. He had come to believe that her moods were due to this lack of "gayeties."

"Fun!" thought Caroline. Rhymed with "bun," and was just as unsatisfying. Feed a woman on bits of fun, and choke her appetite (for what? —for what other fodder?) with scraps of sweetish dough.

But the idea wasn't Maurice's fault. Goodness knows he only wanted to give her what she wanted. He was always asking her what she wanted. . . .

No one in the world could be more lovable than Maurice, she thought.

She slowed down through Steeple Barton, wondering what quality in him had caught and held her. She hooted and swung round the corner into the main road. (Caught and held her for six years now . . .)

What quality? His aloofness, muddled up with his need for affection? The strength of his will, flawed by odd weaknesses of purpose? His candor, his instinctive sympathy, the charm of his disposition, balked by unaccountable harshnesses of judgment and phases of cold irritability? His physical beauty which in its movements and expressions seemed to explain an inward beauty of mind? . . . She remembered watching him once, asleep, before dawn, his face turned towards the strange light of the window. She remembered her sense of his isolation.

As she approached the gates of Arrowe Park she thought of her recent talk with Peter Stanley. When she touched on this subject of human intimacy she had become aware that he read her mind and that, with mixed

amusement and interest, he had perceived her sudden notion to know him better. His mind was as quick as her own. She felt herself challenged on her own ground.

As she slowed up towards the crowd in front of the house, trying to pick out Maurice in the shifting throng of horses and men, Peter walked up to the side of the car. She drew up. He said, "Jane's been asking if you were coming; she's in the hall," as he opened the door of the car. Comfort Krebs rode up. She looked pretty in her black habit. She said good morning to Caroline, tossing back her bright plait of hair, and flushed when Peter spoke to her.

"Yes," she said in answer to his question. "Mother told me."

He said: "Do you think I shall be a good tutor?"

"Oh, of course," she replied, turning her horse. "Am I to come over this next Thursday?" she asked, and colored again.

"Yes, I'll expect you at eleven."

As Comfort rode off, he said to Caroline: "This notion of Jane's is absurd, I think, but she insists on it. The girl's very shy and probably won't take in a thing that I tell her."

Caroline said: "The contact with youth will have a humanizing influence on your character."

"You think I'm so hard-bitten?" he asked, as he followed her into the hall. He turned to Jane. "Caroline thinks that Comfort is going to reclaim me from utter cynicism."

Jane, one hand on her waist, her silk hat tilted, her boots glinting, said: "Nothing would do that. Have a glass of port, Caroline."

"Jane looks like a sporting episode in a cabaret," Peter remarked.

"Hell, you are rude," said Jane.

"Where's Hamilton, Jane? I thought he was coming." Caroline took a glass of cherry brandy.

"He couldn't get away, poor darling."

"How does he like my flat?" asked Peter.

"Oh, he thinks it's marvelous. He's had a telephone put in the bathroom, so he can get New York and scrub himself at the same time."

“That’s called scientific management,” said Maurice, who was standing by. “How many of the brood are going out to-day?” he asked Jane.

She gave him a rakish glance.

“Four.”

“All right. I’ll keep an eye on them.” He turned away. Jane’s look followed him for a moment through the crowd.

“They’re going off,” shouted Greville Krebs from the doorstep. “Come on, Mummie, or you’ll all be left.”

Jane fastened her veil.

Caroline stood on the steps and watched them move off. The park lay in a wintry sleep under a low white sky. The scarlet coats and black coats jolted away across the tapestry perspective of grass and trees, and vanished far off, one by one, into a screen of dim woods. As the last scarlet daub sank into the trees, Caroline pressed her collar up against her chin and shivered as if a fire had gone out.

Late in the afternoon Maurice rode back by himself towards Ditch Edge. Peter had gone back to have tea with Jane.

Along the King’s Norton Road he caught sight of Anne alternately trotting and dawdling along beside her nurse.

Anne heard the approach of the horse’s hoofs and turned. She recognized her father and began to dance up and down. When he drew up beside her she demanded a ride. He explained that Uncle Peter’s horse was too big for her to ride. A flush of disappointment colored her cheeks. She began to cry. He reasoned with her. She cried louder and stamped her feet. Finally he had to leave her sitting in the middle of the road, sobbing, and resisting her nurse’s attempts to make her walk on. Maurice felt miserable.

Anne was so like Caroline; emotional when emotion seemed least called for, stubborn over trifles, incalculable in her moods of sudden detachment or swift violent affection. Caroline said once: “All women are slightly mad, even Anne.” When Maurice thought about his wife’s character he resented its inconsistency, but realized that he would never find a placid and reliable woman so attractive. He condemned her moods, hating their power over his spirit; but he had come to recognize that, for good or ill, they made the climate in which he felt most alive. When he was away from her he felt calm but cumulatively depressed, as if some vital quality had been extracted from the element in which he breathed. On the rare occasions when he analyzed

his feelings and reviewed his personal relations, he admitted to himself that Anne was precious to him, but that Caroline was necessary to him. His need of her persisted and recurred with the instinctive certainty that had made him fall in love with her six years ago. He was aware, too, that some equally certain and instinctive feeling bound her to him, but he had never thought of analyzing its nature.

Peter's groom came out into the yard to take his horse.

"Mr. Stanley won't be home until later this evening." Maurice tramped across the cobbles and through the surgery into the house. He felt magnificently tired and beautifully hungry.

Caroline came downstairs. "I expect you're longing for your bath."

He took her in his arms and kissed her with a high-spirited inconsequence which astonished her. She looked into his face.

"I like that. Do it again."

He laughed, gave her a large hug, and then bounded upstairs two steps at a time.

Caroline watched him. When he had slammed himself into his room she bent to wipe some of his mud off her dress. "If only he were always like that," she thought.

II

Maurice managed to take two days off before Xmas and went with Caroline to London to do their Xmas shopping. Peter came up at the same time, and they arranged with Jane to go to a theatre in the evening.

They drove to London in Peter's car.

Caroline spent the afternoon shopping by herself, while Peter went to the London Library, and Maurice, feeling suddenly irritated by jostling people, retired to read the newspapers at the Royal Institution.

As Caroline paced through the streets, glancing intently into the faces that flashed up past her in the crowd, checking to look into a shop, turning to notice some person or car in the traffic, she thought how odd it was that she should feel this childish excitement. Every time she came to London she found herself thirsty for this first draught of the streets; eager to gulp the noise and stir, to feel herself move more quickly—her nerves keener, her mind swifter, her sense a little drunken.

To-day the air was opalescent; the noise of the traffic seemed to drift and curl in its light like smoke in a soap bubble. Caroline hurried and loitered with a feeling of unreality.

Dusk came soon and the air grew colder, and the noise, louder and subtler, drove her with a wild pleasure along the pavements. The shop windows drew her like huge jewels. She stood staring into their depths, her mind seething in a faint covetous rhythm. A window glowing with flowers burned her vision. A bookshop lured her and held her spellbound, her glance feeling over bindings and text. Folds of brocade, twisted velvets, satins and laces, breathed their drama behind glass. As she passed Morny's a fragrance flung out and checked her like an invisible arm.

If she could write, she thought, turning out of Regent Street, pacing fast, pausing on the edge of Hanover Square while the cars swept past her with flaring eyes—if she could write, she would make poetry of London. . . .

In the evening Jane joined them at supper.

She arrived late, dressed in black velvet. As she approached between two tables they saw that she trailed in her wake a very small swarthy man wearing bright white gloves. Caroline murmured, leaning to Peter, that it was Philip Bertorelli.

Jane introduced him. He bowed, distributing soft clinging smiles. He sat down beside Caroline, reminding her that they had met before. As he spoke he surveyed her as though, thought Peter, she were a pyramid.

A brown woman twisted into a silver dress sang in Russian, and Peter ordered champagne.

Caroline and Peter began to discuss the play they had just seen. Bertorelli, looking up into Caroline's face, said that he thought the characterization was stupid. Maurice, abstracted, watched the singer. Jane, putting a cigarette between her lips, asked him what he had thought of the play. He said:—

“Quite entertaining. But people don't behave like that.”

Bertorelli took up his remark.

“Exactly what I say. That woman would not run away with the man. If she is sensible, she will know how to arrange things.”

“Maurice doesn't mean that,” said Caroline. “He means she wouldn't have had a lover at all.”

Bertorelli accepted her correction with a minute, incredulous smile.

“I speak of life,” he said.

“So do I,” said Maurice, momentarily interested. “That's why I say she wouldn't have gone off with him.”

“There Philip agrees,” Jane remarked.

“Yes. But I contend,” said Maurice, “that she and the other man would have talked it over with the husband and evolved some reasonable compromise.”

“What is a reasonable compromise in such a situation?” asked Peter.

“I say that there is not any,” insisted Bertorelli, and his smile clung for a moment to Jane. “There is not any civilized method but discretion and secrecy.”

“But why secrecy? Among decent people?” Maurice asked.

Bertorelli said politely:—

“Do you not think that the husband might be jealous?”

Maurice was irritated.

“I don’t see how your ‘civilized method’ fits in with your notion that everybody is governed by purely primitive instincts.”

“On the contrary, that is what civilization is for—to conceal what you call primitive . . . Don’t you think so?” Bertorelli added, turning to Caroline.

“I mistrust generalizations,” she said, and got up to dance with Peter.

Bertorelli moved to the chair beside Jane.

“I always find it very amusing to speak of moral questions with the English,” he said. “When the devil takes an Englishman up on to a hill, and shows him all the cities of the world, and tells him that he will possess their riches and beauty if he will acknowledge his power, the Englishman says: ‘No, I will not take them, but they will have Dominion status; that is to say, I will profit as much as I can without incurring more responsibility than I can avoid.’”

Jane laughed. “I guess you’re pretty near the truth.”

What an awful little bounder, thought Maurice. He turned to watch Caroline dancing with Peter, and noticed that she looked lovely. She was getting on much better with Peter than she had at first. He felt pleasure in the idea that they had become friends. He caught Peter’s eye as they passed, and smiled.

Peter, holding Caroline in his arms, said to her: “How attractive Maurice is. He’s much the most attractive man in the room. Jane’s *cicisbeo* is a tedious little creature.”

Caroline was silent.

After a few moments she said: “I wish there were more room to dance. This band’s so awfully good.”

Peter was silent.

When they stopped dancing she turned away and went back to their table and sat down by her husband. She put her hand on his wrist.

“Will you dance with me next?” she asked.

“Of course, my darling.”

Deliberately, intently, she renewed her awareness of his charm. While the other three were talking she asked:—

“Do you like my dress?”

He said: “I’ve been thinking how perfectly it suits you.”

She kept his look in hers and drew from it a sustaining sense of his power. He said, responsive to a demand in her which he couldn't analyze: "Come and dance with me now."

Peter was dancing with Jane. Bertorelli sat sipping champagne, and smoking, patting, and caressing the crowd with his glances.

"Whenever I come to a place like this," said Maurice, "I realize that I'm no longer quite a young man. I think, 'God, what an awful crowd—what awful women, what futile men.'"

"Aren't you enjoying yourself? I am," said Caroline. "For the moment I feel as if I never want to do anything else but dance to this band, and have supper and sniff other women's scents."

For a moment Maurice didn't answer. She felt his glance on her eyelids. Then he said:—

"But then all you want of life is sensation."

She was startled out of the sensuous-affectionate mood she'd created for him.

"Aren't you being unjust, darling?"

"Darling. No."

"I never knew you thought me a mere sensationalist."

"It doesn't affect my feeling for you. You know that."

She did know it. She believed that nothing could alter his feeling for her.

"But why do you think me a sensationalist?" she asked.

"Because you're always telling me so."

She perceived that this was, indeed, the real reason of his criticism. He accepted, with everything else, the analysis of her character which she chose to give him. But how far did she really believe, herself, in its truth?

Perhaps everyone hoped secretly that they were better than they seemed to their own judgment, and by playing up, on occasions to some high notion of themselves, managed to justify a belief in their latent virtue.

Jane and Peter passed. Peter looked across Jane's shoulder at Caroline. Jane said something that made him smile. Caroline let herself wonder for a moment what it was that made Peter Stanley attractive, for he had many qualities that she disliked.

III

Lady Snow asked Peter Stanley to dinner. For there was nothing she enjoyed more, she said, than a tête-à-tête with a clever, well-bred young man. She informed him in her note that she had invited Caroline and Maurice and Jane Krebs to come in and play poker afterwards.

When Peter was shown into the drawing-room of Thorpe Cottage, Lady Snow was awaiting him with a love bird on her bare shoulder. She had emphasized what Caroline called her “Versailles” appearance by a mauve brocade gown and a black riband round her plump throat. Her consciousness of the perched bird added to the stiff graciousness of her carriage. She held out her hand, and then, urging him to be seated, explained that she would not give him a cocktail—“There is no doubt that they spoil the appetite and corrode one’s kidneys in the end,” she said. Her skirts rustled as she crossed her ankles, and her bosom looked opulent in the lamplight.

“I always assure Caroline that she will ruin her skin before she’s thirty. . . . I’m afraid the snow’s still falling, isn’t it? The glass is low. We don’t usually expect snow round here until after Christmas. I detest the cold, personally, and always make a point of going south before the sixth of January. . . .”

The love bird flicked to the mantelpiece and perched between a china lamb and a silver cornucopia.

“Sweet Georgie . . . You haven’t seen Georgia, have you, Mr. Stanley? She’s in her cage in my boudoir . . . I hope your car is in the garage. . . .”

“Dinner is served, m’lady.”

“Come along, Mr. Stanley.”

She rustled powerfully before him and led across the hall, trailing whiffs of heliotrope, and talking as she went.

The dining room had a narrow, sanctified quiet; a silver candelabra hung above the table, and the magic casement opening on Madame André’s domain was hidden by a Chinese screen.

Still talking, Lady Snow beckoned Peter to sit at the place laid on her right hand.

“And now I want you to tell me about your new book,” she said. “I’ve never really had time to ask you about it before. Last time at Caroline’s,

Agnes Haviland monopolized you all the evening—and at the Belvilles' they take bridge so seriously that there's never any real conversation at all. . . .”

The soup was velvety, hinting oysters and cream.

“. . . Of course there's no doubt that the art of conversation has declined in the last fifty, well, even twenty, years—since *I* remember. (This is quite a good Chablis, I think.) Nowadays, people don't seem to take any trouble about it at all, and most of the young people spend their time playing games. . . . I read somewhere—now where was it?—the other day, that games have taken the place of religion in modern life—”

“Yes,” agreed Peter. “Yes—there's a good deal in that—”

He glanced down the menu:—

Turbot Andalouse

— —

Poulet Archiduc

— —

Cerises jubiléés

— —

Soufflé au Parmesan

“. . . There's no doubt that conversation is becoming extinct,” he said.

She talked on; but the fish was insinuating. “Andalouse”—a soft name and a bitter sauce. The chicken, skirted by truffles as a Venus by *amorini*, was blessed by a Pol Roger champagne. Peter began to find his hostess worthy of respect. For it really mattered so little what she was saying, or how often she plucked that handkerchief from her bodice, or how many subjects she mangled and threw off in the incessant and maladjusted machinery of her mind. It didn't matter (how could it?) that she misquoted, misinterpreted, misunderstood; that her thoughts were flashy and clumsy as a third-rate beauty chorus, slick with self-assurance and lewd for sheer lack of grace—

“. . . and my husband bought this champagne, from one of the Rothschilds, but I forget which. . . . I want to find a book, a really interesting

book, about Cleopatra—”

He said: “Quite a lot has been written about Cleopatra. . . .”

She talked on. . . . The ice glistened and the cherries were on fire in a silver bowl, throwing up azure flames.

“. . . but Cleopatra is more a symbol than a character,” he said, and poured the blue flames from a ladle on to his plate.

“What an interesting idea! You must have a little more of the ice cream, Mr. Stanley. . . . One always wonders just what they all saw in her.”

“‘But she makes hungry where most she satisfies—’ What Shakespeare made of her was the whole force, Woman. Each woman is a spark of it, of that particular divine fire: men clutch these sparks, and they go out in their damp hands—” He noticed that the champagne was intoning his voice, but observed that she did not anyway understand his meaning.

“But it isn’t always the sparkling women who have most success. Often the women who seem quietest— Now, my daughter Caroline,” said Lady Snow, carefully naïve, “always had great *succès* as a girl, without taking the least trouble, you know—”

“Ah—Caroline has great charm, and a delightful appearance,” he remarked, presenting his hostess with appropriate phrases.

“Considering that, I can never help feeling that she’s thrown herself away. Who was it said something about ‘wasting her sweetness on the desert air’? After all, lots of people thought her very beautiful indeed,” said Lady Snow untruthfully. Peter felt her glance at him from under her parrot eyelids.

He disarmed her by brandishing his gallantry.

“She is very beautiful. It’s quite clear where she gets her looks,” he said, and as he spoke saw, uncannily, how Lady Snow’s features, sensitized by intelligence, dignified by indifference, might be Caroline’s. Those eyelids—wider and calmer—might be Caroline’s; the lips, sensuously rather than so precisely informed, might be Caroline’s; relax the pinched nostrils, widen the brow, and give the dented chin more weight and less narrow aggression. . . . But Caroline’s eyes were grey, luminous, changeable; whereas her mother had a worldly eye, fish-clear with pin-prick pupils.

“. . . but I was better-looking than Caroline as a girl . . . I think you’ll like this ‘oloroso.’ Dear old Sir Francis Croke always said that nothing could beat a really good sherry.”

The cheese with a savory soufflé was a gold cloud breaking upward. He remarked deferentially on the beauty of their dinner. She lit to his compliment. Her smile exposed her fine teeth.

“. . . for, apart from anything else, one digests the food that one enjoys better.” She launched on an anecdote: how years ago a clever specialist had ordered her from a diet of rusks and camomile tea into a mixed diet, provided, of course, it was prepared by a chef. So sensible. . . .

She told him her gastronomic history throughout dessert, and over coffee and liqueurs discoursed to him intimately of aperients. “So many drugs are habit-forming,” she said. “But of course every person has their own particular medicine, and I know a great many men find liquid paraffin so satisfactory. My husband, on the other hand, was a great believer in stewed apple before breakfast.”

Peter, urged to confide, said that he believed in exercises.

“That’s exactly what dear . . .”

Caroline’s voice sounded out in the hall.

“Mother. Are you still sipping and gossiping in the dining room?”

She stood in the doorway. Peter found that she was always unlike the woman he prepared to see. Sometimes duller, sometimes more alive; sometimes disappointing, at other times so nearly lovely.

“We’ve been having a scientific conversation,” Peter said, and thought that she wasn’t, after all, in the least like her mother.

As he stood waiting for Lady Snow to precede him from the room, some trace of his thought showed in his face, so that Caroline said:—

“What were you thinking, about Mother and me?”

He glanced at her for a second, and then said, half laughing:—

“My dear. . . . I was deciding there was no real comparison between water and paraffin.”

“Oh,” said Caroline. “Mother’s been proselytizing again.”

Lady Snow held good cards and played them with caution. When Maurice dealt her four aces she was unable to repress a little satisfied compression of her lips. . . . She bid carefully, rising a penny above each of

Jane's shillings. Jane had two knaves and a joker. Lady Snow's rings flashed over the green table.

"Caroline's notion about having two jokers is quite amusing," said Maurice, "but it makes the play rather crude."

"Incredible and unorthodox play," murmured Peter.

"Mother is getting rich—" Caroline lit a cigarette and borrowed ten shillings from Maurice.

"I s'pose I'm so darned unlucky at cards because I'm lucky in love," said Jane expansively. No one could think of a reply. Peter dealt. He had bid very little so far and the others couldn't make out his play. Maurice concluded that he had had bad cards. Jane said, as she took up her hand:—

"Peter's awfully deep, I warn you. I've played with him before. His bluff always seems like the real thing, and when he's got a marvelous hand you always get an idea he's bluffing—"

"What a formidable reputation," said Caroline. "One card please, Peter."

She had a nine, an eight, and three kings. She threw away the eight and drew a joker. Elated by her luck, she placed the joker as a nine and decided that a "full house" would justify her bidding as high as she liked. She needed to recoup her losses. She bid five shillings.

Maurice looked at his wife's face and decided that she was bluffing. There was never any method in Caroline's bluff. He knew from experience that she bluffed because the tactics amused her, and not because she fully understood their use.

"I'll see you," he said, smiling.

Lady Snow felt that five shillings was too high to come in. Jane threw down her cards impatiently. "Catch me betting on a pair of threes," she said.

Peter raised Maurice a shilling.

Caroline bet another five shillings.

Maurice looked at his cards and decided to go out. He knew from Caroline's expression that she would bet irrespective of her cards, until she was "seen." She would throw away any sum for the feeling of recklessness that she got—not from losing, but from the act of throwing away. He nearly warned Peter, who had been, clearly enough, unwilling to take so much off her already. Peter must suppose that she had a good hand; whereas Maurice

suspected that she had no more than a pair. But Maurice knew that if he said anything, Caroline would feel that he'd made her seem a fool.

"I'll raise you another shilling," said Peter.

Caroline leaned over the table.

"I'll raise you another ten shillings; lend me a pound, Maurice."

"My dear child, you are being rash. I hope you'll win," said Lady Snow.

Caroline met Peter's look, which reflected, faintly, a little doubtfully, the excitement of her own. She bet again. She hardly troubled to wonder if he held better cards than hers. They sat, Peter intent, but keeping up an air of amusement. Caroline by turns rigid and restless—adding counter to white counter on the emerald square between them. . . .

Every now and then Lady Snow made a deprecatory murmur. Jane stared slowly from Peter's face to Caroline's and back again. Maurice kept glancing, half amused, half annoyed, at Caroline, but said nothing, restrained by an indefinable tautening of the relation between the two players. Each click of a counter seemed to mark a new notch in their tension.

Jane found her fingers curled, ready to clench, as if she were expecting a shock. Suddenly she felt that the atmosphere felt fit to break, Peter leaned back and said:—

"I'll see you—"

Caroline's excitement swerved visibly, like a shot bird, soared for a defiant silent second, and tumbled. It occurred to her that he might have good cards. In her pause she half expected a miracle, almost believed that as she glanced at her cards they would show a perfect hand.

"Full house," she said.

Peter looked at her, and put down his cards.

"Four knaves," he said.

She pushed the counters across to him, smiling, inwardly surprised at her own chagrin. She realized that she had been fighting to win.

"Bad luck, Caroline," said Jane. "My deal, isn't it?"

Maurice teased: "Not so much bad luck as bad management, I expect. You were a goose, darling. You might have concluded he had a good hand—"

“At first I thought you were bluffing,” said Peter, “and then I began to think that you must feel fairly sure of yourself to go on—”

“Caroline was always foolhardy,” said her mother.

They took up the new deal.

While Caroline surveyed her cards, her mind began to operate coolly, in retrospect, on her last hand. Her memory presented it photographically. She had thrown away an eight and drawn a joker . . . Three kings, and a nine and a joker . . .

“You haven’t ante’d,” said Maurice.

. . . Three kings—and a joker—and a nine. And *made it a full house!* And Peter had only had four knaves—

“Any cards, Caroline?” prompted Jane.

As they drove back to Ditch Edge, Caroline turned to Peter, who was sitting in the back of the car, and began to explain her blunder.

“You *are* a goose,” said Maurice.

“A kind of aphasia,” said Caroline.

Peter lit a cigarette. She saw a moment of his face in the match flare. He remarked:—

“You seem to have been not only rash, but stupid—”

“Anyway,” she threw off lightly, “I can always console myself with the fact that I might have won.”

“Yes,” said Peter.

His fifth card had been a joker.

IV

“Is Mr. Stanley in?”

“I think he’s in, Mrs. Vernon. If you’ll come in an’ wait, I’ll go and see. He come in from huntin’ a half hour ago and I expect he’s taking his bath.” Mrs. Bredon stumped to the foot of the stairs, and stood listening. “Yes,”—she gave a chuckle,—“he’s in all right. I can hear him singing. Mr. Stanley’ll always sing in his bath,” she grinned, “although at other times he’s what I call a thoughtful kind of gentleman and don’t say much. I’ll just blow the fire up for you, Madam. Cold it is to-day. My husband says we shall be getting more snow. The wind’s from the north, so we have to expect it, don’t we? That’s a better blaze. I do like to see a good fire.”

“How’s your husband’s arm, Mrs. Bredon?”

Mrs. Bredon lurched to her feet and stood holding the bellows as though it were a mace.

“Well, Madam. Some days it seems better, and other days it seems worse. That liniment what Dr. Vernon give him done him good while he rested, but directly he uses the arm again the pain seems to return. Still, I say to him, perhaps he was meant to have this pain, seeing he hasn’t been ill ever since we was married. . . . It stands to reason everyone has got to bear a certain amount of pain in their lives; the same as we must all expect sorrow now and then. It’s in nature, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so,” said Caroline.

“My mother always used to say. . . . But there, Madam, if I stop here talking, my brandy cake’ll be spoiled.” She put down the bellows and, with a quick bend of her head, turned and hurried from the room.

Caroline leaned back on the sofa.

Looking about her, she reflected that, whereas people of negative disposition could inhabit a house and leave its atmosphere at zero, other characters seemed to have, in proportion to their richness, the power to quicken a room, to beget a living expression in its furnishing, to give sense to its colors, sympathy to its arrangement.

This room was redolent of Peter—thick with Peter. Just as Maurice’s study was alive with him, the beats of his mind quivering in the air, like dust in sunlight. Here no single disarrangement, no particular gesture of his half

worldly, half-scholarly existence, gave Peter away; yet the room was bent to his influences as a tree grows in deference to the prevailing wind. . . .

Caroline amused herself by building up a simile. When she was with Maurice her mind bent to his, her thoughts caught the rhythm of his thought. She expressed him, indefinably, but unmistakably, within the four walls of her being. . . .

She noticed some written sheets of foolscap on Peter's desk, and wondered if they were part of "Melbourne." She got up and went over to the desk. She glanced at the top page. There were few corrections, and the small letters were easily spaced and carefully formed, as if each sentence had been written at the conclusion of a process of lucid thought. The passage dealt with the penultimate stage of William Lamb's marriage to Lady Caroline. . . .

". . . That colossal fetish called marriage so often, in defiance of reason and of Nature, succeeds in being a sacrament, and makes a bond between two spirits which no betrayals of body and infidelities of mind can dissolve . . ."

"Colossal fetish . . ."

"Good morning, Caroline—"

She turned with a guilty air, as if he had found her ransacking his coat pockets.

"I've been looking at your latest chapter."

"So I see. I hope you like it. Forgive my keeping you waiting. I hope Mrs. Bredon explained that I was in my bath."

"She did. Did you have a good day?"

"No. Do sit down, won't you?"

"I don't want to keep you. I expect you want to work. I came, as a matter of fact, to ask you a favor." She sat down on the arm of a chair.

"I hope I can grant it. What is it, my dear?"

"I want you to sit for me."

"You want to paint my portrait?" Peter asked. He smiled. "I should be flattered if I didn't know that modern portrait painting battens on the grotesque. Seriously, do you mean this, Caroline?"

“If you don’t mind. I like doing men, and I shouldn’t want more than six sittings, at the most. . . . You saw the one I did of Maurice—that hangs in the dining room?”

“Yes. As a matter of fact, I know you well enough now to confess that when Maurice told me you’d done it I was astounded. I didn’t think you had the talent. I don’t like your landscape, you know: I’m afraid I think it’s specious. It’s Monet-esque, instead of being Caroline Vernon. So much of women’s ‘creative impulse’ is the perfectly recognizable sediment of masculine achievement. But it struck me then, and later, when you showed me that one of your mother, and Mrs. Belville, and Colonel Lane, that in portraits you really do get yourself expressed. . . . I hope you don’t think I’m being rude?”

“Not at all. You’re always least interesting when you’re being polite. I hope this interest anyway means that you’re going to sacrifice yourself, and sit for me.”

He gave her a clear and amiable look with his green eyes.

“What will you call your portrait of me?”

“I haven’t begun to think. ‘Peter Stanley, Esq.,’ I suppose.”

“That isn’t very clever.”

“Verbal cleverness isn’t my line.”

“But is mine?”

“Yes.”

“May I reserve the right, then, to name the portrait when you’ve done it?”

“Certainly.”

She saw that he was pleased by her demand, and wondered how far his pleasure was caused by average masculine vanity, and how far, if at all, by the prospect of her companionship. She had come to assume that he liked her, but she couldn’t be sure if his liking would endure her frequent or protracted company; or that the spark of contempt lurking in his opinions mightn’t at any time smoulder into boredom.

“I wish I could ask you to stay to tea,” he said, “but my pupil arrives at any moment.”

“How do you find her as a pupil?”

“As a matter of fact, unexpectedly intelligent.”

“Isn’t that because you find all intelligence in women rather unexpected?”

“Possibly. At any rate it’s a pleasure to teach her. She’s got a very quick, malleable sort of mind, and good memory. She’s quick at grasping ideas (unlike her mother, you know. Jane’s intellectually stupid), and she’s got that unusual thing in women, a thirst for knowledge, in itself.”

“‘Women’ again! How do you know she doesn’t thirst simply for the knowledge you give her?”

“I should have thought that kind of motive would be easy enough to detect.”

“You’re wonderfully simple. In fact, you’d never detect it; and if you know Comfort Krebs all her life you’ll never be able to tell whether it’s knowledge, or *your* particular knowledge, that she’s got a thirst for at this moment.”

“You choose to imply a parallel between woman’s biological and intellectual behavior.”

“I don’t make a parallel. In civilized women they’re indistinguishable.”

“You mean,” he asked, “that they’re intellectually essentially passive.”

Caroline looked at him with a deliberate amusement.

“The notion of female passivity, intellectually or otherwise, always seems to me rather overdone.”

He laughed.

“I concede you that point.”

Caroline took up her gloves.

“By the way, you started by saying that Comfort was exceptional in her thirst for knowledge. Don’t you realize that by finding her exceptional you’re laying yourself open to the suspicion of being taken in—by a form of (what we agree isn’t) passivity? I don’t mean,” Caroline added, listening to a peal at the front door bell, “that the girl’s behavior isn’t quite unconsciously instinctive.”

Peter said abruptly: “Women have a way of assuming that their instincts are unconscious, and therefore excusable as motives for every kind of behavior. . . . Hello, Comfort!”

Comfort came in, looked surprised to see Caroline, and shook hands with her. She asked:—

“You did expect me?”

“Of course. Mrs. Vernon might stay and have a coaching . . .” Peter glanced from Comfort’s fair face with the strained-open eyes and emotional underlip to the vivid false calm of Caroline’s features. The girl’s expression showed her faint doubt (was he joking or not?), her desire to please, her fear of being awkward, her indifference to what they might think, her awareness of being so inescapably there, planted before their eyes in a posture that wasn’t quite easy; while the woman’s look, impersonal but wary, easy yet intent, hinted nothing except a power of reserve. In this second, in this flash of comparison, Peter wondered if Caroline’s reserve held any profound feelings.

“I don’t think I’ll stay,” Caroline said. “I don’t think my desire for knowledge is—pure enough.”

Peter glanced after her as she went out, and Comfort, watching his expression, felt hurt, and at the same time relieved that Mrs. Vernon had gone.

As she sat down in her accustomed place by the table, she decided that she didn’t much like Mrs. Vernon, though she couldn’t think exactly why.

“Have you brought me that essay this time?” Peter asked.

Comfort handed him an exercise book bound in blue linen.

“I finished it at one o’clock this morning, in bed. Every other moment I thought that Fräulein, who sleeps opposite, might come in and find me.”

V

Jane fell off her trapeze and sprained her wrist.

Her butler rang up Maurice. Mrs. Krebs would be so glad if Dr. Vernon could come at once.

Maurice found Jane in a scarlet wrapper sitting on the edge of her bed, her cheeks clay-colored, her curls damp on her round forehead.

She said, "Hell, this pain makes me feel I'm going to vomit. I hope you'll be clever, Maurice. I was trying those marvelous back-somersaults that I saw a girl do at the circus a little time back. This is a lesson to me that I'm getting too old for somersaulting. . . ." She drew in her breath as he manipulated the arm.

"Sorry. I shan't hurt again."

"Something romantic anyway about a wrist—sling and all that. Hell, I know it isn't *you* hurting me, Maurice darling—" She bit her scarlet underlip. "Might be nicer if it were." She smiled, and clenched her teeth suddenly. "Nice smell that lotion has. Lead, isn't it? Might leave me a bottle for future use (it is poison, isn't it?) in case I ever want a back door out of life. Nicely you bandage, darling! Still, I s'pose you ought, as it's your job. Will you give me an extra bottle, Maurice?"

"There are more satisfactory forms of euthanasia," he said, watching her color, and getting a flask out. He poured out some brandy. "Take this!"

She sipped while he held the cup. After a moment she said: "That is a bit better. . . . What a lovely sling! Did you bring that specially for me?"

"I want you to take some of that stuff I prescribed for you before—to make you sleep to-night. I'll tell your maid about the hot and cold bathing. There's quite a lot of inflammation there, I'm afraid, at the moment."

She said, "I think I'll have a rest," and moved suddenly—and saw the room flicker and shut down like a fan. . . .

. . . She felt her mind wake again in a grey trough. Maurice's face was above her. He said nothing. She couldn't tell how long she lay in a luxury of dull pain, staring into Maurice's face. When he moved she said, "Don't go, darling," and shut her eyes so that she shouldn't see the impersonal quality of his pity. She wondered if he thought her a coward. . . . She wondered if he realized that her nervous system felt pain very acutely. . . . She wondered about telling him this, and lay still. She felt that she could lie still like this

forever with Maurice Vernon looking down at her from the cloudy firmament of her pain . . .

He said, “You’ll be all right now, Jane. . . . It’s rather better, isn’t it? I should take some aspirin and a hot drink. And you’ll ring me up, or your maid or somebody will, in the morning?”

She shut her eyes, and opened them again.

“I’m sorry I kept you so long by my absurd fainting,” she said.

He looked at his watch.

“As a matter of fact, you’ve only kept me ten minutes anyway. . . . Don’t be depressed. The pain’ll go as the inflammation goes down. Have a rest and console yourself with the thought that you might have knocked your teeth out.”

“. . . and never smiled again,” said Jane, with a pert, shadowy grin.

VI

When Maurice saw the portrait of Peter after the first three sittings he said it was a caricature. He glanced from his wife's canvas to his friend and back again to the canvas.

"It's very odd," he said to Peter, as if Caroline weren't there. "She's got the likeness of you exactly, and yet it isn't an impression of your character a bit. . . . She's made you look—" Maurice searched for his words—"romantic, and yet rather a brute, you know!"

Peter got up and stretched himself.

"I'm glad, anyway, that that isn't your impression of me, Maurice." He came over and looked at the canvas too. "It is like me though," he said with involuntary emphasis.

Caroline stood with her back to them, looking out of the window down into the stable yard. She said:—

"Anne's just taking some sugar to Phæron. She adores that horse of yours. She pretends to be Phæron and that her bed is a loose box."

Maurice said, smiling:—

"Caroline's emphasized that bronzed appearance that made Lady Haviland say that you were such an 'upright British-looking man'!"

Caroline turned from the window.

"Go away, Maurice. I want to get on with the thing. Sit down, Peter."

Maurice went out.

Caroline looked at the canvas and grimaced.

"What's the matter?"

She hunched her shoulders.

"It's bad. The color's dull and I've made you look like an alderman at a feast."

"Eupeptic?"

"Mm—without discrimination!" She took up her palette. She became serious. "I've left out the scholar in you."

"I didn't know you allowed me that quality."

“Don’t talk.”

He sat still, watching her intermittently.

He found that he liked her best when she was at work: when she was detached, irritable, untidy; when her glance moved intently from the canvas to himself and back again to the canvas; when her face was unpowdered and her movements lanky and unconscious. During these sittings he had begun to feel that he approached her real character, stalking it, at first, with a haphazard interest, gradually allowing himself a conscious stealthy following up, aware that his success depended on her unconsciousness. . . . It was only too easy to startle her into the self which she presented to her fellow creatures.

Her glance came to and fro. Her eyebrows were drawn down. She squeezed out some more paint.

He tried to give a name to the quality in her which he had been surprised to find, and decided that it could be explained by the word “honesty.” A peculiar honesty that ran in her nature like blood in her body; that was neither derived from a moral code nor influenced by any mental process; that seemed to live in her like a disease over whose origin and persistence she had no control.

He asked, “Is it improving?”

“Mm. Beginning to.”

“I’d like your talent.”

She stood back from the canvas.

“Would you?” she said absently. She began to paint again. After a minute she said: “I’d like yours.”

“Writing isn’t a talent: it’s an exhaust.”

“Oh well . . . all art . . . in a sense . . . And history isn’t mere ‘writing’ . . .”

“It’s often very ‘mere.’ It hasn’t even the excuse of being utterly untrue—which the worst novel has! . . . And biography’s gone from bad to worse. The biographer used to bury the dead—under ponderous and sanctimonious tombstones. To-day he digs them up again, polishes their bones, analyzes their dust, and fills their skulls with neuroses.”

“You make it out a dirty job.”

“In my will I shall leave my body to a hospital, but forbid any biographer to touch my soul.”

Caroline became absent.

After a pause she said, amused:—

“Perhaps this portrait will constitute your biography.”

“Possibly.”

She laughed. “Rather smudgy, so far.” She added: “Which you aren’t. Actually I want to get you rather clean-cut. That’s what I’m altering now: then repeating all the tones and colors, but less definitely in the rows of books in the background. . . . If it’ll only work out it ought to make an attractive whole. . . . I shall give it to you and then you’ll have to hang it up.”

“I should like to have it quite immensely. Honestly I should. I shall buy it as an heirloom.”

“I shan’t let you buy it. And you haven’t got an heir. If you get it, it’ll be as a Christmas card from me.”

“My dear, I should be far too much in your debt.”

While she hesitated, brush in hand, her look changed suddenly, as a signal changes from green to red.

“I think I should like you to be in my debt,” she said.

Later in the day Peter found himself wondering whether that remark of hers was honest or whether it was a move in one of her innumerable “games.”

VII

Maurice didn't notice her entrance. He was sitting at his desk reading a pamphlet. She closed the door behind her and stood watching him.

As he took no notice of her, she went and sat down on the hearthrug in front of his fire. She stared into the coals. After ten minutes she asked, without moving:—

“What are you reading about?”

When he answered he said, “Rheumatism.”

“What about it?”

“You shall read this when I've finished with it.”

“I'd like to.”

She turned her head and looked at his intent profile and the line of his brow and hair in the lamplight.

“Who's it by?”

“Raikes.”

“He's an authority on the subject, isn't he?”

“Yes . . .”

She sat still for another ten minutes and then decided to go upstairs and say good-night to Anne. Maurice didn't notice her departure.

Anne had just had her bath and was dancing round the nursery in her blue dressing gown. She went on jumping about when Caroline came in.

“See me dance, Mummie!”

Nannie was folding Anne's clothes. Caroline sat down on a chair.

“Look at me dancing, Mummie—!” Anne's two plaits bobbed up and down.

“Give me a kiss and say good-night to me, Anne!”

Anne looked at her mother with shining eyes and continued to dance. Nannie reproached her.

“Say good-night to Mummie, Anne!”

“I don't want to—”

Caroline got up. "All right—don't. I'm going now, though—"

Anne danced on obstinately, the smile in her eyes dying out.

"Won't you say good-night, Anne?"

"I want to dance—"

Caroline laughed.

"All right. Bless you, darling. . . . Good-night." She blew her a kiss from the nursery door and went downstairs.

When Anne heard her mother going downstairs, she stopped dancing. When her mother was out of hearing she threw herself down on the floor and broke into loud sobbing. . . .

"I want to say good-night to Mummie," she cried.

Caroline put on her overcoat and went over to see Peter. She opened the front door of The Quiet Woman and walked in. He was sitting at his desk, writing.

"Oh—it's you. Good evening," he said and half rose from his chair.

"Finish what you're writing."

He sat down again. "If you don't mind I will finish the part I'm doing."

She took a cigarette and curled herself up in a corner of the sofa.

He turned for a moment and said:—

"You'll excuse me, won't you?"

She nodded.

Outside, the wind battered the windows. The green curtains were ugly and comfortable. Peter blew his nose and went on writing. Caroline put up her hand to smooth her hair and felt raindrops all over it.

She went up to the bathroom and took a towel and dried her hair. Then she went into Peter's room to find a comb. As she stood in front of the dressing table arranging her hair before the glass, she noticed a photograph of a woman in a white dress. She bent to examine it: an oval face framed by shining hair; big eyes, a small mouth—pretty. Must be his wife, she thought. The features had an amiable arrogance.

She returned down the narrow staircase feeling disconcerted, wondering if Peter were in love with his former wife.

He was still writing. Caroline sat down again in her corner of the sofa. She watched the back of his head and tried to imagine the sort of life he and his wife had led together. He might have been difficult to live with: inconsiderate and assertive; sometimes awkwardly perceptive; at other times bland, elusive, or stupid. Impossible to tell when his stupidity was deliberate, and when incidental.

“What are you writing about?” she asked.

He half turned. “British finance after the Napoleonic Wars. . . . Would you be very kind and put another log on for me?”

She bent forward to push the log on to the fire. As she did so an idea, which had been playing about for several weeks in the attics of her imagination, took possession of her whole mind. She thought that she was in love with him.

She sat up again and noticed the clock.

“It’s ten past seven,” she said. “I shall have to go back.”

He heard her after a moment and jumped up.

“Oh, my dear! I’m so very sorry. Please don’t go yet. I wanted to get this bit done and then talk to you.”

She took up her coat.

“I must. Anyway, I only came round to chatter.”

“But I wanted you to chatter. I’d no idea I’d kept you waiting so long.”

She looked at him with a sensation of surprise working in her mind.

“Never mind. I shall see you for your last sitting on Thursday.”

Unwillingly he took her to the door.

“Come to-morrow evening before dinner and I won’t work.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I shall have to see.”

VIII

Three weeks before Christmas Caroline was helping her mother pack up presents. Her mother paused in her folding of a length of alpaca and said:—

“You don’t look very well, Caroline.”

“I’m very well, Mother.”

“Your color isn’t good.”

“I’m never buxom.”

“Yes. But you look peaky. I’m sure you don’t eat enough. Young women nowadays are too foolish about their diet. They think of nothing but getting thin. And it isn’t as if men admired thin women.”

“I don’t weigh myself in the scale of men’s admiration. Maurice would never notice the size of my waist, anyway. Besides, I don’t try to keep thin.”

Lady Snow took up another half-dozen handkerchiefs and wrapped them in tissue paper and tied them neatly with “Christmas riband.”

“You need feeding up. I should like to have you here for a few weeks. . . . These are for Comfort. Write ‘To Comfort’ on that card with the robin on it. . . . You’ve been too thin since Anne was born. Having children always ruins women’s figures in some way. . . . The spencer is for Madame André . . .”

Caroline wrote “To Comfort” and slipped the card under the riband. “But that’s what figures are for,” she said.

“For what, my dear child?”

“To be what you called ruined.”

“My dear Caroline . . .”

“Will this card do for Madame André?—What do you think they’re for then, Mother? Dressmakers?”

“Look what you’re doing, Caroline, or you’ll knock those glasses over. I thought they’d be so nice for Jane with the little cocks on them. . . . And the fur gloves are for Maurice.”

“How lovely. He will be pleased.”

“Anne’s rocking-horse hasn’t come yet, but I hear it’s at Banbury Station. . . . And I’ve got a present for Stanley, which I think he’ll like.”

Caroline looked up from the writing table.

“What is it?”

“A nice blotter with his initials stamped on it. I noticed when I went there to tea that he hadn’t got a nice one. . . . By the way, Caroline, you never told me he’d been married.”

“Didn’t I?”

“No. You didn’t. And the result was that I made a *faux pas*.”

Caroline asked irritably what it was.

“Well—it was last week (when I had tea there, you know). I happened to be talking about the way young people marry nowadays without considering it properly, and I happened to say that I thought you and Maurice would have been sensible to wait for a time.”

“Really, Mother . . .”

“. . . and then I said to him that of course he couldn’t realize how restricting marriage could be, as he’d never been married. . . .”

“What did he say?”

“He said that unfortunately he had. So awkward!”

“Very.”

“And what a pity for such a charming, clever young man to have his life spoiled like that at the beginning. Who was she? Do you know?”

“I don’t. . . . I’m not very interested.”

“. . . I must ask Lady Haviland. She’s sure to know. So extraordinary of you not to have told me about it, my dear. But then, you never do tell me anything. An oyster, like your father. My own temperament’s so different. Not a bit secretive. Mr. Stanley is a great admirer of yours, Caroline. . . . He told me your portrait of him is so clever.”

“It’s quite a success.”

“Things have changed so. When I was a young woman the natural thing was for a woman to be painted by her admirer,—if he was an artist, of course,—instead of painting him.”

Caroline wrapped up two pairs of black woollen stockings and tied a card sprigged with holly on to the parcel.

“Peter doesn’t admire me,” said Caroline crossly.

Lady Snow raised her eyebrows.

“My dear Caroline, naturally he admires you. He would be very unlike the world, as I know it, if he didn’t.”

Caroline reflected that her mother didn’t know the world and wondered whether she had made any pertinent observation of Peter’s state of mind.

She asked, smiling:—

“He confided in you, Mother?”

Lady Snow turned her parrot-shrewd glance on her daughter.

“No more than you do, Caroline dear.”

Caroline couldn’t control a nervously rude rejoinder.

“Then he must have left you quite in the dark.”

“No,” said Lady Snow. “No, he didn’t.”

That night Caroline said to Maurice when he came to bed:—

“Can you imagine Mother’s latest ramp, darling?”

He sat on the edge of the bed in his pyjamas, looking affectionate, and replied absently:—

“No, I can’t.” He thought Lady Snow a boring kind of woman.

Caroline smiled, her fingers closing round Maurice’s wrist.

“She thinks Peter’s in love with me!”

Maurice looked first surprised and then amused. . . . “How very funny,” he said, and chuckled at his mother-in-law’s notion. Then, examining Caroline’s face and leaning over her, he said seriously, “Not that it would be odd really, for anyone to fall in love with you, my darling. But old Peter—” he said, smiling again. . . .

“Can you imagine such a situation, darling?” Caroline teased. “Could you imagine my having a lover?” she asked, drawing his head down and kissing his eyelids.

He kissed her lips with a slow intensity of emotion.

“That isn’t a question I can answer offhand,” he said, “because I haven’t ever tried to imagine it.”

She teased: “Would you mind?”

He shook his head. “I can’t answer offhand.”

She laughed. “Anyway, I was only joking.”

“As a joke it isn’t really very funny.”

“You’re not annoyed?” she asked, interested.

He met her look with his perfect candor.

“My darling, of course I’m not annoyed. . . .”

IX

Already at half-past three dusk began in the corners of the studio. Caroline turned her easel so that the canvas faced the window.

She had been working all day on the background of Peter's portrait. She took up a rag and wiped her brushes, and glanced out at the dark sky. Now that she had stopped work her spirit felt bare. She longed suddenly for companionship, and wondered when Maurice would get home. She imagined their evening. . . . A bottle of that Volnay at dinner. Afterwards, while he read to her, she would watch the firelight on his hands as he turned the pages, and feel his voice crystallize each liquid syllable. . . .

But it wouldn't be like that. Either he would have to go out, or if he were at home he'd hurry through dinner and then go away to work by himself on that monograph. And she would sit alone in the drawing-room doing her embroidery or reading, and go up to bed early to escape the sombre company of the night.

There were times when she could imagine herself happy as the wife of an uxorious platitudinous business man. Put on a "pretty dress" for dinner every night, like Sandra Page, and be petted a little, and occasionally brought violets or a brooch. . . . There might be solid satisfaction in a husband who provided "little treats"—who bullied a little, and bragged a little, like Tony Page, and prided himself on the increasing number of his children, and the accruing luxuries of his home. It might be very satisfying to be vulgar and luxurious and prolific. . . . Failing respectability, it might be very satisfying, thought Caroline, half her mind staring at the portrait of Peter, to be simply luxurious. . . . To live for and by the senses. . . . To live for textures and smells and shapes; for brilliance and tastes and sounds. ". . . This whisperer wounds thee, and with stiletto of gold; he strangles thee with scarves of silk, he smothers thee with the down of Phœnixes, he stifles thee with a perfume of Amber . . ." She imagined Donne's phrases engraved on a shrine of luxury.

The studio grew duskier. A voice called her from the landing below—Jane's voice. Jane appeared in the doorway.

"Darling, I've come to have tea with you. I've left Comfort at Peter's and I thought I'd pay you a proper call! Is this your portrait of him? He's just been telling me how good it is. Why, it *is* good, though I can't see the color much now!"

Jane stood beside Caroline, her head critically on one side. “You don’t see him the way I do, in some ways. But I do think it’s marvelously good.”

Caroline realized that her eyes ached. She asked: —

“How differently d’you see him?”

“*Well . . .* You’ve found a sort of romantic streak in him that I don’t get at all. To me, you know, he’s a very cultured man with a sophisticated outlook on life—and a pretty bitter tongue sometimes. But it *is* like him,” she broke out, struck by a new aspect of the picture. “The way he looks round at you with those *eau de Nile* eyes of his, as if you were an insect on a windowpane and he couldn’t make up his mind if you were an interesting specimen or just a pest to be squashed out!”

“Come down and have tea,” said Caroline. As they went downstairs she asked: —

“Is your wrist quite all right again?”

“Pretty well.”

Jane went into the drawing-room while Caroline washed her hands and took off her overall. While Jane was waiting she reflected that there was a new shade in Caroline’s behavior. Caroline went in for moods, but it seemed to Jane that this one, notable for a kind of sharpness, was involuntary. When Caroline came back, Jane referred to their plan of going to Paris together after Christmas.

“You could come with me for a week, anyway,” Jane said.

Caroline hesitated. It was expensive, she said. She didn’t like leaving Anne. Maurice didn’t really like being without her. “If only Maurice could come too,” Caroline said.

Jane agreed. “And Peter’s just been talking of going over at the same time. His brother’s at the Embassy there, you know. (He’s got a most attractive wife . . .) Peter seems to think he’s going over for several weeks —”

Caroline made no comment, but wondered why Peter hadn’t told her he was going when she’d mentioned last week that she might be accompanying Jane.

“Does Peter make love to his brother’s wife?” she asked.

Jane looked at her in surprise.

“I don’t see why you should think that of him, Caroline.”

“Oh, I should have thought he’d make love to any attractive woman.”

Jane was faintly shocked by Caroline’s words and puzzled by her manner. She said, half laughing:—

“Well, he doesn’t make love to you or me—”

“No.”

Jane demanded, still smiling, but puzzled:—

“You mean you wish that he did, darling?”

“My dear Jane—” said Caroline lightly, taking up the teapot. She handed Jane her cup. “Adultery is scarcely my line.”

Jane took the cup.

“You mean that it *is* mine? One sugar, please, darling.”

“Oh, with you,” said Caroline, “it’s not so much a ‘line’ as a religion.”

Jane was pleased. But she said sentimentally:—

“The difference is, darling, that you have a happy marriage, and so you can let marriage be *your* religion.”

“Yes,” said Caroline.

“Hamilton would never do as a god,” Jane remarked, cutting herself a slice of plum cake.

“Poor Hamilton,” Caroline said perfunctorily. “I should think polytheism suited you best anyway.”

“What exactly do you mean by *polytheism*?”

“I mean idealistic promiscuity.”

Jane decided that Caroline was being flippant and reverted to the subject of Peter Stanley.

“Have you read any of Peter’s ‘Melbourne’?”

“He’s read me some of it.”

They began to discuss Peter’s book. As they talked, Caroline noticed that Jane was nervy. She broke into what Jane was saying:—

“Maurice ought to give you a tonic, Jane. Did he? I think that sprain and not sleeping has run you down.”

Jane laughed off the idea.

“I need a change. Paris always picks me up.” She glanced at her watch. “Will Maurice be coming in?”

Caroline was vague. She didn’t know, she said.

He came in a few minutes later. Caroline turned to him and said:—

“I think your patient looks rotten.”

Maurice looked at Jane.

“She refused to take the rest I prescribed. I told you to go away and vegetate, didn’t I?”

“Hell, see me vegetate!” Jane exclaimed.

Maurice sat down beside her.

“Exactly. You see, Caroline!”

“I’m just about as much built for ‘vegetating’ as a six-litre Bentley,” said Jane.

Maurice helped himself to a sandwich. “Then you can’t blame me if you run yourself to pieces.”

“Oh,” said Jane, “I don’t know about that. If a pumpkin can be turned into a coach, then any really competent magician ought to be able to turn a motor car into a cabbage.”

Maurice said, “The professions of medicine and magic became separate some time ago.”

When the two women had gone to Peter’s house, Jane to fetch Comfort, Maurice felt a relief which he expressed to himself in the reflection that even intelligent women managed to make a great many uninteresting remarks. It seemed to him that women were definitely inclined to be boring. Caroline was an exception. But when she was with other women her talk was as futile as theirs . . . They seemed incapable of sustained thought on a subject, and were therefore unable to give it prolonged attention. Either they leapt suddenly to some kindred but irrelevant topic, or, having surveyed the subject in ten seconds from ten different points of view, they abandoned it altogether.

Maurice lit his pipe. He had an hour before he had to go and meet Selkirk at the hospital. He fetched a pile of newspapers and began to read through them, page by page, every now and then marking a column with his

fountain pen. He marked Denesford's letter on "The Future of Parties." (Very much what Lovell was saying at Yorke's the other night . . .) Stephen's two articles on "Rationalization." Stephen wrote better than he spoke. . . . Maurice got up and fetched the scissors. That editorial in the *Manchester Guardian* was worth keeping. . . .

Rose came in and cleared the tea.

"Get me a glass of sherry, please, Rose."

Rose put the tray beside him on the table. He wished that her shoes didn't squeak.

When Caroline came back half an hour later she found Maurice, scissors in hand, his feet drifted over with newspaper cuttings.

She came over to his chair and put her hand on the back of his neck. After a pause she said:—

"I wish you weren't dining out to-night."

"Mmm." Half his attention was on the paper in his hand. "Luckily, as it's only a men's dinner and Carden himself gets back late, I needn't change." He began to collect the cuttings at his feet. "I shall go on there after the consultation with Selkirk."

"Is the woman very ill?"

"I'm afraid so." He got up. "Don't lock me out by mistake." He looked at her and smiled suddenly. "Darling, you are enchanting."

She answered, after a pause, looking back at him:—

"Well, so are you if it comes to that. I hope your party at Mr. Carden's will be amusing," she said.

On the way home from Ditch Edge, Comfort sat by her mother without speaking. Jane glanced at her once or twice and wondered what she was thinking about. She asked her whether she had enjoyed her tutorial.

"Oh, yes . . ."

"You always do, don't you?"

"Yes. Mr. Stanley's very interesting to learn with."

They lapsed into silence. Then Comfort said with a conscious sigh:—

"I hope I shall never marry."

“Dear me, Comfort. Why d’you say that?”

Comfort turned on her mother a look which seemed gravely to reproach her for the shortcomings of the world.

“Because people never seem to stay in love,” she said.

“Gracious me, Comfort. Whatever do you know about that?”

“I’m sixteen. . . . Juliet was married at fourteen.”

“Whatever makes you say that, though?”

“I’m very sensitive to atmosphere, Mother. Whenever I see married people together I see that they aren’t in love with each other.”

Jane was distressed.

“My dear Comfort, you mustn’t be cynical!”

“Well, Mother, you and my father aren’t in love any more. Leastways, *you* aren’t, are you?”

“How can you say that, Comfort?”

“And Mr. Stanley,” Comfort continued, “has divorced his wife. And Dr. and Mrs. Vernon—”

“Well, at least,” Jane broke in, “you can’t say they aren’t in love.”

For a minute Comfort didn’t reply. In the faint light thrown up from the switchboard of the car Jane tried to discern what she was thinking. Then the girl added:—

“I don’t think that they are.”

Jane didn’t know whether to go on discussing the subject with her daughter or not. She put on a teasing manner:—

“You are a quaint child, Comfort!”

Comfort was silent.

“You can’t expect romance to last forever,” said Jane. “But there are other feelings . . .” she proffered, fulfilling a notion of her duty to her daughter.

“What other feelings?”

“Oh. Affection, darling—and mutual respect.”

“‘*When love has turned to kindness.*’ That’s why I shan’t marry.”

“But you love children, Comfort, and you can’t have children outside marriage.”

“You can’t stuff me up with that, Mother. Besides, I don’t mean to have any. I wouldn’t take the responsibility of giving life to anyone, or making another soul to face all the trouble in the world.”

Jane wondered what Comfort could have been reading. It struck her that the child was inclined to be morbid. She wondered whether she hadn’t better “bring her out” next season, instead of waiting another year. . . .

When Comfort got back to her own room in the Nursery House she locked the door and then went to the open window and stood looking out into the night. She felt the tears brim in her eyes. Her senses were invaded by an indefinable painful luxury of emotion.

She stood by the window for a long time, shivering, the stars blurred by her tears. . .

X

Maurice came down late to breakfast. He said:—

“For heaven’s sake let’s have the windows shut. The room’s like an ice cellar.”

Caroline got up and shut the windows. As she poured out Maurice’s coffee she glanced at his face. He had come in late from Carden’s party last night.

“Did you enjoy yourself yesterday evening?”

“Yes.”

“Who else was there?”

“Colonel Lane—Reggie Landon—Belville—an American called Lusk. We all had rather too much to drink.”

“That’s obvious from your temper and complexion this morning.”

Maurice looked at her, his eyes narrowed.

“I wish to hell you’d let me have my breakfast alone.”

She put his coffee down beside his plate and felt a desire to hit him.

“Do you suppose it’s amusing for me to sit and contemplate your sickening expression?”

“Why don’t you get out, then?”

“Because you want me to.” Caroline sat down shivering with rage.

“Get out!”

“I’m not going to.”

“Haven’t you got anything to do?”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“Nothing in the world that matters.” She thought how nasty his fried egg looked.

“Well then, you ought to have.”

“What do you imagine I ought to be doing? What on earth have I got to do that matters twopence?”

“Paint.”

“Paint pretty pictures!”

“Oh—get out, Caroline!”

She sat still, gripping the arms of her chair.

He threw down his table napkin and jumped up.

“Well then, I’m going—” He banged the door after him and she heard him cross the hall and go into the surgery. She smiled deliberately, as if she were acting, and then got up from her chair and went into the drawing-room. She wrote out the meals, answered Mrs. Belville’s invitation to dine on New Year’s Day, and then went up to her bedroom.

Glancing out of the window, she saw that the car was gone. She got her coat and a scarf out of the cupboard and sat down before the mirror to tidy her hair and redden her lips. She saw that she looked pale, and admired a Medusa-like effect.

Peter had settled down to write for the morning. He was interrupted by someone outside the window. Caroline had come in by the garden and was standing with her hands in her pockets watching him. He got up, wondering why she had come. He opened the window.

“Come in?”

She hesitated. “I merely came to see what an author looked like when he didn’t know anyone was looking at him.”

He saw that she was lying and had come with a definite purpose. He went to the garden door and let her in.

“I don’t want to disturb you,” she said.

“Don’t you?”

She met his look, and then said:—

“Perhaps I do. Do you mind? I just felt a need for company.”

“Where’s Maurice?”

She gave him a slow, unfriendly smile.

“I really don’t know. Is that your way of saying that he’s my legitimate company?”

“If I wanted to say that I should.”

She disbelieved him, but made no comment. She maintained a silence which she felt was to his disadvantage, for he was looking at her. Her

instinct was justified when he said:—

“What a curious young woman you are!”

“You don’t really like me?” she asked carefully.

He walked over to the window, then came back to where she stood by the fireplace.

“Of course I like you.”

“You like me because I’m Maurice’s wife.”

He laughed.

“You’re completely wrong there.”

She thought of Maurice and pursued intently:—

“Do you think I’m attractive?”

“My dear Caroline—”

She discerned the flaw in a manner at the same time deprecatory and amused.

“You mean you don’t think so?” she asked.

“You put me in the position of having to be either too gallant or not gallant enough,” he said.

She felt him move involuntarily nearer. She said, half smiling, half malicious, “Supposing that I don’t mind how gallant you are?”

“I don’t suppose for a second that you’d mind.” He offered her his cigarette case. “I see that, for some reason, that’s what you’ve come for.”

“And the idea bores you?”

“The idea doesn’t appeal to me for several reasons.”

Caroline reknotted her scarf.

“I should like to know your reasons.”

He ignored her remark, gazing across the room out of the window. She couldn’t in the least feel what he was thinking. When he turned to look at her his expression conveyed a dispassionate interest. He said:—

“Women always run true to form.”

She buttoned her coat.

“Pity you’re sometimes so banal, Peter.”

“I’m sorry, my dear.”

She felt that she could get nothing more from this interview and decided to go. On the doorstep she asked:—

“Did you think I came here to seduce you?”

“My dear Caroline, no one but yourself can answer that question.”

She stood for a moment staring down the village street. Then she threw at him for what it was worth:—

“Maurice and I quarreled this morning—at breakfast.”

“Really?” he said. “I supposed that something of the sort had happened. The danger of being banal, my dear, isn’t exclusively mine.”

He went in and shut the door.

Peter sent Rosamund a telegram asking her to dine with him at the Bath Club. Her reply was telephoned up to The Quiet Woman: “Adore to dine with you to-night. Love. Rosamund.”

While his man was packing, Peter wrote a note to Caroline saying that he couldn’t dine with them the next day as he had to go up unexpectedly to London. He added, as a postscript: “At the risk of being impertinent, let me advise you, as your friend, to make up your quarrel with Maurice. He is worth ten of you, and you make a very great mistake in treating him lightly and trying his devotion to you.”

Peter gave Mrs. Bredon the note to deliver at Dr. Vernon’s house. The idea of going to London to dine with his ex-wife amused him. The plan fitted his mood.

He had asked Rosamund to dine at eight o’clock. She arrived, inevitably, at quarter past eight, looking pretty and very well dressed. (She had always told him that she dressed well, and as her dressmaking business, “Mazinka,” was successful, he supposed that she must be a judge of this matter.) She clasped his hand, and he could tell by her lit-up eyes and smile that she considered their meeting an escapade.

“Too amusing, darling,” she said. “How *are* you, Peter, my dear? Looking too nice and bronzed and well! I’m afraid being a bachelor suits you.”

“You’re looking very pretty, Rosamund.”

She smiled and made her little murmur of pleasure.

“What is it? ‘Distance lends enchantment’ or something? . . . and ‘Absence makes the heart grow fonder’ . . . *So* dreadfully true proverbs are, aren’t they?”

He followed her, with an uncanny sense of familiarity, into the dining room: the slim familiar nape of her neck, her lovely shoulders, her usual careless, conscious little gestures as she took a cigarette out of her bag and lit it with her lighter. As she talked he felt himself scrutinized by those shining experimental glances that betrayed, for him, her peculiar mixture of silliness and resource. She asked him about his horses, and told him that she had been hunting in Leicestershire the week before, and gave him news of several mutual friends. He couldn’t help smiling at the way she established an atmosphere half domestic, half flirtatious, between them.

Peter asked her how her husband was, to which she replied that he was well, but boring after a time.

“Legitimacy takes the guilt off the gingerbread?” Peter asked.

She shrugged her shoulders.

“I oughtn’t to be bored. He’s a dear thing in his way and absolutely worships me.”

Peter wondered if this was what she used to say about him. She glanced at his expression and said:—

“I know you’re thinking something too horrid, darling.”

He shook his head, remembering how certain tones in her voice, and this one in particular, had irritated him.

“How’s business? How’s ‘Mazinka’ doing?”

“*Not* too terribly well just the last month or two. I mean fairly well, of course, but I had a beastly operation in the autumn and had to be away for six weeks, and that *always* means they make the most impossible muddle of everything. But I think I shall pull it together all right.”

She lit a cigarette between the courses—another habit he had always disliked. He realized that there had been moments since their divorce when he had imagined he was still in love with her. Now that he was with her again he could make a catalogue of her physical attractions and observe how utterly she had ceased to charm or interest him. She had neither brains nor

temperament, though he knew that she could produce a serviceable synthetic intellect and a creditable imitation of emotion (largely worked up out of egotism and hysteria). Making love to her had always been rather like getting a packet of chocolate out of a slot machine. What you got was always identical, and the habit produced a calculably diminishing return of pleasure.

She hovered round the subject of her business and finally asked him if he would lend her five hundred pounds—"just to put the thing straight again." He agreed at once, feeling a chivalrous obligation towards her which his mind resented.

"You *are* a darling, Peter. What it is not to be married to a chap! Now if I'd simply *implored* you five years ago. . .! Are you in love with anyone yet, Peter?"

"No, my dear."

He saw that she was pleased, but doubtful.

"*Certain*, darling? You're the kind of man who never really knows when he's in love. I simply had to hang round your neck until you noticed I was there. Do you remember that week-end at the Leslie's?"

He could be shocked, even now, at her way of profaning whatever was no longer sacred to her. During the last years of their marriage she had seemed to take pleasure in despoiling corners of their past which he would rather have left alone—to be forgotten in neglected beauty. He said lightly:

—

"No, Rosamund. I've given up the habit of being in love." As he spoke he had a picture in his mind of Caroline Vernon, standing with her back to the fireplace and looking sulky.

"What a marvelous habit to give up, darling. Wish I could!" She paused, her glance shining on him from beneath her neat curled lashes, and he realized that she was offering him, if he wanted it, a personal interpretation of her remark. "There's something terribly attractive about you, Peter darling," she added.

He said perfunctorily: "Let me return the compliment, my dear. You're utterly unchanged."

She took out her mirror and powder puff.

"Yes. I don't think I'm aging yet," she said, momentarily self-absorbed. Then she put her mirror back in her bag and began to tell him about her last

visit to Paris, and what she had bought and whom she had met there. While she was talking he remembered a story of de Maupassant's in which a man is attracted by his ex-wife after she has married her lover. The situation was a contrast to his own. He realized that Rosamund would never fail to bore him. He compared her with Caroline and wondered how he had ever supposed that they had any qualities in common. Caroline was complex and incalculable; Rosamund was irritatingly simple and tediously calculable. Caroline's charm was involuntary, Rosamund's deliberate. Rosamund pretended to be spontaneous and unconventional; Caroline cared too little for opinion to pretend anything. Rosamund was energetic while Caroline was lazy, calculating where Caroline was instinctive, instinctive where Caroline was intelligent. . . .

Rosamund described how she had seen his brother and sister-in-law at Paillard's while she was in Paris. They had cut her, she said—and laughed with a bad grace.

“. . . Lydia looked terribly stuffy and he simply looked through me. Of course Roman Catholics *are* all terribly old-fashioned about divorce and birth control and all the things that make life possible at all!”

Peter said: “I'm going over to stay with them sometime in January for a fortnight.”

“Well, if you are, you might try and explain to them that my sins are no more scarlet than anyone else's. . . .”

Peter reflected how slavishly Rosamund cared for people's opinion. He remembered her hysterical relief when he had agreed to let her divorce him. He wondered, if they had had any children, whether he would have agreed to this. . . . Fortunately her nervous horror of child-bearing had obviated such a difficulty.

She asked him, as they went into the lounge after dinner, how his book was getting on. He told her that he hoped to get it finished by May or June. As they passed a writing table, she said:—

“Oh—about that cheque, my darling?”

He sat down and wrote out the cheque and handed it to her. She read it, folded it neatly, and put it into her note case. “Too sweet of you, Peter. *Do* hope it hasn't ruined you.”

“I hope not.”

He sat down beside her on a sofa, and observed that she felt an obligation to be charming and a little intimate. Every now and then, while she talked and asked him questions about his life at Ditch Edge, she laid her hand on his knee, or touched his arm, or, resting her head against the back of the sofa, turned her face to his and gave him a long hesitating look. . . .

After a time she proposed that he should come home with her and see her flat; Carlyon was away, she said, so there wouldn't be any awkward situation.

They drove to Hans Mansions. When they got in Peter noticed that there was whiskey and soda ready on a tray. As her husband was away and she hated whiskey, he concluded that she had planned a tête-à-tête.

She went to take off her cloak and called to him to come and see her bedroom.

“Clarissa Vane did the wall paintings for me,” she said. “Aren't they rather ravishing?”

“Very.” He thought Clarissa Vane had been clever. Monkeys in amorous groups amidst tropical flowers. (He remembered Caroline saying that she and Clarissa Vane had shared a studio for a time.)

Rosamund threw her cloak over a chair.

“D'you feel that we've suddenly gone back five years?” she asked, standing before the glass.

He looked at her, dispassionate and, for a moment, admiring.

“No, my dear,” he said. “I'm very much aware that we haven't.”

She followed him back into the drawing-room and stood about him while he poured himself out a whiskey and soda.

“Play me something,” he said, indicating the piano.

The idea pleased her. He suspected that she interpreted his request as a flattering rebuff of her proximity—and wondered, in a flash of afterthought, if she mightn't be right (and whether there wasn't truth in the assumption that opportunity made any attractive woman too attractive).

“What shall I play?” She wandered over to the piano and sat down. “Have you heard Dick Rawdon's latest song? I heard him sing it at Lettice Hare's and he sent me the music—”

“Who is he?”

“Oh, darling, you must remember! The young man who did the lyrics in *All Change* and goes about everywhere with Betty Linklater.”

“Mm—yes. I do remember vaguely. Looks like a pimp and behaves like a lady. What’s it called?”

Rosamund played a few bars and paused.

“It’s called ‘My Subconscious is Conscious of You.’” She smiled. “It’s rather good. Everyone’s mad about the tune.” She began to play again. Peter found himself woken by its rhythm.

“I can’t remember most of the words.” She hummed the tune, swaying a little as she played:—

“My Subconscious is craving for you
Craving for you in dreams;
For whatever their themes
And however it seems
That their subject redeems them from amorous schemes
They mean that—I—WANT—YOU. . . .”

“I can’t remember the words of the verses—” She stopped playing suddenly. “Like it?”

“Quite amusing—” He looked at his watch. “I must go now. It’s half-past eleven. I’ve got to get back early to-morrow morning.” He was aware that his manner was sudden.

She got up from the piano.

“Hunting to-morrow?”

“Yes.”

She came towards him.

“It’s been terribly sweet of you to want to see me again,” she said, a sentimental undertone in her voice. She put her hand on his arm; for a second she laid her forehead against his shoulder (an old trick of hers). “We must meet again,” she said, and glanced up, half smiling, half curious.

“It’s been great fun,” he said, suddenly miserable, suddenly envious of her facility to make all life trivial. “We must certainly meet again,” he said emptily, and patted her shoulder, and turned to go, longing to be out of her presence; as if that gesture of hers—her forehead against his shoulder—had given him the sadness of satiety.

It was raining in Brompton Road.

Peter walked towards Sloane Street hoping to find a taxi. As he buttoned up his coat against gusts of rain he reflected that Rosamund, up in her flat, was already unreal to him, though he had an impression of her final look of mingled archness and chagrin, and a phrase of the tune she had played lilted vaguely in his mind and set the rhythm of his steps along the pavement.

The stimulus which he had sought from Rosamund's company had worked off.

To-morrow, the day after, sooner or later, he would be with Caroline again.

He hailed a taxi.

If he hadn't utterly done with "being in love," if he weren't content to be free of the turmoil of emotion, it would be easy for him to believe that he loved Caroline Vernon. (And she was ready, he admitted, thinking of the morning's episode, fatally ready, for the mere taste of change, for a mere sense of adventure, to feel herself in love with him.)

Easy enough . . . Too easy, he thought, staring out at the wet lights of Piccadilly.

It was after twelve when Maurice came home that night. The lamp above the garage door was veiled by gusts of rain, and the house was hidden in the dark.

Maurice looked up at her windows. There was no vein of light between the curtains. He got out his latchkey.

The lamp in the hall was turned low, throwing out a melancholy dimness. Maurice felt too discouraged to turn it up. He dragged off his overcoat, glancing mechanically at a pile of letters on the table. The sick apprehension which he had been warding off all day took possession of his mind.

Her scarf lay on the table.

He lit a candle and turned the lamp out and went upstairs. Ramsay was waiting for him in his dressing room. He thumped his tail. Maurice bent to pat him.

It wasn't possible to calculate her actions. . . . He began to undress. He was so tired that his body ached when he moved. He'd told her to go . . .

He'd told her . . .

He dragged on his dressing gown.

He opened the door carefully in the bedroom. The darkness seemed to be waiting for him. He listened, and could hear nothing. Then he turned back and blew out the candle in the dressing room, and then stood still in the doorway.

“Caroline!”

The silence and darkness pressed round him.

“Caroline . . .?”

He groped through the dreadful stillness towards her bed. He felt its edge—the eiderdown—her body. She moved suddenly, and lay rigid. He breathed:—

“Caroline?”

Under his hand he felt her shudder and turn over. He repeated her name. He was afraid. He felt that nothing could ever break this darkness. He heard her breathe unevenly, and move on her pillows. He drew away his hand, and heard her gasp out a stifled “Don't”—and realized that she was crying.

“Darling—”

“Darling. Caroline—darling—” He sat down on the bed and took her in his arms. She made no resistance and went on sobbing. He felt her burning wet cheek. He kept saying, “I'm sorry—darling—I am so sorry—” and every now and then she clutched him harder as though his nearness might stop the dreadful mechanism of her tears. He kissed her damp forehead, her eyelids. She was near and intimate now, as she had been remote and strange ten minutes before. The time between her sobs grew longer. Kissing her lips, he felt a swift desperation in her response.

“Dear—Maurice—darling. . . .”

She had the power to light his senses and to lose herself in the slow flaring of their mutual fire. . . .

Later, when he was asleep in her arms, she lay wondering what was going to happen to their life. In this dark cool aftermath she felt a sort of tenderness for Maurice and a kind of inquisitive liking for Peter Stanley. But neither of these feelings seemed very important; and she found herself

deciding that mushrooms would improve that casserole of chicken for tomorrow night. . . .

PART THREE

I

Jane had booked a suite at the Crillon. Jane always booked suites. When they arrived there were roses waiting for her. She looked at the card and smiled and tore it up.

Caroline pulled open the windows and looked out, lips, nostrils, eyelids tasting the cold air. Paris below her, a tide of sound incessantly wounded by the hoots of taxis. A mad luxury of lights. Bars of gold pitched helter-skelter, a million necklaces flung down glittering, jewels splintered and scattered among trees: Paris, breathing like someone near you in the dark.

“Every time I come to Paris, I get out of my grave and gasp and read my epitaph—‘Here lies Caroline Vernon, who died early in her life!’”

Jane was putting her hat in a cupboard.

“Sort of a resurrection of you, darling?” She glanced at Caroline’s back. “What buried you?” she asked curiously.

“More interesting to know what killed me . . . (How lovely it is. Feel the air, Jane. D’you feel a little mad, a little alive, already?) Don’t know what killed me. . . . The thing was about after the war—I sometimes think it’s the result of what Meredith calls drinking oblivion—and ‘shortening the stature of your soul.’ Refusing to ‘feel’ much, you know. I drank my soul to death—early—”

A gentleman with an Argentine complexion and an assumed French accent came in to ask Madame Krebs if she was satisfied with her rooms. Jane told him in bad French that she wanted her roses arranged in water.

When he had gone Jane said:—

“Let’s call up Peter. He told me to call him up when we arrived.”

Caroline shut the windows and went through the bathroom into her room, saying that she expected Peter was busy.

Jane proceeded to telephone with her native casual air of being born to a mouthpiece. Caroline waited, listening. At last she heard Jane talking to Peter, and turned and went back into Jane’s room.

“He wants us to have supper with him on Friday night.”

Caroline nodded.

“Says she will,” said Jane. “Here, Caroline, he wants to speak to you.”

Caroline took the receiver.

“Caroline?”

“Yes.”

“What are you doing to-morrow?”

“Several things. Shopping, I expect. Supposed to be lunching.”

“Come with me to Versailles and improve your mind.”

“Beastly if it rains.”

“Why should it rain? It’s been lovely to-day — air like champagne.”

“Why do people always say champagne?”

“I shall call for you at ten o’clock.”

“Very well. But not if it rains.”

“My dear, if it rains, I’ll take you out and buy you goloshes.”

He rang off. Caroline asked:—

“What time are we dining with these people?”

Jane took her traveling clock out of the dressing case given her by Krebs when her last baby was born.

“Eight o’clock. I’m going down now to have a face massage—you coming?”

“No. I think I’ll lie down and rest. . . . I wish sometimes one could have a mind massage,” she said.

II

There was a graciousness about his sister-in-law which Peter found singularly lacking in the women of his time. She had qualities which he remembered as being notable in his mother and in the women who were his mother's friends. Her manners had a charming flavor of formality while her manner gave out a deliberate grace. Without seeming either hard or assertive she carried with her an implication of disciplined emotions and ordered thought. She knew her world, without being worldly, and conformed perfectly to the usages of society without allowing social life to impair the integrity of her character. In public she felt, quite clearly, the obligation of "behavior." (Peter always felt that he could trace in her an admirable nursery discipline.) In private she revealed a sensitive gayety of heart, a quick sympathy, an active mind. During the years that Peter had known her (she had been married to his brother now for twelve years) he had never observed her assert her personality by mood or temper; and, knowing her a woman of strong emotions and opinions, he recognized that this reservation of self must imply both imagination and control. She had achieved a companionship with her husband which was both easy and profound—and Peter knew that the hard work of that relation could never have been achieved by his brother, who was clever, skeptical, and selfish. Her children loved her with their hearts and minds; they respected her commands, and were enchanted by her friendship. It was easy enough, Peter felt, to trace her influence in their eager intellects and excellent manners.

In her judgment of people Lydia was quick to observe and slow to criticize, and it was with a mixture of interest and apprehension that Peter suggested to her that she might invite Caroline Vernon to tea.

She was quick to remember a former mention of Caroline's name.

"Ah," she said, "your good neighbors in the country? I'd love to ask her, if you don't think she'll mind—on a mere mutual friendship?"

He smiled. "I'd like her to meet you, Lydia. And I want to have your opinion of her."

"If you've arranged to take her to Versailles to-day—then bring her in to tea here afterwards."

He agreed that this plan would be excellent, and Lydia sat down to write Caroline a note. While she was writing she asked: "Was it Mrs. Vernon or the husband that you knew formerly?"

“Maurice Vernon.”

She finished writing her note and blotted it.

“You like him?” She took an envelope out of a drawer.

“Very much. He’s an interesting character . . . They’re an interesting couple,” he added.

“Tell me about them. You know how I love to hear about people.” Her hand moved in a gesture. “Make a picture of them!”

Peter hesitated for a moment, while his mind began to give form to the household at Ditch Edge.

“Tell me,” she urged, “about their house, the color of their hair—their carpets—a description in the romantic tradition.” She folded her hands on her lap and sat upright, waiting, examining her brother-in-law’s features.

“As you will, Lydia. . . . Their house is built of stone and was originally a square farmhouse. It has good stables, situated at the back, across a courtyard, where I keep my horses. Inside, the house is furnished with comfort, and with a sense of color and arrangement which only just misses being conscious and ‘artistic.’ The rooms are neither too tidy nor too untidy, and admirably full of books. The south rooms have lovely views of the country—I don’t remember the carpets! They have one or two good modern pictures—a Matthew Smith and a Marquet. At intervals there are evidences that Maurice has helped with the furnishing and decoration. There is a stained red leather armchair in his own study, and some indifferent etchings of Oxford on the stairs, and a glass case full of fossils in the dining room.

“Maurice himself hasn’t changed much since I knew him at Eton. He’s very good-looking and dresses abominably. He’s fair and looks much younger than he is. He’s much cleverer in action than in talk—though every now and then he makes a remark which shows how penetrating his mind can be. He’s detached—up to a certain point—about the human side of life. People are either his material or his companions, but he doesn’t want them in any intimate relation. He likes occasionally to see a crowd of men and get drunk with them, and forget every one of them the next day. As for women, he has very little use for them, though I imagine he would make love to a woman who wanted it, and forget her utterly within two hours. There is one exception to his cherished detachment. He’s tremendously influenced and absorbed by his wife . . .”

“In love with her?”

“As far as I can make out, yes.”

“And she . . . is she in love with him?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think she knows herself. She relies on him very much.”

“What is she like?”

“She’s—luminous some days, and other days she simply has a sort of dull handsomeness. She has dark hair and remarkable grey eyes, and a long neck, and the most beautiful hands I’ve ever seen. . . . She’s as tall as I am and manages her height badly.”

“Is she clever, Peter?”

“A clever painter, I think. I’m not sure if she’s a clever woman. Her mind is very quick and quite undisciplined. She appears to be sensitive up to a point, but utterly selfish, and suffers from vague discontents. She is very observant about people, and gets hold of all possible data about them although she has very little idea how to use it. She and Maurice seem to alternate between phases of inexplicable coldness and an exaggerated mutual confidence. One evening I found her in tears because Maurice hadn’t returned when she expected and she imagined he’d had a motor accident . . .” Peter broke off, hesitated.

“Women are quite incalculable,” he said.

“And you and Maurice? Do you see much of each other?”

“Yes. But, as I told you, he has an aversion to intimacy, or rather he simply doesn’t feel a need of it. We talk, whenever I dine there, and we ride together occasionally, but I haven’t, from him, the least information as to what he has gained or learned from his experience of life; or what place he mentally gives to his marriage, his child, or his work. I sometimes doubt if he knows himself; I doubt if his thoughts ever cover that kind of ground. . . .”

Lydia got up from her bureau.

“I shall be very interested to meet her.”

“I hope you’ll like her.”

She handed him the note.

“I think I’m bound to like any friend of yours, Peter.” She looked him in the eyes and said in her stately admirable way, “Our friendship is a great

pleasure to me, Peter. I always count it as one of the blessings brought to me by my marriage.”

He wasn't embarrassed, but he was touched, and, for a moment, unable to reply. Then he said:—

“You're one of the very few real friends I have, Lydia.” He remembered how she'd helped him during those awful last two years of his marriage. He remembered the way in which she'd been able to give him strength without ever giving him advice. . . .

She was asking him:—

“Have you been happy this winter, Peter?”

He wondered.

“I've lived a curious life,” he answered. “Hunted. Had no friends to stay and seldom been away myself. Worked rather hard.”

“It sounds a happy life to me,” she said gravely.

“Isn't it rather a cold life?”

She shook her head. “Not if you work. . . .”

He couldn't follow her train of thought, but saw that she looked sad. She never gave him an opportunity to learn why he was sorry for her. He asked her:—

“Did you see—Rosamund at Paillard's last summer?”

A slow color showed in her plain charming face.

“She—told you that she saw us?” she asked.

“Yes . . . I dined with her just before Christmas.”

“Yes, Peter. I did see her. But I didn't choose to acknowledge her presence. . . . She probably told you that.”

“Yes. She was very much hurt.”

Lydia made no further comment than:—

“Curious such women are.”

The phrase, and the gentle but detached tone in which it was spoken, seemed to him to expose the distance between Lydia and his former wife. Lydia closed their talk by reminding him that he had to call for Mrs. Vernon

at ten o'clock. She then rang the bell and gave orders for the two younger boys to be brought in to her for their morning lesson.

Peter met them in the corridor looking solemn, each wearing an overall and carrying an exercise book and pencil box.

He strolled from the Rue St. Honoré toward the Luxembourg Gardens. It was too early yet to call for Caroline. He looked forward to half an hour's solitude, for his conversation with Lydia had conjured up the problem he had been able to relegate, if not to forget, during the unceasing sociability of the last weeks.

He decided that he must either master the question of his future relation with Caroline or else give himself up to its unwarrantable power, subjecting his peace of mind, his freedom of spirit, his whole sense of proportion and propriety, to its vagaries.

Although Caroline was "the matter," he preferred to consider its difficulties and complexities in a neutral form. The personal problem made abstract, presented in formulæ, rather than in the warmer and more elusive outlines of Caroline's being, was susceptible of logical treatment. He could work it out, he felt, to some irrefutable conclusion, whereas the attaching of Q.E.D. to Caroline's skirts would give neither poise nor certainty to her behavior.

He emerged into the Place de la Concorde. His thought settled, reassured, on the algebraical. Since her behavior, her feeling, her intuition, was uncertain,—was x , in fact,—it was his business to discover the value of x in their whole equation. The metaphor amused and then annoyed him. He had come no nearer to lucid thought.

What, then, was the face of his problem? That he was afraid of falling in love with her? That he was more in love with her than he admitted? That he was half in love?

These shades of sensation weren't in themselves important, he decided, crossing the Rue de Rivoli. Their importance was in their practical result. Either he was so lightly, so easily, in love with her that there would be no harm in his staying at Ditch Edge, or else he was too much in love with her and would have to go. "In either case," he thought, "she'll please herself by concluding that she's the cause of my behavior."

It seemed to him curious that he shouldn't be able to measure his own feelings. Away from her he alternately desired and disliked her. She haunted

his finer thoughts and deeper meditations, moving among them with a crude but ephemeral provocation: a faceless ghost, the expression smeared in by his angry imagination. When he was with her he found himself too close for the mere staring of desire, or for the pleasures of a nice and ironical contemplation—and knew her company as the slaking of a hidden thirst.

He sat down on a bench and lit a cigarette. As he threw away the match he noticed the etched silver scene before him. The trees, the formal steps and terraces, the façades of distant buildings, the traffic flashing gracefully beyond the iron palisades of the Gardens, the blades of thin grass and the thin frosty cries of the children playing by the fountain—these shapes and tints and sounds grew into a vision of delicately bitten beauty, a vision affecting him so intimately that he had the sense of drawing in its loveliness from the brittle, glistening air. . . .

He wished that she were beside him at this moment. . . . He would feel how she felt this: silently (for she was profuse and clumsy with words)—silently and seriously, the light growing stronger in her eyes.

Perhaps he was relieved, he thought, that she wasn't here. She might have spoken and thumbed the surface of his vision with her words. Better to be alone, and let his sense of her wander invisibly among the grey trees.

As he got up to go he realized that he hadn't, in any way, thought out the situation. It seemed to him that a moment of acute æsthetic perspective had affected his emotional state and enabled him to feel a tenderness for Caroline which the prospect of immediately seeing her didn't confirm.

So very young men fall in love, he reflected. . . . They abide by such moments and suffer from the gradual perception that the woman they took hold of was no more than the substance used to throw an effective shadow.

He reëmerged into the Rue de Rivoli feeling depressed.

III

Peter was ushered into Jane's room, where she was curled up in bed among a quantity of pillows. He could hear Caroline singing in her bath and splashing.

Jane told him to sit down where he could find room. He placed himself on a chaise longue between confusions of silk and lace and swansdown and listened while Jane rattled off an account of the party she and Caroline had been to the night before.

Caroline came in in her dressing gown and apologized for keeping him waiting. She loitered for a moment, chattering vaguely and smelling of verbena. When she had gone away to dress he decided that her entry had been a deliberate raid on his senses and asked himself why he had arranged to spend the day in her company.

He answered Jane's question about his brother. She startled him by saying, laughing and sipping her coffee:—

“D’you know Caroline thinks you’re having an affair with your sister-in-law?”

“It amuses Caroline to imagine me a Don Juan.” Caroline’s assumption made him angry. He got up and walked about the room and sat down again. But he couldn’t help smiling at the idea of an “affair” with Lydia.

In a few minutes Caroline reappeared, gay, friendly, a little casual. He felt his resentment ebb. She kissed Jane good-bye.

“Got a Blue Guide, Peter? To serve as your text?”

She slipped her arm through his and he felt himself trapped in her assumption of their flawless friendship. As they went down in the lift she looked at him and laughed; but when he asked her why she laughed she merely shook her head and said she didn’t know.

During the drive to Versailles she leaned back, diffusing a sense of her pleasure. When he spoke to her she answered him shortly, but with an air of elusive happiness. After a time he became silent, too. He had never felt her so contented—so assured. She was visibly drawing life from some element or elements which she usually lacked. He wondered what they were. He could feel her body more alive, her mind more sensitive. . . .

As they drove through Neuilly he asked her what she was thinking about.

Her look touched him with a clear warmth. “I wasn’t thinking; I was feeling.”

“What?”

“Just feeling. Like being in a bath.”

He had it in his mind to tell her about his visit to the Luxembourg Gardens. Instead he asked her if she had ever done any landscape work in France. She replied by some reminiscences of a time she had spent in Provence. She had no gift for narrative and her account struck him as dull. She used the word “Lovely” over and over again, and said that the Palace of the Popes was “marvelously impressive.” . . . She broke off and said, smiling at his surprise:—

“If you were telling me something that didn’t interest me I should lose your friendship forever if I showed I was bored.”

“But I wasn’t . . .”

She leaned towards him for a moment. “I don’t care a bit if you were . . . *dear* Peter.” She laughed. “I hope we shall have an absolutely delicious luncheon,” she said. “Mother says a hotel near—I’ve got it written down—is good. . . .”

He remembered when she spoke of luncheon that he hadn’t given her Lydia’s note. He handed it to her now. He saw her color as she read it, and remembered Jane’s remark.

“How nice of her, Peter!”

“Will you come?”

“Yes. . . . Please—will she like me?” she asked uncertainly.

“I don’t see why she shouldn’t.”

Caroline felt silly and embarrassed. “I hope she will.”

Peter said:—

“I have a great respect for Lydia’s judgment. . . .”

Caroline was quiet until they reached Versailles.

They were suddenly alone in the baroque desert of the Galerie des Glaces. He said:—

“I feel as if I were in the tomb from which a whole epoch has been exhumed. The place is gutted. There’s something grim to me about these windows. Life has ceased to look out of them. Holes in a skull.”

She walked to one of them, saying, “But we look out”—and feeling her gaze trickle minutely out over the magnificent bare vista of gardens.

“Maggots looking out of sockets.”

She turned.

“What gloom you’re in!”

Her laughter echoed and she checked it, looking up to the ceiling as she did so. He was going to speak, but she stopped him.

“Wait,” she said. “Don’t let’s talk for a little. I want to feel something,” she breathed. And then, a minute later: “I don’t *want* just to take all this for dead. Wait a little. I want to feel its life. . . .”

He watched her, surprised, interested, just a little amused.

“Now I do begin to feel it,” she said. “I don’t mean ghosts. I never do feel ghosts. I mean simply that I’m understanding that there was life, in here. . . . How badly I say it. But people really lived in here. Walking in and out of these doors. I know that now. (I couldn’t before.) Real women! One of them cross because she had a spot on her chin; another one excited in a new dress. . . . All those men, one cheerful because he’d won some money, another disagreeable with the tummy-ache. . . . Where I’m standing a woman like me, like any of us, waited about looking calm and feeling *sick* with excitement because some ordinary man—like you, Peter—was going to come into the room. . . . *Funny* it is—tantalizing. Her hand was as warm as mine is now. And she felt the same feelings, *real* feelings, when a pin pricked her—when she felt gay, when she wanted him to kiss her. . . . It’s a frightening feeling, this, when it comes! The more you know them alive, the more you know that your own aliveness is like theirs, *real* now, and so dead in a hundred years that it’ll need an absolute pain of someone’s imagination to think it alive again!”

He asked: “Are you afraid of dying?” And saw that his question contracted her thought.

“Not if I can have enough of life first.”

“What do you want? What are you always wanting?”

She became silent.

An elderly woman and a girl came in at the far end. The older woman was talking about Marie Antoinette. “. . . and when the crowd shouted for cake she said, ‘Give them bread!’ . . .”

Caroline said: “Let’s go.”

As they walked down the staircase she looked at his profile and wondered what had annoyed him. . . . The chattering elderly woman?

He was thinking of her very typical and personal attempt at the historical spirit. “. . . Because some ordinary man, like you, Peter . . . the same feelings . . .”

Either, he thought, she’s unforgivably childish, or deliberately childish (which is worse).

“I suggest we go back now,” he said.

She wondered if he’d be surprised if she told him that the only thing that mattered to her was to be in his company.

As Caroline entered the Stanley’s *appartement* she felt herself change climate. As she walked into the drawing-room, followed by Peter, she wondered if their day hadn’t, after all, been simply what it seemed: delightful, interesting, friendly. She turned to him while they were waiting for their hostess, and remarked that his sister-in-law had a charming flat. And what lovely flowers! She noticed the way they were arranged. In this pleasant room she felt herself pleasant, and, straightening her back, smoothing her gloves on her hands, developed a sense of her own formality.

Peter, observing a change in her manner, put it down to a desire to make a good impression.

At the end of two minutes, when Lydia came in, Caroline found her less the genius of the room than she had expected. The room was accounted for, she decided; it was clear enough how its orderly beauty had grown under Mrs. Stanley’s direction. But it was equally clear to Caroline that the remarkable quality in her hostess couldn’t be expressed in terms of material taste and practical beauty. . . . Caroline sat down, answering a question about their visit to Versailles; agreed to a well-turned commonplace about never visiting the beauties of a city in which one lived. Mrs. Stanley wasn’t in the least what Caroline had expected. She was less chic and more charming, less conventional and more dignified. Caroline felt herself in the presence of a woman whom she so immediately liked and respected that she felt shy.

“Peter has been telling me about his life in your village. I made him give me a graphic description.”

“I hope his description was pleasant.” Caroline glanced at Peter. She smiled at him. In this atmosphere she found that her confused feelings about him were at rest, and that he was simply sympathetic and interesting and commanded a part of her affections. Dear Peter! She felt happy in the sudden and sweet clearness of these moments, and turned with a sense of gratitude to the hostess whose influence had given her this relief. “Was it pleasant?” she repeated, still with the shyness of her admiration.

“Pleasant and interesting. . . . I envy you living in the country, Mrs. Vernon. I was brought up in the country and miss its companionship. In a town the seasons only change in temperature and never with the complete metamorphosis of a country landscape.”

“All the same, Lydia, Paris is a good background for you.”

Lydia gave him a half smile.

“How little you understand me, Peter! . . . Sit down and don’t pace about the room like a hungry bear. Cut yourself some cake.”

Caroline observed the ease of their intimacy. “Peter is at his best with her,” she thought, “just as I should be if I were with her.” She listened to their exchange of remarks about a plan for the morrow and thought that she would have liked to be like Lydia Stanley. . . . Yet, what was between her, Caroline, and that quality—those qualities—in Peter’s sister-in-law? Not cleverness, for Mrs. Stanley wasn’t visibly clever; not experience, for Lydia could scarcely be more than thirty-five now. Caroline pieced the matter together for herself, her instinct guiding her unwilling reason. Spiritual sensibility, moral courage—a hardly achieved coherence of character. . . . Lydia Stanley’s charm was the fine and difficult flower of her spirit.

“You and Peter are going out this evening. What are you going to see?”

Peter said:—

“Give me your advice, Lydia.”

They began discussing plays and restaurants. But in this fragrant quiet room Caroline felt a distaste for restaurants, and, with an impulse to cancel her evening, said that on the whole she wondered if they hadn’t better be sensible and have an evening of rest. . . . “For Peter says he’s been out five nights running,” she said, “and I’m almost jaded after two festive evenings.”

She felt Lydia look at her. Then wondered if she’d imagined her glance.

“I expect Mrs. Vernon’s right, Peter. She has wisdom for both of you.”

“The matter is entirely in Caroline’s hands,” said Peter. “Personally I’m not at all jaded; on the other hand I shouldn’t like to persuade her against her will.”

Caroline saw Lydia look at him with the same swift intentness that she had bent on her a moment before.

“I think I’d better not,” said Caroline.

Peter shrugged his shoulders. “As you like.”

Lydia offered Caroline a cigarette.

“That’s decided, then. . . . When do you go home, Mrs. Vernon?”

“To-morrow.”

Peter’s back was turned. He was looking out of the window.

“When you’re next in England, Mrs. Stanley, will you come and see us?”

“I’d like to so much. I’d like to meet your husband. Peter tells me he’s so clever.”

Caroline thought of Maurice with a shock of emotion which startled her. She saw him, quite suddenly and quite clearly—his wide brow, his hard clinging look, his air of gently conceding nothing and amiably caring for nobody which made him seem, at times, so much more a visitant than an inhabitant of the world.

“Yes. He is clever.”

Lydia asked her about Anne and they discussed the upbringing of children while Peter moved about the room and paid no attention to their remarks.

When Caroline got up to go he broke in on her farewells with an offer to escort her back to her hotel. She turned to thank him. She would be delighted, she said, and wondered at the abruptness of his manner.

When they were in the street she asked him what was the matter.

He broke out:—

“Simply that you’re utterly without balance.”

“I don’t understand.” She didn’t. Lydia’s atmosphere was still in her lungs. She had borrowed a sense of integrity and wondered that he shouldn’t, conformably, feel this. In another world, two hours past, during

their drive back from Versailles, she had persuaded him to take her out for the evening.

He didn't speak. He walked beside her, hurrying her through the radiant orchestration of the streets. He stopped outside the Crillon and she realized that he was going to turn back without speaking to her.

“Peter.”

“Good-bye, Caroline.”

“Peter. . . .” She wanted him to stay. He mustn't go—like this. “Peter. . . .”

“What's the matter?” He ignored her hand on his arm.

“Peter, let's go out after all—I'm not tired.”

“You said you were.”

“I want to change my mind.”

“Your mind does nothing but change.”

“It's changed for better now.”

“You really are tedious, Caroline. How Maurice can live a week in your company!”

She felt his uncertainty and withdrew her hand from his arm.

“We will go, then?”

“You're maddening,” he protested, but smiling because her eagerness was attractive, and her determination to enjoy herself so uncompromising.

“Fetch me here, then—at seven, as we'd arranged.”

“Very well.”

She watched him walk away: an aggressively British-looking back view in a dark blue overcoat and a bowler hat.

As she went up in the lift to her room she abandoned her mind once more to the vague excitement which Lydia Stanley had temporarily dispersed.

At half-past seven Peter waited in the hall.

At quarter to eight Caroline broke out of the lift in a white dress, carrying a white fan—her eyes dark with excitement, her necklace glittering, her laughter glistening on the surface of her mood. She apologized, breathless, laughing: a shoe had got lost—she had looked everywhere, while Jane, in a nervous temper (for Krebs, the inevitably “poor” Krebs, was arriving to-morrow in Paris), had furiously prologuized; and found it, she added, of all places,—she laughed, slipping on a burnished cloak, hugging its folds,—of all places, behind Jane’s weighing machine! . . . But they wouldn’t be late—or would they? And her attention flashed over his face, as they stepped out in the gilt freezing air; flashed away, as swiftly, up and down the street; lit vaguely on the taxi which drew up.

“Get in,” he said, touching her arm; for she seemed to him to be living at a double rhythm in a strange palpitating dream, so that he wouldn’t have been surprised to learn that the taxi, into which she dived and sprawled, seemed to her a sleigh drawn by wild swans.

“Lovely,” she said, and again her laughter glistened, and her face, her cloak, her hands, seemed to give off a throbbing incandescent life.

“What’s lovely, my dear?”

“Oh—” she drew in a tremendous breath, held it, gazing out intently at the jiggling streets, the speeding lights. She breathed out, turning to him suddenly, closely, so that her face was close to his, her shoulder against his shoulder: “Life, Paris—everything!”

He leaned back in his corner, arms crossed. She was absurd, fantastic.

“How pleasant to think so.”

For a second his irony drenched her spirits in their swerving flight.

“Oh, but . . . it *is*—it *is* lovely, sometimes—at some moments. Now, for instance,” she asserted, visibly soaring again on the wings of her mood. “And—oh, Peter,” she murmured, as if from her heights she felt and deplored and yet couldn’t help mocking at his four-square, flat-footed reasonableness, “why can’t you—” She broke off as the taxi drew up.

They followed the seal-like, too amiable, too utterly comprehending back of the maître d’hôtel. People looked at Caroline as she passed, stimulated by her exhilaration. She and Peter sat down in their corner, and the buff-colored beetle face of the too shrewd, too sensitive maître d’hôtel hovered over them. . . .

Caroline acquiesced to each oblique intimation of his taste: “that Madame would like this, that, and then just a little of . . . and to finish . . .” (The music, muted, rhythmic, gave smooth little twists to one’s heart, like the memory of ephemeral passions.) And Peter, ordering the wine, was grave, intent, and reëmerged from the business of decision with an air of achievement.

“He feels safe with me here,” she thought. The chaperonage of a hundred “diners out.” . . . In the taxi he had been afraid of some betrayal. He was absurd, fantastic, to be so stolid, so literal, in a world bounded by mirrors, upholstered in crimson plush, domed by the pastel nudity of vast goddesses, sanctified by savors of the perfect cookery. . . . But champagne, she calculated, half angry, half amused, might save their evening, might attune his mind to hers, might drug that craving for consistency which became so easily, so fatally (from the point of view of ease and enjoyment) a man’s panache—his pride, his fetish. . . .

He began to talk about the play for which he’d taken tickets. He hoped it was amusing; someone had told him it was amusing. They could leave it if they were bored. . . . They’d go on, anyway, afterwards, and have supper. . . .

She saw that the champagne lightened his state of mind. It pervaded her own spirits with a mist of amiability.

“What fun if Maurice were here!” she remarked, her rapt look on the silver chafing dish in which the duck was waved before them over a flame. (*Canard à la presse*, Mother always maintained, was the gourmet’s seventh heaven. . . .)

“Yes,” said Peter, “what a pity he couldn’t get away. Have you heard from him?” he asked, determined to talk of Maurice, since that was what she wanted; and thinking of Maurice, as he spoke, with a curious resentment.

“Oh no, we never write. We don’t need to. When we meet again we’ve never been away—like two bits of a worm.”

“Does he miss you?” Peter asked.

She seemed to hesitate between several answers.

“I can’t really imagine,” she said at last, “because when I’m not with him he isn’t alive to me any more. . . . He likes to have me back again. . . .”

“And you,” Peter insisted, “do you like going back again?”

“It isn’t a matter of ‘liking’—I just *am* back again with him—and then I can’t imagine being anywhere else.”

“Or with anyone else?”

“No,” she said simply.

The duck was presented to them in all its sanguinary and savorous perfection.

“Does that apply to whomever you’re with, and whatever circumstance you’re in?” He looked at her with an intensity that was hardly disguised by the lightness of his tone.

“Yes, I think so.” She smiled uncertainly. His intensity menaced the dazzling ease with which she had meant to carry off, and carry through, their evening.

“It applies, for instance, to me?”

She fenced: “How d’you mean?”

“I’m real to you now; but if you went back to Ditch Edge, and I remained here—I shouldn’t be real any more?”

She put down her knife and fork. A feeling of desolation took hold of her.

“You’re real to me now, Peter.” Her appeal, her touch on his arm, demanded that he should let her alone on this, of all subjects—that he shouldn’t, for some vague jealous curiosity of his own, exploit her nightmare.

“You’re absolutely real to me,” she repeated. (Real because he was here; because her fingers were touching his sleeve, because she felt the power of his proximity. Real, because he was with her in the radius of light, in the forest-clearing of the present—desperately real, at this moment, because she might lose him in the darkness of past and future that encircled them, threatening to change him into another of her ghosts. . . .)

He said:—

“I don’t understand how you can have any genuine personal feeling if absence can switch it off—”

“Not ‘switch off.’ Not so—sudden. . . . People simply ‘fade’ out.”

He changed the subject as abruptly as he’d begun it. During the rest of dinner he gave her an account of the various people he had met while he was in Paris. He described them, one after another, with a rapid trenchant wit, with a Chaucerian noting of this and that detail, of such and such a tone or

mannerism—so that Caroline saw them pass, one by one, across the scene of his imagination. He seemed to see them vividly, to understand them tolerantly, and yet, by the emphasis of his description, to imply a valuation of each character by his own absolute standards. That was what made him a little alien, she thought. There seemed, for instance, no reason why Madame X shouldn't marry her ex-lover to her daughter; but Peter had, quite obviously, a feeling that there was something "wrong" in such a plan.

While he talked he realized that she was regaining her lighter state of mind. He always enjoyed talking to her, for she was a good audience, quick to seize a point, to catch the humor or irony of a remark, to ask, in a pause, some question which showed her interest, and stimulated the speaker. Her intrinsic qualities of subtlety and resilience gave charm to her mind while they destroyed the coherence of her character. There were moments when it seemed to him that her intelligence was a phosphorescence, causing or indicating (he couldn't make out which) a state of decay. . . . This evening, as she responded to his remarks, as her expression lit and changed to the changes and lights of his thought, he was painfully aware both of her charm and of her weakness; doubly attracted by the glow of her mind and looks, yet mistrustful of a kaleidoscopic behavior which seemed to prove the shifting, flickering quality of her spirit.

On the way to the theatre he surprised her by reverting to his former topic.

"Have you ever met anyone who doesn't fade out?"

"No."

"Does even your child fade out?"

"Yes."

"It must be very hard on the people who are fond of you."

"I suppose so."

He became silent.

As they went into the theatre he said:—

"Curiously enough, I dislike the notion of your forgetting me."

Her response startled him. She turned to him on the steps of the theatre with an electric gesture, a strange imploring look.

"Do you mean that, Peter?"

“Yes. Of course.” He spoke with a matter-of-fact reassurance.

“You want to be real to me?” she insisted, and he saw that there were tears in her eyes.

“My dear. Yes.” He took her arm and led her into the vestibule, for they were blocking a doorway and people were staring at her, at her tall figure and intent face.

“Well, then,” she said, as they were shown into their box, “then you mustn’t go away. You mustn’t disappear,” she added, with a glimmer of humor, as if the simplicity of this conclusion had already given her relief. She slipped her cloak off her shoulders and gazed over the auditorium.

“I shan’t, just yet,” he replied, watching her profile. “But in the spring I shall have to.”

She shook her head. “I don’t see why. The Quiet Woman’s for sale, if you want it.”

“I’m not sure that I do.”

She shrugged her shoulders and turned away from him as the curtain went up. “That’s a different matter. That’s your own choice, then.”

He said, moving his chair to the front of the box, “You talk as if there were no factors in a choice except inclination.”

She turned, for a second, to glance at him over her shoulder.

“Are there?” she asked, but her tone died out in the blazing dawn of the play, and the dominance of a rosy-fingered *poule de luxe* telephoning in bed.

“*Mmm. . . .*”

. . . .

“*Mm. . . . O la, la!*”

. . . .

“*Tiens?! . . .*”

. . . .

“*Ah, mon cher! . . .*”

. . . .

“*Mais oui! Mais oui, Victor! . . .*”

“The Englishman’s ideal of a French play,” was Peter’s comment as their taxi rattled towards Montparnasse. “A comedy of vivacious lubricity acted like a masterpiece.”

“I thought it was quite amusing, considering it had nothing but sex to be amusing about.”

“The oldest joke in the world.”

“Yes—I expect Adam told the serpent smutty stories,” said Caroline, lighting a cigarette.

“Not before the fall.”

“Perhaps not. Where are we going for supper?”

“A ‘dive’ I was taken to last week by some people. There’s a South American girl who sings and dances—the most lovely creature. . . . I danced with her during the evening.”

“Did you enjoy that?”

Peter smiled. “Very much. She told me how handsome I was—and how well I danced. Both untrue, but nice to be lied to, all the same.”

Caroline laughed. “Would you like *me* to tell you that?”

His curt reply that, as she wasn’t a dancer in a cabaret, he wouldn’t enjoy that kind of thing from her annoyed Caroline.

“You *do* sometimes cling to the old superstitions.”

He asked crossly *which* superstitions.

“Well, in this case, the ‘good and bad woman’ superstition. Why should you consider me any better or more respectable than—than a cabaret dancer?”

“I don’t consider you any ‘better,’ but it’s in the interests of society that you, representing a ‘class’ of gentlewomen, should assume a respectability—if you have it not.”

“Why is it?”

“My dear, we should argue till dawn and never agree.”

It seemed to her that he was unwarrantably annoyed by the subject. When they were seated at a scarlet table in a cellar lit by storm lanterns, she changed the subject and encouraged him to talk about his projects for his book on Pascal.

The Argentine girl appeared, sang badly in Spanish, and danced, sweeping her black glances round the room. She smiled twice at Peter, drooping her eyelids and drawing her short upper lip up, suddenly, over her teeth, and observed Caroline in a flash of admiration. After her third song she came swaying over to Peter to ask him in staccato American what he would like her to sing. He mentioned a song she had given on his previous visit and complimented her on her last one. His manner to her, a sort of coolness varied by glints of possessive impertinence, surprised Caroline, though on reflection she concluded that he would, of course, be what Dick Rawdon used to call “wonderful with barmaids.”

The girl sang the song which Peter had demanded—a tragic little tune in a minor key that suited her husky voice. Peter watched her with an air of mildly lustful amusement which Caroline had seen so often on the faces of elderly men at musical comedies. It always annoyed her; but in Peter, who was anything but the ordinary kind-hearted lewd-witted good-fellow of a man, it startled and shocked and enraged her. In him it became a sign of infamous mediocrity, of offensive stupidity, of slimy fatuousness; a betrayal of all the qualities in him which she most admired—of his swift mind, his humane vision, his sincerity of feeling, his lucidity of thought.

Peter, sipping a cognac, was unconscious that she had become possessed by an inexplicable desire to make him, somehow, compensate her for the anger she felt. When the dance was over he turned to find her amiable, smiling—charmed by the song, delighted by the place. Several couples got up and began to dance. Caroline suggested they should join them.

“We haven’t danced since that supper with Jane and Philip Bertorelli,” she said, and slipped into his arms with an air of good-humored enjoyment. While they were dancing she talked spasmodically, made comments on the people, praised the band, looking into his face with a gaze that was benign but a little abstracted—a gaze, it seemed to him, that didn’t belong to the creature who was at the theatre with him an hour ago.

“Dear old Peter—you dance like a guardsman.”

“Do I? I hope that’s a compliment.”

“No.”

. . . An hour ago she had been—he couldn’t escape the word—dangerous. Dangerous—to herself, to him: dangerously attainable. His sense of this had amused him; he had been able to contemplate her with a difficult but ironic detachment. Now that she was detached he felt less certain of his

ground, and some instinct of recapture made him say as they sat down again:

—
“I wish we could go and talk quietly somewhere.”

“The band *is* rather loud.” She added: “I expect we shall have lots of time to talk at Ditch Edge.”

“Shall we, Caroline?”

She seemed not to notice the sudden depths of his tone.

“Of course we shall. Or rather, you and Maurice’ll talk and I shall listen.”

“That isn’t the same. . . . This place is so damned noisy.”

“Poor dear. Does your head ache? It is rather stuffy.”

He called the waiter and demanded his bill.

“I expect you’re tired and need sleep,” she said soothingly. He didn’t answer until they were out in the street. He put his arm through hers.

“Are you tired?” he asked.

“Not really.”

The concierge produced a taxi.

“I shall think of you in Paris taxis for the rest of my life,” she laughed, and noticed that he didn’t seem to hear her words. He ordered the man to drive to the Crillon. Then he sat back, and neither looked at her nor spoke.

She watched him. Her inward anger had been almost appeased by the success of her behavior. She had an impulse to spare him the final workings out of a scene which she foresaw as some sort of rebuff, coupled with the comment that he could, clearly, find her as attractive as any dancer in a cabaret. But the memory of the girl restrained her magnanimity.

“I have enjoyed my evening,” she said. “It’s been sweet of you to entertain me.”

“Let me come up and talk for a few minutes at your hotel. Jane’s got a sitting room, hasn’t she?”

“Yes . . . of course. . . . Do come up,” said Caroline amiably, “if you aren’t too tired.”

Jane's sitting room was florescent and perfumed as the dressing room of an actress on a first night.

"I expect Jane's in bed. She meant to have an early evening." Caroline switched on the pink-shaded lamps on the writing table. "Sit down and have a cigarette."

Peter sat on the arm of the sofa. He said:—

"This morning I sat in the Luxembourg Gardens and thought about you."

"What did you think?"

"That you're a problem."

"In what way?"

"As a character."

"I see." Her resolve to be flippant ebbed. Face to face with him in this quiet room, she felt how strangely he could twist her heart.

"I expect you like being a problem," he said.

She shook her head, wondering at the impulse that had made her bring him here.

"You are strange, Peter."

"It's you who are strange, Caroline."

But now, now that she'd got him here, she couldn't bear him to go.

"What a silly play that was—wasn't it?" she appealed.

Without looking at her he got up and fetched an ash tray from the writing table and then sat down on the sofa, putting the ash tray beside him.

"Yes—very silly," he echoed. "I must go soon," he said, and looked round the room. "How Jane imprints herself, even here." He indicated a stack of bandboxes on one chair, a picture by Marie Laurencin on another, a jade kitten on a third.

"She's been shopping."

"Luckily for French trade."

"What did you want to talk to me about?"

He met her look.

“I don’t know. That place was so hot—and Spanish love songs are a glutinous diet.”

She sank on to the stiff little sofa. The exhilaration of the evening had gone out of her. She felt a sadness that seemed to press in a wave through her whole body, that broke through her, hurting her bones, dragging her nerves. And when he said, coming and leaning over for a moment, bending over and looking strangely into her face, that he must really go, because she looked tired out, she put out her hand to keep him.

“Don’t go, not for a minute—please, Peter.”

“Why not, Caroline? What’s the matter?” he demanded, the bare phrase, intent but useless, linking him to her somehow, letting him take hold of her hand.

She tried to think. The matter . . . ? She didn’t know, in words, what was the matter.

“Peter—”

He found himself dragged down by some force behind her voice, kneeling beside her, grasping her fingers.

“What’s the matter?” he repeated.

She shook her head. Didn’t answer. Leaned away from him, staring into his curious thick-lidded eyes, waiting. . . .

“You’re shivering, Caroline.”

She shook her head.

“Yes,” he contradicted, “you are.”

He became silent, kneeling beside her, holding her hand. His nearness began to come round her like a mist and his face had the startling expressiveness of a face in a dream. She saw that he nearly spoke and then stopped. She saw the shadows of thoughts come and go in his eyes. He said, “Caroline—my dear.”

He said, “How fantastic—that I should love you.” “Fantastic,” he repeated, as if to himself, and then, for a second, raised her fingers to his lips, held them, dropped them.

Two words came through to her and grew in her mind: “love you”—love? “Love me, Peter?” she said aloud, and the word kept on saying itself in her mind: love, love, love, mistily and monotonously, and she began to

feel ashamed, because he knelt beside her looking into her face and giving her an emotion that she felt she didn't deserve. Her heart thudded and her eyes felt hot. "Why?" she asked.

"Fantastic," he repeated, and held her by the shoulders, held her at arm's length. And then "Why?" he echoed her question. Why? Searching her white features—wondering how, why, she had flared suddenly across his life; and when.

"I don't know why, my dear"—and she was shaking her head, saying, "How can you know what you feel? Love—" she trailed off doubtfully. And then hesitatingly, as if she knew that it was something unreal and a little shameful that she offered, she said, "I love you, Peter."

"No—no, my dear—you don't. No, no, my darling—" Her sweetness held his senses, her fragrance made him stupid for a moment. "You love Maurice—as far as you love—"

She had a flash of Maurice, a young arduous ghost. "In one way I shall always love Maurice," she said, but he didn't seem to hear what she said. He got up abruptly. He began to walk about the room, without speaking and without looking at her. . . .

"Mere proximity," she said, as though she were setting a theory against one of his. "We've seen each other so much—"

He didn't answer. He came back to her and bent down.

"Let me kiss you once, Caroline?" And then, in quick parenthesis: "It isn't only that—physical. Easier if it were. Easier to give up. Easier, in many ways, to fulfill. . . . Kiss me, Caroline."

She kissed him with a grave, passionate acquiescence, as if she were glad to speak to him in the language she understood.

He let her go at last with a sense of something unbearably over. She held the hand that he tried to draw away—breathed uncertainly, "Peter," feeling in him a power to make her feel, a power to make her live. . . .

He drew his hand away.

"Let me go now, Caroline," he said. "I'll come and see you to-morrow morning. May I?"

"Don't go."

"Please, my dear."

“Why must you go?”

“I must, darling.”

She stood up. She asked:—

“Don’t you want to stay?”—using any means to keep him.

“I must go. I’ll come to-morrow.”

He saw her face dimmed to a lurking opalescence like a stormy moon behind a cloud. She knew now that she couldn’t stop him. He was taking his coat over his arm. He said, standing halfway to the door, “I can’t lose you, Caroline.”

“Why—why should you?”

He said, half abstractedly, “Maurice could understand, couldn’t he? We could all manage somehow . . .”

“Manage what, Peter?” What was he getting at? What did he want? (He had made her want him to stay and now he was going.)

“Manage that I shan’t lose you, my dear.”

“When will you come to-morrow?” she asked. “What time will you come?”

“I’ll come at ten. We’ll walk somewhere—talk things over. Good-night, Caroline.” He turned and went out through the blue paneled door.

As he went down in the lift his mind and body felt bruised with fatigue.

When he got out into the street the stars still flowered in the sky; but the air had a bitter tang of morning and the moon had set.

PART FOUR

I

Maurice put down his book. He couldn't find it interesting. He seldom could find Henry James interesting. But Caroline read and reread him. While she was away he had been doing a course of Henry James. He couldn't help thinking that it was much ado about nothing. All fine shades and fine phrases. No reality. The characters lived in a state of financial security which made their lives seem artificial.

The reflection led him to consider his own momentary affairs with an oblique distaste. January was always a month of penance. The New Year began hideously with paying bills. He wished that he had a thousand a year of his own and could give up his practice. He liked his work, but could never feel that it was his vocation. He had begun to wonder lately, realizing the cost of a household and the prospect of Anne's education, whether he would ever be able to afford to take up research again. Probably not until he was too old to be any good at it. He realized that the bitterness of this perception had begun to infect his whole disposition. He tried to banish the sense that he had somehow, by his marriage, disinherited his mind: deprived his ability of its legitimate domain. He felt that his feeling of injustice inclined him to be unjust. He knew that he sometimes came so near regretting his marriage that he actually had to value Caroline and Anne against this lurking ideal of an existence dedicated to the sheer beauty, the clean fulfillment of work.

Not that a thousand a year would exonerate him. Caroline said that they couldn't live with the necessary minimum of luxury under two thousand a year, and even with her income and what she made by painting they'd never touched that yet; although they always spent it. . . . And he knew that he could do well enough, alone, for his own single purpose, on three hundred. . . .

He remembered a remark of Caroline's when they had disagreed about the necessity of having central heating. "If you must be shut in a hutch with someone simply because it's legitimate to go to bed with them, then the hutch had better be as comfortable as possible. . . ." He glanced at the hot-pipes, concealed in the window seats, and admitted that they had increased the comfort of the house. But he didn't mind, as she did, being uncomfortable. Each hundred pounds spent seemed to him to postpone his release. He supposed, feeling ashamed of the admission, that that was what made him resent her unnecessary expenditures. She wanted "things"—she found pleasure in the material paraphernalia of life. He resented

paraphernalia. The thing worth having was freedom. Freedom from money; freedom to work. Not this unending subjection to the beck and call of materialism.

He put *The Sacred Fount* back in the shelf and stood gazing absently over the backs of the books. They were Caroline's books, collected by her before and since their marriage. A library was the only one of her "have's" which he felt that he understood. She evolved a principle out of this desire, and was wont to assert that every educated person should be ashamed to spend less than a twentieth of their income on books. On the other hand she was apt suddenly to spend three pounds on books and point out that this was so much better than if she had spent it on a hat, whereas she might not, at the time, be able to afford either. She had lately bought the works of Anatole France and usually had a volume by her bedside, although she seldom read in bed. He glanced at her shelf of poetry. The volumes were much fingered, having been acquired during her adolescence. She never read poetry nowadays, and when he lately commented on the fact she had been disagreeable and remarked that it made one vulnerable and lowered one's resistance to emotion.

Maurice took down a volume of Meredith's poetry, and seeing his own writing on the title-page remembered that he had given it to her when they were first engaged. Glancing through it, he noticed that she had scored various passages in "Modern Love" and in "The Woods of Westermain." The passages struck him as obscure. He had given her the book because he knew her taste at the time. He disliked the philosophical in verse, thinking it out of place. His preference was for musical stuff, or for the sensuous or sonorous. Poetry was to him an occasional distraction; a good lyric charmed his ear, Pope could divert his mind, and in moments of conscious relaxation he enjoyed the musical hysteria of Swinburne.

Replacing the Meredith in the shelf, he reflected that he had never really felt the need of poetry, though he admired the need in others as an evidence of spiritual distinction. That Caroline had so deliberately abandoned it troubled him; it was a symptom of the ill in her that he couldn't diagnose.

He heard Rose bolting the front door. Thinking of Caroline, he was shocked by the selfishness in his former train of thought. It might seem to him at times that he had pledged his freedom when he married. But, as he told himself, he had simply chosen between one career and another, while Caroline, being a woman, not only had to modify her career as an artist when she married him, but had to submit her whole life to the circumstances

of his; had to accept the surroundings, the income, the obligations of his career.

It became clear to him as he sat alone wishing that she were here now, in the room with him, that she had sacrificed all sorts of possibilities in herself—to marry him.

He sat thinking earnestly on this subject, and reproached himself. He knew that if he were given a chance to live his life over again he would want Caroline, with all her faults, her temper, her bewildering unreason. . . . As easy for him to imagine his life in another planet as to conceive an existence for himself without her.

On the other hand her sacrifice—of imponderable but definite possibilities—hadn't, he felt, been compensated. He was certain that what was “wrong with her” was that she had let herself in for a life which didn't suit her temperament. She was fitted by her beauty and her quick wits and luxury-loving disposition for a life which he couldn't give her; for gayety, travel, pleasure. . . .

She always scoffed at him when he told her she needed amusement; but he believed that this was because she didn't want him to realize that she felt “limited.”

He tried to think out the whole problem. (He had meant to do so for some time, and he felt that her absence gave him the opportunity.)

Finally he decided that when she came back from Paris he would talk the matter over with her and try to persuade her to go to London regularly once a fortnight and have a few days' change and amusement.

When he went up to bed he felt happier and more hopeful than he had for some time. Caroline should have more diversions, and if she was happy he would feel rewarded. . . .

A vague optimism possessed his mind. He sat on the edge of his bed, gazing at his shadow on the wall. He thought of her, coming back . . . soon . . . in two days now. . . .

And later, perhaps—they'd somehow manage to give up this practice. . . . She'd like living in London—plenty of parties—while he shut himself up in a laboratory. . . . Perhaps it would all be managed sooner than he'd supposed. . . .

His optimism evaporated quite suddenly. He jerked himself upright and began to undress. Much better face facts: some of them good, some

unpleasant. The great thing was to make their present life as satisfactory as possible. He was lucky to have her coming back to him. . . . As for his own future, that must develop as it could.

II

Ditch Edge had never seemed to Caroline so completely her home as on that January afternoon when she came back from Paris.

Squat grey-brown cottages, bare church, gaunt elms, clamped on the crest of the hill, bitten by the north wind, threatened by a snow-laden sky. She recognized each landmark with an emotion that was partly affection, partly sheer relief: Nazeby's Farm huddled halfway down the hill towards King's Norton; the clump of trees shaped like an ostrich on the far ridge toward Banbury; Storrs Mill down in the hollow. . . . Brown freezing fields, black hedges, bare meadows, dark trees branched in fanlike tracery, far white roads scarring the undulations of the earth—this quiet countryside in the heart of an unquiet England held for her the power of great friendship. From the first day that she saw its skylines and gazed, with the dull vision of a stranger, on June fields quilted together by a green thick stitchery of hedges, she had recognized a beneficence that no human being could give her—deep but impersonal, unchanging yet oblivious; an understanding that accepted her without criticism and created her again, as if she were only one among the million forms of life that had to be renewed.

Now, preyed on by fears and indecisions, shaken by a conflict of emotions, dazed by innumerable problems shifting and changing in each new angle of light, she turned to gaze on the country with a blind gesture of spirit, and, as the car rattled up the steep lane into the village, felt a brief unreasoning reassurance, as if, for a moment, someone had closed her eyelids and taken hold of her hand.

The car passed The Quiet Woman. Its curtains were shut and a pink leaflet had been left on the step of the front door. At the crossroads Mrs. Bredon nodded and smiled, her red cheeks glowing in the frosty beginning of dusk; inside the small window of the Post Office someone was lighting a lamp.

Caroline leaned forward as she approached her own house, charmed afresh, even at this moment, by its small stately proportions. The drawing-room curtains hadn't yet been drawn and she could see the firelight flickering on the walls, and the silvery oblong of the window on the other side of the room, and the ships in the picture that hung above the sofa. . . .

The car drew up. Would Maurice be back yet? Was he surprised at her early return? Her fears pressed back on her. She got out, talking about her luggage to the driver. . . . And Anne. . . ? An odd contortion of her heart made

her realize how much she'd been wanting to see Anne again. The front door was opened, Rose came out—Rose, trimmer and better starched than usual (those new caps, thank goodness, kept her tidy, but made her round face look like a prize baby's.) Rose was well, she said, and “the Doctor” was out, and hadn't been in all day. . . . But Anne was upstairs, had only just come in, quarter of an hour ago, from her walk (and was very well—oh yes, everyone was very well).

Caroline slipped off her coat and threw it over a chair in the hall. Ramsay came scampering down the stairs, his broad white person wagging from end to end, and executed a dance of welcome round her knees. She bent to pat him and he licked her chin in ecstasy and smelled dreadfully of fish.

“Dear Ramsay . . . *darling* Ramsay—”

“Hello, Mummie!” Anne's voice calling down from the nursery landing. “Mummie, Mummie, *Mummie!*”

Caroline bounded upstairs two steps at a time. Anne's small radiant face bobbing over the white gate of the landing; Anne in a clean smock, her hair shining and newly brushed, her red shoes donned for an “occasion.”

“Mummie!” Anne held up ecstatic arms, let herself be swung off the ground, hugged, gazed at, hugged again. She responded with several boisterous kisses while her mother carried her into the day nursery. Her eyes grew large.

“What d'you smell nice of, Mummie?”

“Scent, I expect.”

“Scunt? D'you smell of scunt?”

“Yes, I got some new scent in Paris.” The nursery was gay and warm, bears and dolls in a row on the window sill, socks on the fireguard, a kettle singing and steaming, tea set out on the blue and white tablecloth. . . . Nannie came through from the night nursery, smiled good afternoon, went to take the kettle off the fire.

“What did you buy scunt with? Pennies?”

“Yes.”

“How many pennies?”

“French pennies. Francs.”

“Francs!” Anne chuckled; wriggled to be put down; danced round the room singing, “Francs, francs, francs—”

“How has she been, Nannie?”

“Very well, m’ m.”

“Good?”

Anne seized her mother’s fingers.

“Yes, I have been very good. Good, good, good—” She jumped up and down. “I went every morning to give Phæron his breakfast in the stable. He’s rather sad, I think, because Uncle Peter’s away and can’t ride him. Can I ride him? Can I?”

“No, darling, he’s too big for you.”

“No. I’m too little for him, Dadda says.”

“That’s the same thing.”

“Did you come back from Paris?”

“Yes. First on a train, and then on a boat, and then on another train.”

“Did Uncle Peter come back from Paris?”

“No. He’s still there. . . . He’s coming back next week.”

“Will he bring me something nice?”

“I don’t know.”

“What have you brought me?”

“Something very pretty. When you’ve had your tea you shall come and unpack it.”

Caroline left them at tea, Anne in her high chair, singing and munching, Nannie placidly stirring her tea and adjuring Anne to eat nicely and not to talk with her mouth full.

Caroline’s tea was ready in the drawing-room. The sight of the scones and a chocolate cake and a jar of cherry jam made her wonder, for a fantastic moment, if she had ever been away, or if there were, after all, any world beyond this pleasant room or any tangible life outside the lamplit peace and sweet small pleasures of her own home. . . .

For that was what was strange, and dangerous—and baffling, she thought, sinking on to her armchair, glancing at the fire, taking up the silver

teapot: this facile slipping from one world into another, from one life to another. . . . Yesterday morning she had walked with Peter in the gardens of the Luxembourg, his arm through hers, the grey air biting her eyelids, his voice (that was so curiously and betrayingly beautiful) telling her that they must be friends. . . . Yesterday Peter had driven with her to the Gare du Nord. . . . This evening she sat, waiting for Maurice to come home, wanting him to come home, thinking, with quickened heartbeats, that he would suddenly stand in the doorway, and pause, and then come quickly towards her and take her in his arms. . . . This evening Anne was having tea upstairs in her bright, warm nursery, and Ramsay lay on the rug with his head on his paws, and she could hear a laborer tramping with hollow steps up the village street. . . .

How, in this atmosphere of poignant tranquillity, in this room haunted by six years of accustomed happiness, could she say to Maurice that she was in love with Peter Stanley—that Peter was in love with her? And how explain, in the threatening face of such a statement, that it held neither threat nor danger, and that this violent emotional element, bottled down and labeled “Friendship,” ceased altogether to be dangerous. (For that, indeed, was the sum of what Peter had said, pacing her to and fro in the Luxembourg Gardens, and lighting cigarettes and throwing them away and hardly pausing once to look into her face or to listen to her half-convinced admissions that he must be right.)

Ramsay lifted his head from his paws, looked at Caroline, gave a perfunctory bark, and grinned, showing a pink tongue. Caroline put down her cup and saucer on the table and waited. She heard the outer door of the surgery slam, then the inner door, and Maurice’s steps coming across the hall. . . .

For a moment he stood in the doorway; then he came towards her and took her in his arms.

“Darling.” His face was cold and his clothes gave off that familiar faint reek of ether.

“Oh, Maurice—”

He held her at arm’s length and looked into her face, alive to its every detail.

“You’re all right, darling?”

“Of course. I’d had enough—that was all. Oh, Maurice—” she exclaimed under her breath, holding his hands as if her grasp could keep the

unfamiliar moment, staring into his face as though she could rivet the already blurring outlines of her first sharp vision of him. But the vision slipped away, the shadow of its moment, leaving her merely with a sense that the Maurice who had come into the room was different from the young man she had married six years ago, though she couldn't see in what ways, or imagine at what period, these changes had taken place.

“When did you get in?” he asked.

“About half an hour ago.”

They hesitated for an awkward second, the contact of their hands sustaining the strange minor chord of their reëncounter while their minds fumbled for the commonplace. He struck so grotesque and simple a note that she wondered, uncertainly amused, if he hadn't been unconsciously affected by her nervousness. “Did you have a good crossing?” he asked.

She turned away and sat down on the sofa, beckoning him to sit by her, and saying that the crossing had been not too bad. He kept his look on her face.

“You look very tired, my darling.”

She smiled it off. She had had late nights, too much good food. She asked him about his life and work during her absence and half listened to his answers, while she contrasted him curiously with Peter and wondered at Peter's power to make her forget the unbreakable and unquestionable hold that Maurice had over her whole life. “And you're pleased to see me again?” she demanded gravely.

“How can you ask such an absurd question?” He kissed her forehead, patted her shoulder. His emotion had given way to good spirits. “Is there any tea left?”

She moved across to her habitual chair. As she poured out he asked her how she had left Peter.

“Very well. . . . I went out with him on Thursday to Versailles for the day, and he took me out in the evening.”

“You are a gay couple.”

“You didn't—you don't mind my going out with him?”

He laughed. “My darling, I'm not the Grand Turk! And as for old Peter, you might just as well ask me if I mind your going out with Ramsay!”

Caroline was silent. During the journey home she had imagined all possible openings for their discussion—except the faintly absurd. Now there came over her a hysterical conviction that if she were to try to broach the matter at this moment she would never again be able to dissociate Peter from the image of a rather stout Sealyham.

“By the way, Ramsay seems to be scratching less,” she said.

Caroline was dreaming. . . . She and Peter were walking up and down the deck of a ship. There was no one else on the deck and they walked in an unceasing gliding rhythm, as if they were moving to the tune of a waltz. Suddenly they stopped by the rail and Peter took a bag of francs out of the pocket of his leather great-coat and began to feed the gulls which were circling in arabesques beside the ship. The gulls swooped one after another and caught the francs as they glittered in the air, and Peter laughed without making any sound. . . . When all the francs were gone he threw away the paper bag, and took hold of Caroline’s arm with a violence that jolted her whole dream. But as they turned away to continue their pacing Caroline said, “Look!” and pointed to where the gulls had all settled together on the water, and were pecking at an object on the waves. . . . Curiosity and a vague fear drew her to the rail again to try to see what the gulls had found as their prey; and as she stood, peering down, the bobbing carpet of birds broke apart and she saw a man in the water who turned a clown’s white face up towards her and began to smile; and as the smile spread and the eyes looked up into hers she saw that it was Maurice’s face, and felt herself beginning to scream. . . .

She awoke sobbing on Maurice’s shoulder. . . . She was trying to tell him about her dream. He was drowsy, but he held her closer.

“Darling, there aren’t any gulls. . . . Of course I’m all right, my sweetheart. . . . Try and go to sleep, my dearest.”

“It was dreadful,” she said, “and Peter must have known.”

“Ssh, darling. Peter’s in Paris and I’m perfectly safe and sound.”

“Your face looked so horrible.”

“Darling, I expect you had too much dinner. Try and go to sleep again and don’t dream any more.”

She grew wide awake, staring at the dark. At last she said:—

“Peter’s coming back next week.”

“Try and go to sleep, darling.”

“Maurice . . .”

He shifted sleepily, moving his arm under her back.

“What is it, darling?”

“Maurice . . . I want to say something.”

“Couldn’t you say it to-morrow morning?”

He felt her shake her head, her hair brushing his neck.

“It’s something about Peter.”

A note in her voice broke through his drowsiness.

“What is it?”

“Oh, Maurice. . . .” Her face was turned away.

A throb of foreknowledge shook him.

“Tell me, Caroline.”

“First let me say something,” she demanded. He felt her shiver.

“Yes?”

“You know that I love you?”

“Yes.”

“You believe that I love you—very, very much?”

“I hope you do.”

“You’ll never forget that?”

“My dear—”

“Maurice . . . I suppose Peter and I are in love with each other.” She loosed the words into the darkness. She waited. He didn’t move. His hand still curved close against her waist. She went on waiting because there was nothing more she could say. He didn’t speak. She stared until gold stars began to glow and fade in the dark. He said, at the end of his long silence:—

“How very strange!” And then he said: “How stupid of me not to see—”

“I—we wanted to tell you.”

“How long have you been in love with each other?”

“The thing only—we only realized in Paris.”

“Is that quite accurate?”

“I think so.”

“You say you’re in love with Peter?” She thought his questions came out with consulting-room precision. “And Peter is in love with you?”

“Yes . . .”

“When did you decide to tell me?”

“Two days ago.”

“Don’t shiver so, my darling.”

“When he comes back he’s—going to talk to you, too.”

“I see.” His questions ceased. He was locked up in a silence. He wondered what she really meant or implied. He said: “I—very much appreciate your telling me—” Then: “I’m very fond of Peter,” he said. “I admire him. (My arm’s getting stiff; d’you mind moving a minute, darling?)”

She sat up.

“Maurice. . .?” She was locked out. She felt desolate and afraid. It seemed to her that his impassivity must be suppressing anger or pain, or contempt. Or else that his expression, hidden from her by the darkness, wasn’t impassive at all—was contracted by thought? Was puzzled and intent? Was hardened by shock?

“Maurice, I was right to tell you?”

After a pause, he said: “I haven’t exactly taken in yet what you have told me.”

“What do you mean, darling?”

“I mean, are you trying to tell me that Peter is, or is going to be, your lover?”

“No, Maurice, no . . .”

“I see.”

He realized that a feeling as sharp and hard as fear had come and gone. He said:—

“You’re simply telling me—” He broke off, shut his eyes. “Why are you telling me anything at all?”

Why, she thought—why, indeed? For some theory, some scruple. “Simply to be honest,” she said.

“Is that Peter’s idea, too?”

“Yes.”

He tried to work it out and came to a conclusion she hadn’t managed to convey: that, to Peter at least, the situation was real and dangerous; and that his resolution to maintain their friendship wasn’t a facile gesture.

He said: “You were quite right,” and added, “We must talk it over in the morning.” He moved, got up. She felt him standing next to the bed.

“Maurice?”

“What is it, darling?”

“You don’t—oh, Maurice, it doesn’t seem real now I’ve said it.”

“Darling—darling, we’ll talk it over in the morning. There’s nothing for you to worry about.” He made her lie down and tucked the bedclothes round her. In a moment she felt him lean over her, as if he were trying to see her face. “I’m glad you trusted me, Caroline.”

His words shook her, betraying a courage that was dreadfully innocent, a sincerity too keen for the bludgeoning intercourse of ordinary life. It seemed to her that he dealt so rarely and reluctantly with emotions that when he did so he used too fine a touch—examining the unreasonable in the light of reason, accepting whatever was proved as irrevocably proven, and setting his passion for truth against lesser and more lawless passions. She stretched out her hand, but he was out of reach. She heard him lie down. After a minute she said:—

“Isn’t it more a question of your trusting me, and Peter?”

“Peter’s my friend.”

“You think that makes us all safe?”

“Yes. I think so.”

“I hope you’re both right.”

“Both?” he asked.

“You—and Peter.”

He said, “Go to sleep, darling,” in an abstracted voice.

“I think I must tell you something.”

“What is it?”

“Peter kissed me when we were in Paris. I wanted him to.” As she spoke she wondered if she was being stupid.

He didn’t answer. He tried to appreciate her confession. But there stuck in his mind the realization that she had told him by a chance impulse, and that he might never have known. He said: “I think I understand.” He wondered if he really meant it. Since he had been woken by Caroline crying, he had become involved in a situation familiar in theory, but singularly difficult to realize now that it apparently affected himself. He heard her say in a stifled voice which seemed to phrase his own thought:—

“I wonder if you do understand. I don’t think you’ve even begun to.”

“Now, darling, you must go to sleep. We’ll think it out together tomorrow. Whatever conclusion we come to you shall have nothing to worry about.”

She accepted his reassurance, perceiving its futility, but grateful for the soothing tone in which it was given. She was exhausted and knew herself the easy prey of sleep, giving her thoughts irresistibly and yet uneasily into its clutches as if her spirit, by thus ceding to oblivion, were committing a culpable suicide. She caught glimpses and scenes shuffled under one another like a handful of cards thrown face upward on a table.

Maurice, near, thinking what? . . . Maurice, this morning, coming in. . . . Peter . . . the pale blue paneled door at the Crillon closing after Peter. . . . Peter. . . . Anne at tea in her high chair. . . . Peter in the Galerie des Glaces. . . . She slept at last, with a last tugging sense that she ought to be awake, waiting for to-morrow.

Maurice heard her even breathing and turned over his pillow, pressing his face against the cool side. “. . . not even begun to . . .” Difficult, rather. To be woken up and told this . . . Caroline. And Peter. He was up against it, of course. So were they, he thought, dimly perceiving that they, Peter and Caroline, had their problem, but feeling incapable of understanding any facts beyond his pity for Caroline’s unhappiness, and a seething bewilderment in his own mind.

It seemed to him that he should either be moved by some violent feeling or else attain, immediately, a definite point of view. In fact, he found himself trying impartially to decide on a course of behavior, as if he were a character in search of his own authorship, waiting for a creative impulse to give his conduct life. . . . Here was Caroline—there, Peter. In love. (*In love?*) He,

Maurice, in it too. Obvious situation: Caroline and Peter. Himself and Caroline. Himself and Peter. . . . What was the decent formula? Obvious solution. Peter and Caroline had taken the right line; or Peter had (he suspected). Peter chose to stay on difficult terms, rather than go. Once they talked it over they could go on as before—simply being friends. This would work, because they could all trust each other. (Being civilized had its uses.) Peter saw it could work, too. Of course Caroline, being a sensationalist, would be difficult sometimes. She liked emotional scenes and might try to provoke them. He reflected, with a consciously grim humor, that he and Peter would have to keep her in hand. This notion made the situation seem more elusive than ever. But then, Caroline had a way of making any situation unprecedented. Caroline—who was lying asleep a few feet away.

The main thing was—the saving fact that he found his thoughts returning and clinging to—that Caroline had said she still loved him. From her half confessions and half protests he had made out that, whatever her feelings might be for Peter, she still cared for him, Maurice. He supposed that it was this fundamental feeling for himself that had simply relegated her relation with Peter, whatever its intensity might or might not be, to another plane where it couldn't endanger her feeling for himself . . . and could, if necessary, be sacrificed. (As for its intensity, he wondered, in a moment of ironical satisfaction, whether Peter, sharpened by a lurking emotionalism, might be exactly what she wanted?)

He was moved by some unformulated sense that the revelations and implications of the last hour must have left her changed. He groped for the matches and lit a candle on the table between the beds, and leaned over.

She was sunk backward in the pillow, her long arms thrown up and locked in a characteristic gesture above her head. In the candlelight her features had a drowning pallor, and her hair, tangled back from her brow, might have been the seaweed locks of a mænad spent with her own frenzy and flung by the storm on to the shores of sleep. He gazed on her eyelids, the lashes still spiked with tears, her eyebrows penciled and tragical, her tautened nostrils, the sensuous moulding of her chin, the curious sullen innocence of her mouth—and thought, suddenly and fearfully, of the million casual chances that had created, in her, in the face minted as Caroline Snow, a flickering beauty, a flying magic, which had taken hold of his life.

He remembered; she'd said that Peter had kissed her. He shook off the fact in the blind second that it gripped his mind. Irrelevant; didn't count; a mere symptom of the latent situation. And yet, supposing Caroline and Peter had become, had decided to become, lovers—he dismissed the possibility.

Their characters, as Caroline's explanation confirmed, made it unthinkable. Peter was the kind of man who either wanted a light woman lightly or else, if the thing went deep at all, would want her without reservation and wouldn't let himself in for an ambiguous situation. Maurice tried to focus Peter's attitude, and concluded that he had decided to stay on at Ditch Edge on difficult terms, not from any altruistic consideration of himself and Caroline, but because he could only allow himself to be with Caroline on terms indicated by his own character.

Caroline moved in her sleep and turned her face away from the light. Maurice stared at her profile, lost in the tangled shadows of her hair. After a few minutes he realized that he hadn't been either thinking or seeing. His elbow ached from leaning on it. He blew out the candle and decided to go to sleep; and lay awake until after the church clock had struck four.

III

(Letter from Lady Snow to her daughter.)

GRAND HOTEL, MONTE CARLO
January 16th.

MY DEAR CAROLINE,

I was extremely sorry to miss seeing you on my way through Paris, and very much surprised to find that you had gone home so soon. I was afraid this might mean that you had heard suddenly that something was wrong at home, but did not think this could really be so as I had left both Maurice and Anne in the best of health only the day before. However, I saw Jane, who told me that you had been rather tired out by your “dissipations” and wanted to get back. I feel you should not be tired so easily, and only hope that this does not mean that there is anything *constitutionally wrong with you*. I always feel that you don’t eat a proper breakfast in the morning. A cup of coffee and a piece of toast is not enough *in England* where the midday meal is *late*!

I went with Jane to Sasha’s and saw her try on two very smart evening dresses, and ordered a new black evening dress for myself there, which they are going to post after me to Monte Carlo and alter if it needs it (but they are always so *clever* with just my measurements). I think I have chosen a very good model: it is black charmeuse very cleverly draped and lightly embroidered with silver sequins on the front and at the back of the train. The whole effect is very “slimming,” especially across the back of the hips where one needs it. I’m sure I shall find it most useful and practical.

Dear Mr. Stanley was most kind and took me out to tea at Froissart’s. He told me that he took you to Versailles for the day, which must have been nice. I teased him about it and told him that he would end by making Maurice quite jealous!

I had a very trying journey from Paris. Everything seemed to go wrong! As you know, I will not sleep in the sheets in that dirty Blue Train, and what should I discover when the train had started but that that fool Vaughan had packed *my own sheets* in the

registered luggage! So that I either had to sleep in the *train* sheets or with none at all. I finally decided not to undress at all. . . . So I simply took off my dress and stays and put on my traveling wrapper and (luckily I *had* my own pillow in with me!) lay down like that. The result was that I slept very badly and Vaughan was useless as usual, as she felt sick and spent most of the night, I understand, giving way to this, so that there was no one to make me a cup of my own China tea when I wanted it. To add to all this I had to *share* my compartment with a girl who smoked in bed. She also spilled some black stuff on the cover of my dressing bag —and instead of apologizing said, without attempting to disguise her annoyance, “There’s my eyelashes gone west!”

When I got here, feeling tired out, as you can imagine, I found that they had given me a room with a *west* outlook, when I always have one with a south aspect. Naturally, I made a great fuss, and in the end got a good room with a balcony facing south, but after waiting half an hour while they got it ready! As Hamlet said, “troubles never come singly.”

Talking of Shakespeare, I went to the opera here last night, when I ran across dear old General Murray and his wife, both just arrived from England and finding it very cold here. Of course, I do think it makes a great difference if one can afford to take a villa, and I often can’t help thinking how very different things would be if you had a more *spacious* life and could afford to do that kind of thing. Now I must take my rest before dinner.

Always your affectionate

MOTHER

P.S. Would you write to Gill and Maydon and order some of my special eye lotion to be sent out here, as I cannot get it and the wind has inflamed one of my eyelids.

IV

Lydia Stanley looked up from her work as her brother-in-law came in. He sat down opposite her without speaking, leaning forward on his chair, and held out his hands to the fire. She went on with her work, her shoulders upright, her small feet, in their buckled shoes, resting on a stool.

Peter felt that he must make a remark.

“I’m sorry to be going to-morrow.”

She spoke gently.

“So are we, Peter. I feel you’ve become one of my family.” She added that she hoped he had got his tickets and reservations without any trouble and asked him if he had spent a pleasant afternoon. He said that he had taken Lady Snow to tea at Froissart’s.

“Mrs. Vernon’s mother?”

“Yes. She’s passing through Paris. She ate a great many foie-gras sandwiches, five cakes, and then ordered a glass of hot water into which she poured cathartic white powder.”

“She must be a practical woman.”

“She is. In every sense.”

Lydia threaded her needle. “I should say her daughter was not entirely practical.”

“Caroline,” he said, and then paused. . . . “Caroline’s character is contradictory,” he said, relieved to speak her name.

“What interesting character isn’t? . . . I liked her so very much, Peter. She has charm and intelligence. . . . Curiously enough, when she was here I kept thinking that she reminded me of someone I had seen when I was a child. And afterwards I remembered. Her grandmother (her father’s mother), Beatrice Snow, was a great friend of my grandparents. I used to see her years ago when I stayed with them in Eaton Square.” Lydia paused; observed that Peter was interested. “She was at the house nearly every day. I was a little afraid of her, but thought her beautiful and dazzling. She had wonderful white hair and great big flashing grey eyes, and sweeping black dresses and a tiny waist, and the most lovely hands that glittered with rings (especially a square ruby set in brilliants, I remember). I remember one day she came and brought me Hans Andersen’s Fairy Tales as a present. She

came up to the room at the top of the house that I had as a day nursery, and she knelt down beside me and put the book on my knee (I suppose I must have been nine or ten years old at the time) and said, 'You must like these. If you don't, you have no soul and no sense. The man who wrote them knew all about life and all about people. When you are as old as I am you will see that he did.' And then she kissed me and put her hand on my forehead and stared into my eyes. . . ." Lydia added: "Curious I should remember it so vividly. I suppose Mrs. Vernon recalled it all."

"Caroline's never spoken of her to me."

Lydia hesitated. "It might be chance. . . . But I don't think any grandchild of Beatrice Snow's could have forgotten her, or fail to be influenced by her. She was so very—so very vivid, so very forceful. . . . On the other hand Caroline may never have been allowed to see her; especially if her mother is, as you say, rather a conventional woman."

"Why—what happened?"

Lydia put aside her work and bent her grave glance on her brother-in-law.

"Beatrice Snow was for years the mistress of a very charming and eminent man. (I won't mention his name. I learned the story in confidence.) He fell in love with her and she with him shortly after her marriage. (Her husband was stupid, but good-looking, and cared for nothing but fishing and gambling and they separated while their little boy was quite a baby.) After the separation Beatrice Snow lived in London, bringing up the boy (your Mrs. Vernon's father), and devoted her energies to the suffrage movement that was beginning then. And, as I say, it became known that she was the mistress of this man (who had a wife and a family). Naturally people ceased to receive her, and only people of very broad views, or people like my grandparents, who lived in what was thought a 'fast' and artistic set, made her their friend. The fact that she was beautiful (she was much more beautiful, as a girl, than Mrs. Vernon, I believe), and also that she openly did not care about public opinion, added to her unpopularity. In the end I think much of her happiness was sacrificed. By the time I saw her the man she had loved was dead, her son had married, and she gave the impression (I can see that now when I remember her face) of a woman who knows that she has been wasted in some way. It was as if she had been made to rule a kingdom, and had had to content herself with an allotment."

"What was the end of her?" Peter asked.

“She died of influenza, I think, during the war. (I never saw her since I was grown up and after my grandmother died.) But I heard of her death from someone who saw her in her last years.”

Peter’s image of Beatrice Snow blurred into his image of Caroline. He realized this, and reflected that, from Lydia’s description, Caroline’s grandmother must have been more energetic than Caroline. There was an intrinsic idleness in Caroline that sapped all sorts of possibilities in her character. He noticed her occasionally sitting still for a long space of time, and found, on questioning her, that her thoughts had been utterly inconsequent. He had supposed that when she was quiet she was also profound, and had discovered that in fact she was content to rest, like a Lady of Shalott, and watch the world drift past in the looking-glass of her mind. Many of the characteristics which so often skip a generation must have passed from Beatrice Snow to her granddaughter; but enterprise wasn’t one of them. His next remark to Lydia was prompted by a kindred but different train of thought.

“You say that Lady Snow’s conventionality would account for her ignoring her mother-in-law. . . . I should have thought your views, Lydia, would be much the same.”

Lydia hesitated.

“It’s very seldom that I find you—obtuse, Peter.” She smiled with a momentary radiance, then resumed her seriousness. “My conventionality—as you often call it—is not at all, I expect, the same as that of many people. Mine is what I should describe as a ‘spiritual’ in contradistinction to a ‘social’ conventionality! I mean,” she enlarged, “I don’t condemn people when they sin against convention, but I do when they go against what I feel are the best, the only, spiritual”—she found the word deftly—“traditions!”

She saw that he didn’t take her full meaning.

“In the case of Beatrice Snow—I know that she loved a man who wasn’t her husband. She gave up everything else because she loved him. She risked everything—and lost a great deal. I admire her and I understand her (even if I might have acted differently myself). But the women I condemn, that I will not, and would not, have in my house, are—forgive me—such as your former wife. They play for sensation; they think of no one but themselves. They want their lovers from a hundred false motives, from vanity, sensuality, boredom. . . . They have no deep emotions, no selfless feelings—no impulse to sacrifice, no desire to lose themselves in the happiness of another. They want to despise the world, and to enjoy its privileges. They

long for a *grande passion* while they haven't the least understanding of what such a thing could mean. They are like monkeys acting a drama. They know all the tricks of love and have no inward understanding of the great feeling that they portray."

Peter asked, surprised out of his own heaviness by her fervor:—

"Do you believe in the possibility"—he took her words for want of a better phrase—"of a *grande passion*?"

"Yes."

"Most of us—most people to-day—don't."

"They aren't capable, most of them, of a great range or depth of feeling. . . . You can't play a symphony on a penny whistle."

He looked up and saw the imprisoned element behind her gaze. . . . He thought of his brother, cool, selfish, conventional. He said, flicking his ash into the fireplace, "We're most of us—penny whistles. . . . Reeds with a few stops ('thinking reeds' occasionally)."

"Oh, Peter!" she broke out with a quick gesture of protest. "This—all this cheap cynicism. How I dislike it! How easy it is, and how very stupid . . . ! I think," she added, regaining her composure, "that it's always the mark of the mediocre person in a skeptical age. Religion gives stature even to the least individual; he feels that what he does has importance, and that the acts of his life have—significance. But in an age of skepticism the ordinary man becomes a—petty cynic. He feels he doesn't matter, and nothing he does matters, and he takes refuge in self-indulgence, because he hasn't the brains to seek out a remedy in philosophy. But *you*, Peter—"

He warded off the accusation.

"Haven't I some excuse for being cynical?"

"Not more excuse than—many people," she said. Her implication was the nearest she'd ever come to a personal revelation. He accepted both the confidence and the rebuke.

"You make me feel ashamed." He added: "Your religion's important to you."

She acquiesced. He saw her abstracted, and wondered what special instances of its importance recurred in her mind. As she took up her work again he reflected that her appearance was in harmony with her character: her well-shaped head set on a slender neck expressed inherent dignity; her

eyes, small but set wide apart, the straight upper lip closing down firmly and sensitively on the lower, implied to his affectionate glance her power to see and to understand, to give and to withhold. Only his brother, he reflected, could have accepted as a matter of course the unquestioning help and unquestionable loyalty that Lydia had given him for twelve years.

He asked her when she thought she'd be able to come over for her promised visit to Ditch Edge. She hesitated, then suggested early April; the country was lovely in April. She added that she hoped to see something of the Vernons then.

“You could hardly help it; we live in and out of each other's houses. They're two minutes away.”

She glanced at his bronzed profile and heavy shoulders as he stooped to pick up a skein of her embroidery silk.

“What made you take *The Quiet Woman*?” she asked.

He put the skein on the worktable beside her.

“It was Maurice's idea.”

For a second she thought, glancing up into his face, that he was going to say something else. Then he walked away to the window.

“If it's so foggy here,” he said, “it's bound to be foggy in London.”

It was foggy in London.

Outside Victoria the cold was thick and brown, shrouding lamps and lighted windows, filtering into every corner of the streets, penetrating every living creature. It seemed to Peter, as he tried to identify his own car among the car-shapes crawling to and fro, as if the world were being choked in the sediment of its own murky skies.

He shivered and stamped his feet. His man, Reckitts, appeared at his elbow, apologizing, in his clipped cockney, for being late. It had taken four hours instead of the usual two and a half to get up from Ditch Edge, he said.

Peter got into the driving seat. As he did so he realized that he would see Caroline within a few hours.

He started the car abruptly. It was five days since he had walked with her in the Luxembourg Gardens, reasoning to her baffling inattention. Now he

would see her again. He'd go round and see them both when he got home. . . .

He drove slowly up Grosvenor Gardens, the street lamps dim above invisible pavements. . . . Once he had seen Maurice he would be easier in mind. Down the perspective of five days' absence he made himself look upon the situation precipitated that night at the Crillon rather as a warning of avoidable danger than as a danger in itself. The emotion which had betrayed him was stronger than he'd believed. Now he could deal with a calculable force in himself. As for Caroline—impossible to tell what impulse in her nature had driven her to say that she loved him. Equally impossible to know if her statement were true; or if she had imagined its truth, or if, in a sensational moment, she had felt that the mere speaking and acting of an emotion could make it real.

He followed the crawling line of cars across Hyde Park Corner and into the Park.

"Mrs. Vernon got home safely last week?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. She came round this morning, sir, to ask if you was expected this evening."

Peter accelerated to a pace of fifteen miles an hour. He could imagine Caroline in her battered red leather jacket, striding into his hall as if it were her own, standing there, noting this and that detail of its disarrangement, calling out to Reckitts in her deep casual voice, looking round for a cigarette, idly taking up a book, possibly sinking down in one of the chairs to read away the morning. In a moment of sentimental luxury his imagination saw her there still, waiting for his arrival, her head bent over a book, her long legs tucked under her. He dismissed the picture. At this moment she would be in her own house, playing with Anne—sitting on the floor, probably; as oblivious as the child itself that there was any reality outside a charmed edifice of bricks or beyond the madding crowd of dolls and Teddy Bears. He remembered phrases from the letter she'd written him two days ago. "Maurice is behaving exactly like himself and not a bit like a husband in a book. He seems to think everything's quite all right and that we shall all manage beautifully. I expect in a way I should like it better if he were jealous and suspicious. (So like me, you would both say.)" And her postscript: "Would you be *awfully* kind and bring me over a litre of eau de Cologne, as, going off unexpectedly, I forgot to get any!"

"Hold the wheel, Reckitts, while I light a cigarette."

Was she deliberately or ingenuously trivial? He took the wheel again. He couldn't, even now that he knew her too well, be certain when she was moved by impulse and when by policy.

He doubted painfully if she knew herself.

There was no fog beyond Aylesbury. A north wind had sprung up; low clouds, charged with snow, moved across a dimly starred sky, and the grass and hedges, flecked by a recent snowfall, unwound in the pathway of the headlights like a ribbon of film negative.

In its high-up darkness Ditch Edge showed a scattered half-dozen lights — windows, in an elfin tradition, as big as postage stamps and glowing like barley sugar. Reckitts reported items of local scandal as the car climbed the hill: a long-standing feud had been healed and a balance of power redistributed; a fox had been seen by Storrs Mill; Dr. Vernon's dog had killed two chickens; a sale had taken place at the cottage next to the Pub, the mangle being bought by one, the pictures by another, the marble-topped washstand had gone for seventeen shillings to Mrs. Bredon's sister from King's Norton, Reckitts himself had procured a mosaic umbrella stand for nine shillings. There had been a big Whist Drive in the Hall, and Mrs. Vernon had given one prize and Lady Haviland another.

Peter noticed Caroline's name. As he approached the crossroads a voice rang out in the dark:

“Peter! Hello, Peter!”

She sprang up in the headlights like an apparition. He stopped.

“Caroline!”

She stood still, dazzled: the strangest figure, her skirt beaten against her knees, her red jacket belted tightly round her waist, her black hair blown off her face. He pushed the door, sprang out, realized the nervous vibration in her “I knew the noise of your car—” She laughed on two notes; added, “I've just been for a walk,” her stare seizing him as he emerged into the glare of light. “Only ghosts ought to be out on such a night,” she said, and he saw her twist her flashlight in her gloved hands. “Peter . . .”

He broke down the nervous defenses of her talk.

“Caroline, thank you for your letter— —” He remembered that Reckitts was sitting in the car and that he and Caroline were standing in a stream of amateur limelight. “I'm glad you got home safely.” He made some remarks

about his own journey; then added, as a farewell, that he hoped to come round and see Maurice later in the evening.

“He’d love to see you.” She looked at Peter uncertainly. She felt as though she’d just been introduced to him. For a week she had lived on the edge of this reëncounter. In the last week he had belonged to her imagination; she had created in his image a shadowy companion who seemed to grow more substantial and more intimate as the days passed. . . . Now, face to face with the real Peter, she saw that she had made, out of her own solitude, a lay figure which was neither the violent and grim Peter she had left in Paris nor the self-possessed man who stood talking to her in this freezing air. . . . She turned away, repeating that he must come in after dinner. He thanked her and got into his car again. The headlights swung round, leaving her in the dark. She switched on her flashlight and walked down the street towards her house.

She felt afraid and unhappy. The lay figure had been, to some extent, manageable. She had foreseen the moment of their meeting as the end of suspense and the beginning of a strangely but beautifully adjusted happiness. She had forgotten that Peter Stanley was both intractable and incalculable; and that his power over her, for which she loved him, was greater than her power over him.

As Peter went round to Shipton House the church clock was striking nine. Maurice himself opened the door. Peter’s first impression was that he was friendly but fundamentally annoyed. As he followed Maurice across the hall and into his study he was aware that someone was leaning over the balustrade of the landing. The fact that Caroline (of course) was doing this added a hint of absurdity. He glanced up for a second and saw her, and his anger gave way to a sensation of pity for her and for himself. As Maurice shut the door after them both Peter felt that the situation was grotesque as well as painful and must inevitably end in unhappiness.

Maurice, as he urged Peter to sit down, noticed that Peter looked embarrassed and tired. He himself felt calm, and as if Peter were a patient who had to be reassured. He was surprised but relieved by his own coolness. He felt that he was capable of repressing all emotional elements, and could discuss the question reasonably; and that in a few minutes Peter, who was pacing about the room, would become calm too.

Peter was aware of Maurice’s steady glance. He felt that he had never understood Maurice less than at this moment. He had thought of various

ways of getting straight to the point. Now he balked it.

“I hope I’m not disturbing you by coming round this evening?”

Maurice gave him a reassuring smile.

“You’d disturb me more if you didn’t. Sit down.” He added, sitting down himself in the swivel chair by his desk, “We both want to talk over this business.”

“Yes.”

“Caroline gave me an account of what happened in Paris.”

“Yes.”

Maurice paused. Then said: —

“I can’t see why we shouldn’t all be reasonable; and I understand you take the same point of view?”

He waited.

“Exactly,” said Peter. He thought, “Either Maurice must be insensitive or a fool; a supreme egoist, or a saint-out-of-water. . . .”

“It depends what you mean by being reasonable,” Peter said.

“Being friends. All three of us being friends. You and me. You and Caroline.” Maurice spoke gently, and then shut his lips and looked Peter straight in the eye.

“That is,” said Peter, “exactly what I foreshadowed. Exactly what I—told Caroline.”

“Yes,” said Maurice. He added with an air of mild impatience: “I don’t see why it shouldn’t be quite simple.”

“The lines laid down are certainly clear enough.” Peter saw his own “reasons,” reduced and simplified by Maurice’s mind to a general formula, and understood Caroline’s protest: “Ah, but of course Maurice’ll agree with you; because what you’re saying *sounds* so like the truth.”

“Maurice, do you understand at all what’s happened? I don’t know what Caroline said.”

“She said that you were in love with each other.” Maurice spoke tersely, but changed color. He added: “I might have foreseen that it could happen. I never thought of it, you know. I daresay,” he said, as if to himself, “that I get absorbed in my work and don’t notice things.”

Peter got up and stood with his hands in his pockets.

“I want you to understand that this”—he sought for a phrase—“this is the last thing I could have imagined.”

Maurice said flatly: “People can’t help their feelings.” He found it difficult to imagine Peter’s and Caroline’s real feelings. He tried not to resent Peter’s embarrassment. He liked people to work smoothly, and, at this moment, Peter obviously didn’t. He liked people’s behavior, however peculiar, to conform to a peculiar precedent, or to fit in to some recognized cycle of conduct. Caroline’s outburst of crying at dinner hadn’t been followed by the usual state of passivity; she had locked herself into her room after gasping at him the final reproach that he didn’t care for her even as much as for his fossil collection. . . . He hoped that this uncomfortable phase of his relation with Peter would pass once this interview was over, and they hadn’t got to refer to the matter again, and that Caroline, too, would settle down once the thing was settled (as much as Caroline, of course, could be expected to settle down to anything).

“I should hate to think,” said Peter, “that I could ever do—either of you any harm.”

“My dear Peter”—Maurice stretched out his legs and gazed at his shoes. “My dear Peter, you talk like the villain in an Æsop’s Fable.” He looked up into Peter’s face. Peter could make out nothing from the quizzical glance, the tautened nostrils, the momentary curve of the stubborn mouth. He felt his own appeal for some sort of understanding graze off the impenetrable fairness of Maurice’s behavior. He repeated stupidly, “Like the villain,” and tasted the phrase.

“After all,” said Maurice, “to put the matter briefly, if you care for Caroline and she cares for you and you want to keep things at a— a platonic level, there’s every reason for your staying on here (she said something about your going away). I like having you here. It would be fantastic for you to pack up and go.”

“I gather, then, that that means you trust me?”

“A romantic phrase,” said Maurice. “Rather insulting to you even to discuss that aspect.” He added, after a moment’s thought, “Caroline’s romantic, of course.”

Peter wondered how much or how little Maurice meant by this comment. Did he simply mean that Caroline was capable of giving a false glamour to a clear-cut situation? Or was he inaccurately expressing a notion that Caroline

wasn't to be trusted because she was apt to be guided by her imagination and her desires? He imagined the former interpretation was the right one. Maurice was simply indicating that Caroline might not see things as they were.

"I feel this sort of—discussion is very unreal. But it seemed inevitable," Peter remarked. He thought of Caroline standing and looking over the balustrade of the landing; "the gold bar of Heaven." . . . She'd look frightened. How had she foreseen (and how was she imagining now) this wretched encounter? He hadn't thought it would be at all like this. They weren't really getting to an understanding at all! He had supposed that Maurice would be more sensitive and not so actively reasonable. . . . On the other hand Maurice had had five days to think. Was it possible that this wary and amiable manner signified a policy? . . . Peter dismissed the theory. Maurice was neither actor nor schemer. His behavior and his manner were determined but never "calculated"; the causes of his conduct were deep, but never devious. . . . If nine tenths of Maurice's thoughts were submerged, it wasn't because he deliberately sank them, but because his mind was built to carry stuff (a heavy cargo of facts) rather than passengers. . . .

Maurice was making some remark which edged the whole topic off the stage. It ended— "By the way, talking of not being left in the dark, don't you think this new reading lamp of mine is a good bit of mechanism?" And as Maurice bent his face close up to the lamp, Peter noticed that his crest of hair shone gold, and that his features looked strained as if he hadn't been sleeping.

Maurice explained the principle of the lamp's special efficacy. When he had finished explaining he noticed that Peter was inattentive. He got up and poured him out a drink, and then poured out some more whiskey for himself.

They drank in silence. Then Peter remarked that he must go and Maurice escorted him to the front door and shouted "Good-night" after him into the dark.

When he got back into his study he finished his whiskey and soda. He found himself thinking of Puck's "Lord, what fools these mortals be!" He lifted his glass with a deliberately steady hand. As he did so he heard Caroline coming down the staircase, and decided that he must be left alone.

He went over to the door and locked it, and came back to his desk. He heard her step creak on that bottom step but one, then stop. She must have

heard him turn the key. For nearly a minute she didn't move. Then he heard her go upstairs again and cross the landing, and go into her room.

As he sat down and prepared to read for an hour before going to bed he was assailed again by the profound unhappiness that he had felt since Caroline's return, but which seemed quite irrelevant to the situation that had come about. . . . He felt that he would never be quite a young man again. . . . Probably he had ceased to be young two or three years ago, but he had only just realized this. . . . A spring had snapped—a star had darkened—a color had faded.

He had a sense of waste and of lost years. He thought that until now his life and his youth had been the same thing; and Caroline, who had come into his youth, had been an inseparable part of his life. Now that this business of being young was suddenly over it seemed as if a phase of his life with her was over too.

His life with Caroline. . . . They had lived together for six years. And they had known each other for a year before that. Seven years. He remembered her at all sorts of moments: things they had done and seen and laughed about, and bothered about. He'd supposed that they had made some sort of unity out of all that doing, and laughing, and bothering. . . .

Now she was upstairs. . . .

A spring had snapped—a star had darkened.

V

For the next three days Peter worked at his book, and found relief in a sequence of writing, eating, writing, sleeping. He found that he could live isolated in his work, as if he were on an island. Caroline didn't come to see him, and he concluded that she had decided to meet him only as often as was usual among neighbors in the country. He was surprised that she should have accepted so quickly a state of affairs which in Paris she had described as "unnatural" and "full of pretenses." It was possible that Maurice's cool and reasonable attitude had rather "knocked the stage" from under her feet, and in depriving her of drama had deprived her also of the power to feel. He wondered if he was being unjust. In the face of a cold hope that she might, after all, have been so easily freed, he tried to believe that she stayed away because she wouldn't adventure lightly into their new life.

Just after six at the end of the third day he heard the doorbell ring and Mrs. Bredon stump across the flagged hall. He put down his pen and sprang to his feet, knocking his knee as he did so against the desk.

"Mrs. Krebs, sir—"

"Oh—Jane—"

"Why, Peter—you look as if you'd seen a spook!"

Jane wore a fantastic little brown hat fitted on to the back of her head and an orange handkerchief knotted round her neck and enormous gauntlet gloves.

He said, idiotically, "Do I?" and told Mrs. Bredon to bring another lamp.

Jane continued to scrutinize him, flickering her eyelashes.

"Perhaps you haven't recovered yet from your dissipations in Paris!" she commented. "I flew back day before yesterday. Sick as hell the whole way. . . . A day's hunting yesterday put me right again. Why weren't you out?"

He indicated his desk.

"Working?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Getting on?"

"Yes."

“When’ll it be done?”

“In May, I should think.”

“And then you go?”

“Yes.”

“Seen the Vernons since you came home?”

“Only once.”

“Caroline deserted me in Paris the day after she went out with you. . . . Did you give her a dull evening, Peter?”

“I hope not.”

Jane sat down on the arm of the sofa.

“Mix me a cocktail, darling: I’ve played two rounds of golf to-day and called on two lots of new neighbors.”

“There’s no ice, I’m afraid.”

“What? No ice with the Almighty refrigerating as hard as He can day and night! Call up Caroline to bring round some ice. Caroline’s the sort of housekeeper who always has everything ‘in.’ Her store cupboard looks like Fortnum and Mason, and her medicine cupboard is much more professional-looking than Maurice’s dispensary.” Jane moved toward the telephone.

“She’s probably busy.”

“Gracious, Peter, the one certain thing about Caroline Vernon is that she’s never busy, and if she is she’d rather not be. I’ll call her up for you.” Jane picked up the receiver. “Hello. King’s Norton 6, please . . . yes. . . . That you, Caroline? It’s Jane. . . . I’m at Peter’s. Can you bring some ice along right away? I want a cocktail and he’s got nothing colder than his own heart to freeze it with. . . . You come along and have one too: I invite you. . . . That’s right. Come round right away . . .” Jane came back laughing to the fireside. Then, quite inconsequently, she became serious, took hold of Peter’s coat lapel, and looked up into his face.

“Peter?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve known you quite a time? Haven’t I?”

“Yes, Jane.” He wondered what on earth she was driving at.

“Well, then, I’m going to ask you something.”

“Go on.” He was interested. He couldn’t imagine what the question she was now hesitating over could be. She had once asked him, in the same sentimentally portentous manner, to arrange an interview for her with Bernard Shaw.

“Peter, are you crazy about Caroline?”

He drew back.

“My dear Jane, why should you imagine such a thing?”

Jane ignored his question, and went on in her funny husky voice. “I’ve thought for some time that you were getting that way. (I—I’m like that, you know. . . . I get a sort of hunch about what’s happening.) Ever since that poker party at Mamma Snow’s—”

“My dear Jane, the idea’s absurd.”

“I’ve had an idea. . . . And Caroline’s been sort of queer, too.” Jane shook her head. “I don’t like it, Peter. Seems to me you’re riding for a fall!”

“But you assume—”

“Hell, man—*you* assume every woman’s a fool. Fact is, I seem a fool and I’m not, and Caroline doesn’t seem a fool and in lots of ways she *is*! And one thing I’m pretty certain about is that you don’t know just where she is and where she isn’t!” Jane pulled herself up. “Not that that’s my business. *But*—what I want to say *is* that if you and Caroline start playing around you may do yourselves harm and you certainly will hurt Maurice, and—and he doesn’t deserve it.”

Peter checked her.

“I’ve let you go on, Jane, because you’re a little difficult to interrupt. In fact, you’ve made half a dozen false assumptions—starting from a premise quite unauthorized by facts.” The doorbell rang. “That’s Caroline—”

Jane watched his expression as he turned towards the door, and concluded that not only Maurice might be hurt.

As for Caroline, who came in rattling a thermos pail of ice and rubbing her nose with a large handkerchief, Jane could discern no coherent state of mind beneath her incoherent good spirits, nor any definable emotion in her air of being indefinably restless and overspent. She handed Peter the ice while she smiled at Jane and proclaimed that a cocktail was exactly the one thing she wanted. Peter began clinking about with bottles in a corner and Caroline threw herself on to the sofa, demanding Jane’s news.

“How was Hamilton? Did you tell him I was sorry to miss him? Did he revel in seeing you again? Did he manage to recapture a first fine careless— Not too much gin, Peter!—Did you get through the customs all right? Where’s Hamilton now?”

Jane explained that Hamilton was still in Paris and was then coming to London to live in Peter’s flat. Peter asked, gesticulating the shaker:—

“Will Krebs add to or detract from the respectable reputation of my flat?”

Jane laughed. “He’ll add to it all right. Hamilton’s the sort of man that can make a night club seem like Sunday School, and never goes home with anything more snappy than the evening paper!”

Caroline, with her eyes shut, wondered for a moment if Jane was worse vulgar or sentimental, and why one liked her so much. (And how strange that it was Jane who’d imported Peter. . . .) She opened her eyes; Peter was looking at her. She stood the look for a second and then turned away; it expressed his whole attitude—a sort of struggling bitterness. . . . And Maurice was bored, but kind. . . . And at nights she lay awake thinking about Peter, and fell asleep to dream fitfully of him, and woke to the relief of finding Maurice at her side. . . . She lived through the days (only three days?) as if her words and actions were predestined and could evolve themselves; seeking solitude and then shirking its oppression, grabbing company—of neighbors, of Anne, of the gardeners even, and then resenting the tyranny of their talk; shadowing Maurice and finding respite in the hours when she could sit in the room with him while he worked.

Jane was chatting to Peter, telling him how someone mixed cocktails. . . .

Caroline shaded her eyes as if to defend herself from Jane’s voice. . . . Last night Maurice had worked until one o’clock on that article; only noticed when he stopped that she was in the room; patted her shoulder and told her she shouldn’t sit up so late. She’d trailed upstairs after him. . . .

“Caroline, this’ll revive you.”

“Thank you, Peter.” She sat up.

Jane said, “When are you going to start teaching Comfort again, Peter?”

“As soon as she likes.”

Caroline threw a log on the fire.

“The wood’s damp,” she said. “Did you bring my eau de Cologne, Peter?”

“No, I’m sorry I didn’t.”

Caroline drank down her cocktail. Now she felt emotionally numbed. It seemed to her that her world was full of men who took no trouble about her. She kicked the log. Maurice really cared so little that he couldn’t even be jealous. And Peter, who made such a heroic business of having fallen in love with her, couldn’t remember to bring her a bottle of eau de Cologne. . . .

“I’m sorry,” he repeated, seeing that she was sulky, but unable to believe that she could mind one way or the other about the litre of scent.

“Doesn’t matter—” The doorbell rang again. “That’s Maurice, I expect.”

Maurice came in looking blown about. Peter poured him out a cocktail and Jane slipped her arm through his and drew him to the fire, pouring out a story about Colonel Lane (who was Maurice’s *bête noire*). How Colonel Lane had stood up to address a meeting of the Local Conservative Association in the village hall and a gramophone (which nobody could discover) had begun to play the “Red Flag.” The Communists of King’s Norton had taken this as an omen, and nobody but Jane’s second chauffeur, himself a high Tory, had seen Greville Krebs returning to Arrowe Park after the meeting with a square box strapped on to his bicycle, and thick dust which might have been picked up under a platform smearing his coat.

Caroline wished Maurice’s nose wasn’t pink with cold. Glancing at Peter, she thought that he looked discolored from sitting indoors. They both looked unattractive at this moment, and she felt puzzled that she should have gone through so much emotion about either of them. She held out her glass to Peter for another cocktail.

An hour later, as she and Maurice were walking home, she wondered what they had all managed to talk about for so long. There had been a false vivacity in the air, and Jane’s plan that the four of them should go to the Sedgewick Point to Point next week seemed to hold little prospect of pleasure for anyone.

As they turned the corner at the crossroads Caroline looked back and Maurice asked her what she was looking at. She said, “Nothing in particular,” and realized that she had hoped to see Peter still silhouetted at his open door.

VI

On the following Wednesday morning Jane's white Isotta flashed down the village street to Shipton House.

She saw Peter and Maurice and Caroline waiting for her on the doorstep. As she drew up she had the impression that they were relieved to see her. . . . She apologized for being late and ordered Peter and Caroline to sit at the back and Maurice to sit in front with her. She saw Peter hesitate and then get in after Caroline, who was exclaiming at the size of the luncheon basket. "Enough loaves and fishes for the whole meeting," said Peter. He felt that Caroline was too exuberant this morning and Maurice truculent. And as they started, sped out of the village and over the crest of the hill in the direction of Sedgewick, Jane's bright insistent talk picked each of them out in turn like a searchlight. The thing was going to be hideous. . . . He'd come because he wanted to be with Caroline for a day. Now that she was beside him he wished he'd stayed at home and done some work. He turned to her and asked her what she'd been doing since Sunday when he'd supped with them. (Sunday evening!—Caroline morose, Maurice argumentative about tariffs, the dog scratching incessantly, and an unexpectedly bad supper.)

Caroline said that she'd been painting a still life. "Very art-school," she said. "Oranges and green grapes and a crumpled pink tablecloth."

Jane was talking to Maurice about a book she'd been reading on Buddhism. She was eloquent and elated. Caroline caught the phrase "Mystical contemplation" and saw Maurice looking dubious. She asked Peter how his work was going and didn't fully take in his reply. After a few minutes they became silent, each looking out of a different window. Caroline felt suddenly at peace and wished the drive could go on forever. Peter could feel her spiritual acquiescence to the moment, and hated its facility. He felt relieved that they would be at the course in another quarter of an hour. He was depressed by the grey sky and by the wind blowing across the ploughed fields.

Maurice sat with his arms folded, half diverted, half irritated by Jane. She used too strong a scent and he disliked scents. On the other hand he always felt there was something very nice and friendly about Jane. She was pretty in a way that commanded an effortless admiration, and sometimes when Caroline had been particularly complicated and difficult Jane's company was a relief.

As they approached the course they joined a line of other cars. Caroline caught sight of the Havilands, two cars ahead, and beyond them a Packard coupé, painted bright green, which made her exclaim to Maurice that that was exactly what she would like herself. Maurice laughed. “Caroline and Anne both admire cars for their color,” he said.

Caroline leaned out of the window. Already a large crowd had collected on the hill above the course, and the growling of their talk and the shouts of the bookies were borne towards her on the wind. The line of motors climbed slowly to the car park on the side of the hill. She caught glimpses of the horses and of the colored caps and jackets of the jockeys moving to and fro in the paddock. Peter was saying, “The first race is in ten minutes,” and Jane suggesting that they should go and watch it and then come back and lunch in the car before the second race.

Jane parked the car and was given a ticket. While they were getting out Caroline cast another covetous glance at the green Packard. She saw a very pretty woman in a green leather coat getting out of it, and thought her face seemed familiar, but couldn’t remember where she had seen her before.

Jane seized Maurice’s arm.

“Come on or we won’t get in a bet before the race.”

They hurried across the car park and over the rough grass to join the crowd and pushed their way towards the raucous line of bookies. Jane bought four race cards and began scrutinizing the runners in the first race. She caught sight of various neighbors and rushed up to each in turn demanding a tip. Caroline wandered off by herself, exhilarated and interested by the crowd, while Maurice and Peter stood side by side, agreeing that it was absurd to bet on this race and turning up their coat collars against the wind. Jane seized Caroline by the arm, exclaiming that she had fallen for a “lovely” bookie called Bob Spiller. Bob Spiller had a rubicund face and small eyes and a brown bowler hat. Jane thrust two pounds at him, on Scarlet Runner. Caroline said that she preferred the look of Harry Green, and detached herself from Jane and put five shillings each way at 9 to 2, on Leander (who had been a hero of her childhood).

The crowd began to shift on to the southern slope of the hill which commanded a view of the starting post on the flatter ground below. Caroline moved with them, dreamily infected by their excitement and thinking what fun these small meetings were, when the richer sheep weren’t paddocked away from the poorer goats—and how curious it was that the proletariat enjoyed eating oranges even in a cold wind—and wondering what 9 to 2

worked out at if you won. Down below the riders were lining up at the starting post, and there were shouts of “Here they are!”—“There’s Rob Roy!”—“There’s Scarlet Runner!”—“They’ll be orfina minute!” Caroline heard a woman’s voice saying, “I *do* think you might have backed him for me, darling,” and noticed the green leather coat just in front of her.

“They’re orf!”

The crowd drew its breath.

The gleaming horses, harlequin jockeys, streaked away over the fields. Caroline watched them flying over the first jump, thudding up, flying over, thundering on; the second jump (a man down, a horse galloping off riderless—“Nabob” said someone, chagrined; the jockey, purple and yellow, carried off, yellow cap dropped). Now they were disappearing away over the fields, up a slope and over the horizon. The crowd waited. Caroline felt that Peter was near her and turned round; he was standing behind her. “Three minutes before they reappear,” he said.

Maurice came up and joined them.

“We’ve lost Jane,” he said. “She’s hanging round Colonel Lane for a tip for the next race. Not too cold, darling?” He laid his hand on Caroline’s shoulder.

“No, thank you.”

She wondered what Maurice and Peter had found to discuss which had so quickly improved their tempers. Maurice had refused to make any revelations about their meeting when Peter had come back, and she had no idea what their relation was now. On Sunday evening it had seemed as inharmonious as possible. . . . She sat on her shooting stick while they continued their discussion above her head.

—so that I take the negative point of view anyway,” Maurice was saying. “After all, the experience and the philosophy even of a genius must be limited by his opportunities. There were no Cook’s Tours in those days.”

Peter insisted: “It’s the traveling power of the imagination that counts—To ‘put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes.’ The same applies to the psychological realm. A personally conducted tour through Denmark wouldn’t have added a cubit to the stature of Hamlet—”

Shakespeare, thought Caroline. At this moment the dead author of *Hamlet* was more important to them than any living woman: a fact, she thought, which was a measure of their finer calibre. She turned and glanced

up into their faces. Maurice amiably took in her look; Peter's glance met hers, his sentence faltered for a scarcely appreciable second, then he finished:—

“—and accredited writings of Bacon are such different stuff altogether —”

“There they come!”—“’Oo’s that leadin’?”—“Pink cap an’ black jacket leadin’.”—“There’s Scarlet Runner” . . .

Caroline stood up.

“Peter, lend me your glasses. . . . Leander—can you see Leander?” As she held out her hand for Peter’s field glasses she heard the woman in the green coat:—

“Oh, Carlyon darling, *do* say it’s mine *leading!*”

The glasses dropped between them. Caroline saw Peter’s stare at the woman’s back, saw a narrowing of his eyes, a stiffening of his mouth. Then he bent to pick up the field glasses, and as he did so Caroline remembered where she had seen the woman’s face before. The photograph on Peter’s dressing table. Her glance followed Peter’s. The woman’s profile was turned now to the man next to her. The crowd was shouting: “Scarlet Runner—Scarlett Runner! ’E’ll git there!”—“Scarlett Runner!”

Peter turned to Caroline and said, under cover of the shouting:—

“That’s my former wife.”

Caroline found herself gazing at the woman with a sensation too subtle and painful for immediate definition. She took in the charming shape of her head and neck, her slender figure, the details of her clothes.

“Her name is now Mrs. Carlyon Effingham,” said Peter, and saw that Rosamund was exhibiting a charming petulance because her horse hadn’t won. He knew the whole gesture so well, the big eyes, mouth pursed up but hinting a smile, hands clasped behind her back like a little girl.

The crowd was turning—to move back towards the bookies and the paddock. Jane seized Maurice by the arm.

“Come and help me collect my winnings, Maurice.”

Caroline, left with Peter, said, “She’s awfully pretty”—following the green coat with her gaze as it moved away with the crowd.

“Yes,” said Peter, “isn’t she?” and looked at Caroline and thought that it was an odd coincidence, Rosamund being here. He was puzzled by Caroline’s expression.

“She *is* pretty,” she repeated. And then added, “We’d better get back to the car. (My horse didn’t win, did he?) Jane said something about lunch.”

Jane was sitting on the step of the car counting her winnings while Maurice unpacked luncheon. Caroline sat down beside her. She felt physically and spiritually empty. She looked at the game pie and wondered if luncheon would make her feel better. Maurice handed her a glass of sherry.

“Bob Spiller’s a hundred-per-cent white man,” said Jane, stuffing notes in her bag. “Now then, darlings, eat away—we don’t want to miss the next race.”

Peter stood about biting a sandwich. He saw Rosamund and her husband having luncheon with a party of people twenty yards off. She seemed to him like any pretty woman doing pretty tricks. He would go and speak to her afterwards.

As he bent down to take a mutton pie he perceived that Caroline had seen him watching Rosamund and was in some way angry or hurt. He said, smiling:—

“Try one of these delicious mutton pies, Caroline.”

She shook her head. Jane went on talking.

Maurice agreed with Jane that anything Captain Haviland rode probably had a chance and wondered if he could get away after the next race. Jane’s betting was becoming a bore and Caroline looked bored and Peter didn’t seem to be enjoying it much either. This kind of thing was a waste of time; especially when you had as few hours off as he did. He looked round with distaste at the parties of people eating and laughing and talking and leaning on shooting sticks. A parade of typical British half-wits. He interrupted Jane by a sardonic remark to this effect.

Caroline said: “But then you never allow, Maurice, that the world’s full of people who’ve never heard of research, and who wouldn’t see any sense in it if they had. These are some of them.”

Maurice said, “God forbid that any of these people should do research. What maddens me is that they do nothing at all.”

“They do it rather well,” said Peter. “Most of them show up much better doing nothing than something.” He accepted a slice of plum cake from Jane, who said: “Well, *I* think that there’s nothing can beat a fine old English county family. There’s something about their ‘atmosphere’—”

“A *‘je ne sais quoi’*,” suggested Peter absently. Caroline was staring in Rosamund’s direction. He said, “You’d better come and make a bet for the next race, Caroline.”

Her attention jerked back to him and fastened on him with an odd intensity.

“No,” she said. “I don’t think so. . . . I mean, I shall go and bet with Jane, as she’s so lucky.”

Caroline was relieved when Jane suggested they should leave before the last race. Jane’s luck hadn’t lasted, and it seemed to Caroline that she had been listening too long to Jane’s exclamations of chagrin, her renewals of hope, and her recurring despairs. Peter had accompanied them during the afternoon—though Caroline felt that he must want to be with his wife. She kept catching sight of her and admiring her elegance as something she herself could never achieve. After the second race she had seen her recognize Peter and wave to him with arch camaraderie.

Maurice had gone off soon after luncheon with Roger Haviland to see the horses and hadn’t returned. Caroline knew that he was quite capable of walking home twelve miles rather than stand an extra hour’s social boredom.

As they were going, Roger Haviland came up to Jane and gave her a message from Maurice, that he had borrowed the Haviland’s car to take him home as he wanted to work. Jane accepted the message with equanimity, but Caroline could see that her feelings were hurt.

On the way back Caroline sat by Jane in front and Peter sat at the back. Jane was quiet and Caroline was preoccupied and sullen, and remarked once that it was going to rain.

Jane dropped them at the crossroads at Ditch Edge. She roused herself to say with bright vague finality that they must all come over soon and dine.

As she drove off, Peter said:—

“I wonder what’s the matter with Jane.”

Caroline didn’t answer. She wasn’t interested. This was the first time she had been alone with Peter since Paris. She said, “Good-night, Peter,” and

turned away and walked off in the direction of her house. Peter was startled by the suddenness of her move. He checked an impulse to ask her to come back. As he went slowly down the road to The Quiet Woman he told himself that it was just as well he hadn't suggested she should come in and have a cigarette. There was no sense in forcing things.

But when he got in he felt the room empty because she wasn't there. He took off his overcoat and sat down, and for a second pressed his hand against his eyes, as if to shut out her image. He reflected that he must do some work; glanced toward his desk and didn't move. He took up the *Times*, which lay near him on the sofa. As he did so Caroline walked into the room. She said:—

“You left the door unlatched after you, Peter.”

She stood looking at him as if she were frightened.

“Peter, aren't you fond of—of your wife still?”

“Why do you come and ask me that, Caroline?”

“You are, then?”

“My dear—!” It seemed to him impossible to explain the way in which Rosamund had no longer any meaning for him at all. The ultimate proof, for him, was in the meaning that he got, even in such a chill moment, from Caroline herself. All he could add was:—

“—my dear. The thing's utterly over.”

She stood awkwardly in the same place by the armchair; remarked: “She's so pretty—attractive.”

He dismissed the significance of that with a gesture. Caroline sat down on the arm of the chair. She didn't know what she wanted to say now that she was here, and she couldn't bear to go. She said:—

“Isn't it curious? I hate the idea that you should ever have cared for her.”

“Caroline—” His exclamation of her name was half protest, half endearment: a plea that she should leave alone the too personal aspects of their situation, and yet, involuntarily, a concession to its importance. He pulled himself up.

“It was nice of you to come,” he said. “I thought that something had annoyed you this afternoon.”

She looked at him. She realized that he was asking her to be impersonal. She said with an effort so obvious that it seemed grotesque:—

“It was cold. And Jane talked so—”

He fairly seized on Jane.

“I don’t think Jane’s happy.”

Caroline thought, “He’s said that before!”

“We’re none of us particularly happy, are we?” (Why should he waste his feeling on Jane?)

He came over to her and took her hands.

“Caroline, for goodness’ sake let’s forget about that!”

He stood by her, looking over her head and still grasping her hands in his. Then he added: “Go, my dear. You must go back.” He pulled her to her feet, hesitated for a second between speech and movement, for a second laid his hand on her forehead; then, with a swift change of manner, remarking that she’d be late for dinner, he escorted her to the door.

As she went out he said:—

“You must both come and dine with me next week one day. Find out from Maurice which day would suit him best.”

Caroline reminded him that they would see him as usual on Saturday evening and could arrange something then.

VII

It struck her as she pulled on her stocking that perhaps Maurice actually didn't want to come. That that telephone message was an invention . . .

It was so unlike Maurice to invent anything that the drawing on of her second stocking was accompanied by a doubt of her own doubt.

She sat down in front of the glass. After all, why should he suddenly refuse? He had been perfectly amiable on Saturday evening when Peter came to dine. And he had assured Peter that he was coming.

She leaned her chin on her hands and stared blankly into her own face. He hadn't gone out yet. She could go down and ask him . . .

Ask him what? Ask him if he had invented an excuse for not dining with Peter? And, by such a question, send a crack right across the lacquered surface of their life? (For they hadn't for months, even a year ago, she reflected, been so calm and untroubled in each other's company.)

And if he didn't come, she would be alone with Peter. . . . She saw the hope expressed sombrely, doubtfully, in her own face.

Watching the expression, she became aware of her features. She leaned forward curiously. She thought, meeting her own strange stare, shoulder leaning to pale shoulder: "This sulky-looking woman is me—is the cover of what I feel—is what Maurice calls his wife—what he wanted, what he lives with, what he sees when he comes in—is ME for other people. But I don't feel what I look like." She thought: "Does anyone? How much does anyone get through their 'cover,' except to look out sometimes at their eyes, and sometimes to try to get out into the open in words, and explain that this and *this* is ME, not the haphazard curve of a jawbone, length of an eyebrow, pigmentation of the skin.

"And yet this," she thought, and saw that her hand was touching at the reality of her face, "which Maurice calls me, is the same symbol for Peter—Peter sees the same eyelids, same figure (a common physical denominator)—wants the same 'me'!

"Or doesn't he?"

Supposing that it was something different that Peter wanted, but locked up in the same—in the same set of cells, she thought, queerly, as the elements that made her Maurice's wife? . . .

She remained still, perplexed, staring over her own shoulder. Perhaps it was always a mistake—the notion that people needed the whole of each other. (For what was it she wanted of Peter? Not the whole Peter, for there must be a dozen aspects of him that she didn't know or desire.)

Idly she touched a bottle of scent. . . . Too simple, though. You couldn't get away from the physical entity because you could divide the spoils of the mind. Maurice might make a generous gesture just because he held the substance. But suppose that Peter had taken her, simply physically, would Maurice have been so philosophical? . . . She shivered at a stir of her senses and turned away from the glass. As for Peter, as for herself—

The door opened and Maurice came in.

“I'm just going, darling.”

She turned round.

“I suppose you really have got to go?”

“Worse luck, yes.”

She saw now that he was speaking the truth. He came and leaned over the back of her chair and kissed her lightly on the forehead.

“Have a nice evening with Peter,” he said. He caught sight of them both in the glass and thought what a relief it was that the situation which had seemed so trying at first was now perfectly comfortable. Caroline seemed happy and unusually good-tempered, and, as far as he could see, Peter was getting less self-conscious over the whole business. . . .

As he went downstairs he reflected that he didn't mind how often Caroline dined with Peter alone; the thing that had worried him at first was an inner sense of insecurity, and the outward embarrassments of seeing that Peter wasn't at ease and Caroline was nervously overwrought. He told himself that all that was now over, and there was nothing to worry about.

In the hall he stopped for a moment. Then he shouted up to Caroline:—

“I shall be back before you are, I expect. I might come and fetch you.”

Her answer came after a moment's hesitation:—

“Don't bother to do that.”

“Well—anyway I'll wait up for you,” he said.

Ten minutes later, as Caroline left the house, she wondered what hidden impulse had made Maurice, who never noticed when or how she came or

went, concern himself with the hour of her return.

Caroline was aware that they were speaking contentedly, comfortably, to one another. Far more aware of this than of the topics that rose and fell like waves on the steady tide of their intimacy. . . . Pleasant to have dined with him; pleasant to be sitting here with him on the broad sofa, the two of them talking and drinking their coffee, the two of them smoking and laughing, easily. . . . If it could always be like this, she thought. No past, no future. Simply this happiness between firelight and lamplight.

She met his look; smiled slowly; leaned back in a long silence. She found herself breathing with deliberate quiet as if she had feared to exorcise the bright ghost of their felicity.

He spoke again.

“You’re having a show this spring?”

She nodded. “In May, I think; early in May.”

He watched her as she spoke. He had felt a dreadful enchantment in this evening. Dreadful because so fragile. Now—he would like to keep her just so: her face turned to his, her words marking the crystal seconds of the hour. . . . The light from the lamp shaped her cheekbone. He thought it strange that he should find this moment perfect; or find her perfect in this moment when she said:—

“I shall exhibit mostly still life.”

He had no desire to explain to her that a moment had flowered while she said, “I shall exhibit mostly still life.” He knew that he had no way of explaining this, and no time; for its loveliness was already overblown when he asked her:—

“Are you going to show my portrait?”

“If you don’t mind.” . . . Her thoughts drifted. “You once said you’d name it for me.”

“I remember. . . .”

“What would you call it?” she asked, turning to look at him, to watch the play of his expression while he hesitated.

“Portrait by Caroline,” he said at last.

She took his meaning; asked lightly;—

“Then where do *you* come in?”

“I’m simply the ‘Portrait,’ my dear. I’m what you use; your pigment; your effect.”

She didn’t answer. His meaning hurt her. She turned her head away so that he shouldn’t see the tears in her eyes.

“But it’s a good portrait, all the same,” he said; “credible to your talent.”

“You’re bitter!” she broke out. “It may be true, that *then*—two, three months ago—you were a ‘subject.’ But *now* it isn’t. You know it isn’t true. You know that, Peter. . . . Don’t you believe me?” she asked, feeling the beautiful fabric of their evening clawed down by his doubts.

“You like a scene.” He got up and stood looking down at her. “Don’t you?” he asked, as she didn’t answer.

She shook her head.

“You’ve told me so yourself,” he said.

She felt helpless.

“No. Oh, no.”

“You told me so once quite distinctly.”

She sat staring up at him, bewildered by his attack. She felt weighed down by her helplessness.

“All women enjoy scenes,” he said.

“*Women!* . . . Oh, Peter! You never see the trees for the wood.”

His face gave her no response. She asked:—

“Why are you suddenly angry? One day you’re getatable. The next day you shut up like a wooden box. *Why?*”

“I don’t see at all what you mean.”

“I mean you’re changeable and hysterical. . . .”

He said, feeling a chilly anger, “Absurd accusation. You’ve now made a scene”—he looked at the clock—“for six minutes.”

She got up and faced him.

“D’you want me to go?”

“Perhaps you’d better.”

“Ten minutes ago you wanted me to stay; we were perfectly equable—perfectly happy. I think you’re a little mad, Peter.”

“I think I must be.” He thought that the madness lay in the continuance of his relation with the Vernons. He needn’t have stayed on. Next week he’d go. She liked to have him here to play *jeune premier*. . . . He remembered her phrase—she “got a kick” out of him.

“Peter—”

“You’d better go, Caroline. We shall have recovered our tempers tomorrow.”

“I simply don’t understand you,” she said, and fetched her coat from a chair in the corner. “This is the third time we’ve had a childish kind of quarrel in a week!”

“The inference perhaps is that we should meet less frequently.”

He noticed, as she walked towards the door, that she wore a black coat.

“What a prig you can be,” she said.

The next day Annie was playing in the garden.

She filled the little jug with earth; pressed it in and then ran across the lawn to the hose tap. She turned the tap on and held the jug under it until she had made a wet chocolate mixture. Then she walked back to her table under the apple tree, carrying the jug at arm’s length. She took a spoon and ladled out the black mixture on to her baking board. She patted and prodded it in several places. “Just the right consistency,” she remarked. She took up her rolling pin. She began to roll and knead the mixture alternately, singing to herself under her breath, “Roly—poly—pudding! Roly—poly—pudding!” While she sang, the meaning of the refrain led her to think of Samuel Whiskers. . . . She had a stiff horror of rats. She had seen that Big Rat in the hayloft. It looked rather like Daddy’s Lelectrician. “. . . poly—PUDDING!” She didn’t like Christine, the new housemaid. She said, “Yes, MEDUM,” to Mummie. Anne practised aloud: “Madam, madem, medum, medem. . . .” Daddie said the Greeks didn’t have housemaids. They had Slaves. . . . Briseis was a Slave. Achilles sitting in a striped tent like that one at Eastbourne last summer and being sulky. Anne thought about that Shield his Mummie had had made for him. . . . Thetis had a teagown that trailed. . . . Now the Baking Tins: “One for Mummie, one for Nannie, one for Daddie,

one for Granny, one for Uncle Peter—” Uncle Peter took plums in his cake. . . . She bustled to find some tiny stones that had accumulated near the cold-frames. She brought them back in her pockets. It was plum pudding, really, not chocolate pudding. It would be all on fire, with curtains drawn and holly on top. . . . Mummy said it was ten months until the next Christmas. She was going to make Mummie a mat with red and blue straw plaited in and out to put on the writing table. . . . She would use *some* of the straw to plait Dobbin’s tail for May Day. She noticed Uncle Peter coming across the lawn from the stables, and filled the triangle tin.

“Where’s Mummie, Anne?”

“I should rather think she’s indoors. Have a little plum pudding, Uncle Peter.”

He received his plum pudding and devoured it with succulent noises. While Anne was offering him a second one Mummie came out of the house. Anne hastened to prepare a pudding for her in the shell-shaped tin.

“Anne’s entertaining me royally.”

Anne detected a flaw in Uncle Peter’s tone which indicated that he had become detached from the matter of her pudding.

“Here, Mummie. Here’s one for you, please, in a dear little shell tin!”

Mummie pretended to eat, but Anne felt that she wasn’t interested and snatched back the tin. “No! You’ve finished.”

Mummie said absently, “Oh, thank you, darling”—and answered Uncle Peter. Anne prodded the table with her spoon and listened to them. Their sentences were interwoven above her head, netting her down so that she couldn’t even peck at their attention. She watched their faces, and felt prickled by their expressions. The atmosphere scratched her. She tapped her toe on the gravel.

Gradually the tone of their voices changed. Anne felt smoother, and stopped fidgeting. Uncle Peter said “my dear” to Mummie. Anne silently imitated his way of saying it. “My DEAR”—little word, big word, (Little Claus, Big Claus); Mummie said “darling” (in a funny way as if she were going to sneeze). Uncle Peter, with his eyebrow jumping up as it did, said a curious thing: “*The Platonic strings easily get out of tune.*” Anne pondered and tried the words “*platonic-string*” . . . and Mummie answered a curious thing: “They aren’t real gut, that’s why.” Why was that why? Why did she say “gut” (which was rude, Nannie said)?

Mummie and Uncle Peter walked off together. Mummie put her hand through Uncle Peter's arm. Anne began to scrape the mixture out of the little tins. "The strings aren't real gut." "*Gut!*" she said aloud, and glanced up nervously into the branches of the apple tree and stared into the bushes. (She had a fear of bushes since she had learned that Moses found God in a bush.) "The strings aren't . . ." She saw balls of string arranged in a row. . . . Tom Kitten rolled in dough and tied up with the string. Don't think about Samuel Whiskers, though; think about—going to tea to Maximilian and Sofia this afternoon, and riding on their pony. . . . Anne chuckled aloud. *How* naughty Perdita Krebs had been last time when she threw her milk all over her Nannie's face! . . .

She said, as they left Anne:—

"Come up to the studio and fetch that wretched picture away." She withdrew her arm from his abruptly, though she had meant to walk arm in arm with him into the house, probably meeting Maurice, and so, she'd planned, reassuring all three of them. As he followed her indoors, she wondered why she should have been prompted to make such a plan. . . . She heard Maurice talking to someone in the surgery. Rose banged through from the kitchen carrying a dustpan and brush, and followed by the tropical scents of marmalade making. Nurse came downstairs carrying Anne's mid-morning glass of orange juice. She asked what Anne was to put on to go out to tea in the afternoon; and Rose, after retreating, at the sight of Peter, into the library, reëmerged perforce to say that there was no ammonia in the house for washing the hairbrushes and was she to wash the hairbrushes to-day or was she to wait until Thursday when the ammonia would be brought from Banbury. . . .

Caroline said that Anne was to wear her white smock with pink smocking and that the hairbrushes might, for once, be washed by any simple method that should occur to Rose. Then she looked at Peter and laughed, but found that he hadn't noticed these domestic capers and was merely impatient.

When they got up to the studio he renewed his apologies for being rude the evening before. He repeated what he had said in the garden, that she must try to understand more than he could explain. Then he looked blankly out of the window down into the stable yard and said, "But each man kills the thing he loves," and somehow the quotation at this moment twanged her nerves and brought her near to screaming. But she merely said:—

“Can you carry that great frame and everything?”

“What? . . . Oh, the picture! . . . Of course I can.”

He went over to where the picture leaned in front of a pile of other canvases against the wall, and grasped it under his arm. Then:—

“Hullo—what’s this?” he exclaimed.

She came over to look. Then explained, casually, “Oh, that’s a charcoal sketch I did just to amuse myself.”

“From the picture?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

She said, looking at the sketch:—

“To have—when the picture was gone.”

He couldn’t answer. But after a moment he remarked:—

“The sketch in some ways is more like than the portrait, but it isn’t interesting as a picture.”

“It’s only for me,” she repeated in a dull poignant tone; and turned its face to the wall. “Come on down,” she said. “I’ll come and help you hang that thing up.”

When they were out in the air again her spirits lightened and she teased him for carrying his own image, like an eikon, through the streets.

Her liveliness hurt him, and he wondered whether their reconciliation had been any use at all. There was something nightmarish about the way disagreements between them sprang suddenly, without reason or warning, into vast disproportions.

She felt his mood. She felt his suspicion. She felt that he had gone quite blank and that she couldn’t go in with him and stand and hang up that picture, and talk about where, and how high, and in what light.

She turned round and left him and went home, passing blurred cottages, and ran upstairs to her room; past Anne, whose words came after her, fragmentary and plaintive; past Rose, rattling and polishing a door handle.

She threw herself down on her bed and lay still, her face buried in her arms.

“Somebody must save me; something must save me,” she thought.

But who? . . . What? . . .

She lay rigid, wondering. And there emerged the notion, romantic, futile, but insistent: “Maurice must take me away.” He must take her right away, she thought, envisaging with a kind of luxury the passivity of her going. (To a sea? An island? A city with shuttered white houses?) Away—the world held a wailing reassurance. She would speak to Maurice, to-night. . . . (Was it possible that he might suddenly understand this need for them to go?)

As for Peter—

She didn’t want to think of Peter. That was the reason of her going. She saw herself alone (and Maurice where?), far away in a narrow street between shuttered houses. . . .

VIII

She was still waiting for Maurice to come in when Nurse came downstairs and reminded her that she hadn't said good-night to Anne. She was startled at herself for having forgotten this, and hurried upstairs to the night nursery.

Anne was sitting up in her white cot. She accepted her mother's appearance with:—

“Aren't you a funny girl to forget to say good-night to me?”

She snuffled and grabbed for a hanky under her pillow. “I've got a bit of a cold,” she said, and fixed a dark shining gaze on Caroline's face, ready for sympathy or concern.

Nurse confirmed this statement. “She's been a bit thick all afternoon, m'm, so I was quite pleased you didn't want her downstairs after tea.”

Caroline laid her hand on the child's forehead. “She doesn't feel as if she had a temperature.” (Delicious little round forehead, delicious hair, as warm and silky as a kitten.)

“Nurse *took* my temperature,” said Anne, “and it was quite norman.”

Caroline smiled and then turned to Nurse to say that Anne had better stay in bed the next day until her cold was over. She felt Anne's fat wrist stiffen in her grasp.

“I don't *want* to stay in bed.”

“Yes, darling, you must until your poor cold's quite better.”

“I don't want *to*,” Anne sneezed, and burst into tears.

“But, darling, only for one day, I expect,” reasoned Caroline. Anne's crying made her nerves prick all over her body.

“But Uncle Peter said Reckitts could drive me to the meet at Thorpe tomorrow!” An agony of disappointment shook her and made her sobs louder. “He said . . . he said . . . I could . . .”

For a second Caroline was touched by the idea of Peter's plan for the child, maddened by the situation he had unwittingly made, shaken by the noise of crying.

“Oh, Anne! I promise you shall go next week when your cold's better.”

Anne went on obstinately crying. Caroline knelt down beside the cot, clasped her arms round her.

“Oh, Anne, do, *do* stop!” The sharp, nervous entreaty in her tone surprised the child to a momentary silence. Anne took what seemed to be her advantage.

“Can I go, then?”

“My darling, *not* to-morrow, but—”

“All right.” Anne bent a long look on her mother’s face. She seemed to have forgotten about crying. Her look was intense and yet distant. “All right,” she repeated. Caroline was baffled, for it was as if Anne had suddenly perched far away on another world. She touched Caroline’s sleeve; asked lightly:—

“What’s that stuff called?”

“Crêpe de Chine.”

“I wish I could have a dress of it.”

“I expect you will one day.”

“A red dress, can I have?”

“Perhaps.”

“When I’m grown up can I have a red dress of it?”

Caroline kissed her small enchanting face, sticky with tears. She supposed Anne must have decided it was no good bothering about the meet any more.

“Red and blue and yellow dresses when you’re grown up.”

“And pink?”

“Yes.”

“And purple and white and orange?”

“Bless you, darling—yes.”

As she went downstairs Caroline realized that if Maurice took her away she would have to leave Anne. The idea hurt her and she paused halfway downstairs, as if she were waiting for the feeling to go over. Maurice came out of the surgery and saw her.

“Hello, darling.”

She felt, looking down at him, that he was bothered and driven by life, and that she did nothing for him, and the protective feelings woken by her thoughts of Anne turned suddenly to her husband. She ran down to him; stood facing him. “Maurice—”

“What is it, Caroline?” He was surprised by her tentative touch on his arm, and wondered, a little wearily, what the matter was now. He had been out all the afternoon and had to go out again in ten minutes’ time.

“I want to speak to you.” She led him into the firelight of the library. It wasn’t only for her that they must go away, but for him. He needed it. To get right away—new scenes, new places. She would give up anything, everything, if she could remake his life. She knelt down beside him and put her hands on his shoulders.

“Maurice, will you agree to something very important for us both?”

His head ached. “Depends what it is.”

“Maurice—”

“Yes, my dear.” He wondered, half abstracted, what was coming. Her voice and manner were emotional. (Sometimes he wished that people’s emotions could be sterilized. It would make the world so much cleaner and tidier.)

She felt his detachment. She must make him, force him to listen.

“Maurice . . . listen!”

“I am.”

“Darling, I want you to take me away. I want us both to—to get right away, together.”

“A nice plan. But rather unpractical.”

“Maurice, we *must*.”

He perceived that she had, for some reason, worked up an obsession on this matter and wondered why. He took her hands off his shoulders, where they annoyed him.

“My dear Caroline—darling, it’s very sweet of you to want this, and in many ways it would be very jolly. But it simply isn’t practical.”

“Maurice, it’s vital. We *must*! . . . Don’t you see?”

After reflection he asked:—

“Is all this because of—of Peter?” He spoke too naturally. But she could only insist.

“Take me away, Maurice.”

He got up, lit a cigarette, and peered at his watch.

“I think you’re being hysterical and a little foolish,” was all he said; and left her kneeling in the bright firelight by an empty armchair.

She remained so for several minutes. Then she got up. She saw now that her plan wasn’t merely impracticable, but that it wouldn’t anyway have worked. She saw that quite clearly now. Maurice was incapable of asserting any emotional mastery of her, partly because he would instinctively despise such a course, partly because for nine tenths of the time he was interested in other matters. And anyway the idea of being saved, once revealed in the cool tacit flash of Maurice’s reason, seemed romantic and futile.

She told herself that she’d simply got to face out her relationship with Peter from day to day.

Yet, even as she made this assertion with her reason, she tried instinctively to think of some force which should help her in spite of herself.

The solution came to her the next day.

Anne’s cold was worse, and Caroline spent the morning in the night nursery reading to her and making paper boats and houses. And as she was painting a red roof on a yellow house she thought that she saw a way out.

She stuck on a chimney with seccotine. “Don’t touch till it’s dry, Anne.” The more she thought of this solution the simpler it seemed. It would save her, save Peter, save Maurice, even if he didn’t recognize necessity for any sort of salvation. . . .

She spoke to Maurice at luncheon.

“Maurice, I want another baby.”

He was reading the *Times*. He looked up and took in the sense of her interruption. Then he said:—

“I thought we’d finished discussing that.”

“No.”

He saw her gentleness change to obstinacy like a signal from green to red.

“Well, I don’t,” he said.

“Two don’t cost much more than one.”

“Exactly twice as much.”

“No. . . . Anyway, I want one.”

He put the *Times* down on the floor. He was surprised by her lack of sensibility. It didn’t seem to strike her that it was odd to be sitting there asking for a baby as if a new life were as prosaically got and given as a new ice box.

“Is this instead of our holiday?”

He was quicker than she’d imagined. She said, “I need one, I expect. One of the best forms of self-expression.”

He said reasonably but gently: —

“I can’t see why your work isn’t enough for you to do.”

He supposed that she and Peter were finding life difficult, and though the realization hurt him, both on her account and on his own, he felt that this was due to bad management. If she thought more about her work, and he didn’t allow himself to be affected by a scene such as this, they would pull through. Peter had his work to do, too. He intimated his line of thought.

“I really believe you like existing like someone in an average novel. You *like* being obsessed by human relationships and having as little time as possible, between ‘scenes,’ to do anything ordinary or useful.”

(What had Peter said about her liking “scenes”? Were they both, to some extent, right? She had a habit of respecting masculine judgment, due, she supposed, to the fact that her father had died before she was old enough to criticize him.)

“People matter to me. They don’t to you,” she said.

He said, “You matter to me. Anne does. No one else.”

She couldn’t answer. She didn’t understand him. If he cared for her, how could he also feel this indifference to her dangers and wants? But he had always been strange about her, she remembered, thinking far back to the beginning of their engagement. She didn’t know, even now, if he really needed her, or if she was simply the incidental music to his life.

“As for this baby business,” he was saying, “frankly I don’t see why we should add another inhabitant to the country because you’re finding it difficult to keep up a platonic friendship with Peter Stanley.” He added,

getting up from luncheon (though he hadn't finished his cheese, she noticed), "Peter himself might just as well hope to cure the situation by breeding rabbits at The Quiet Woman."

Caroline sprang up.

"Odd subject for you to be funny about."

"It was you, my dear, who began being funny."

She cried, "I can't think why, at this stage in the twentieth century, we should all three be acting such a *pastorale* of the situation."

Maurice turned on her, sharply, suddenly.

"Do you suppose that I'd share you with anybody? And d'you suppose that Peter doesn't know that? D'you suppose he'd share you with anybody himself if he cares twopence halfpenny for you? Sometimes you're so stupid, Caroline, that I wonder if I've been mistaken about you for seven years. *Pastorale!* The trouble with you is that you're simply rotted with the ideas you lapped up as a puppy when you went to art schools and sat up till three in the morning talking sex and never practising it! And anything but a general post in and out of bed you call a *pastorale*. God, you are childish! . . ."

For a moment she thought he was going to hit her. Then he went out, leaving her simply angry, feeling as if she had been shut into a box with a glass lid through which Maurice or Peter could look at her when they felt inclined.

She packed an evening dress, a cloak, a nightgown, and took her suitcase out to the garage. Maurice could do without the car for once. He could hire the "pub" car if he wanted one. She decided to go before he came back from his committee at the schoolhouse. With any luck she would get halfway to London before dark.

At Aylesbury she stopped and sent a telegram to Jane, who was in London, saying that she was coming to stay for a night. She wondered if Jane would be free for the evening. If she wasn't, perhaps Sandra Page or Roger Langton—anyone would do.

She reached Jane's house in Westminster just before six. Jane was in her bedroom being manicured. She accepted Caroline's arrival without other comment than that her room was ready. Caroline asked her what her plans were for the evening. Jane said that she was dining with Philip Bertorelli and

going on somewhere to meet some other people and have supper. Caroline stood in the middle of Jane's bedroom and said:—

“Let's get another young man and I'll come. I want a party.”

Jane looked amused.

“Feeling gay, darling?”

Caroline nodded. “Yes. Frightfully.”

Jane said, “Ring up Dick Rawdon. He's always amusing.”

“What's his number?”

“Gerrard 5807.”

Caroline rang up the number. Dick answered.

Caroline said: “Jane and I want you to come out and amuse us to-night.”

Dick said: “Is that Caroline?”

“Yes.”

“Why, I thought you were dead and buried in rusticity.”

“Just risen again. This is my Easter party.”

“Sounds festive. . . . All right. I'll throw over the party I'm going to.”

“Here at quarter to eight, then. Speaking from Jane's. . . .”

Caroline put down the receiver.

“I guess he didn't have a party at all,” said Jane. “He always pretends he has, though. He'd rather die than let you think he even cleans his teeth alone.”

Caroline went into her room and undressed. While she was in her bath Jane brought her a cocktail.

“Nothing makes you feel more a disembodied soul than a bath and a cocktail together,” said Jane. Caroline lay in the hot scented water and sipped. She thought, “What the hell do Maurice and Peter and all this fuss matter? . . .” The situation that at Ditch Edge had borne down on her mind like a nightmare now seemed to recede and become blurred like a scene wrongly focused through a pair of field glasses.

When she was dressed she went downstairs to the drawing-room. Philip Bertorelli greeted her and then went on talking to Jane. Caroline looked at herself in the glass with intent pleasure. She felt excited and smooth all over.

When Dick Rawdon came in she perceived another reflection of her beauty in his glance. He opened his small eyes rather wide and said: "Marriage does suit you, Caroline darling. Marvelous effect on you. Quite chemical." Then he turned to listen to Jane's plans for the evening. While he was talking Caroline noticed that the conventional dissipations of his life made him already look older than he was. This perception pleased her. A quality of decay lurked in his exaggerated boyishness, an aroma, so faint and subtle, that it affected her pleurably like a perfume edging putrescence. He was graceful, with a slender waist and hands, and moved consciously, as if he feared to impinge on the glances that appraised him. His features shewed his character, she thought—the clear brow, the thin winged nostrils, the satisfied yet fastidious sensuality of mouth and chin. She remembered an occasion, five years before, when he had wanted to make love to her. She had found him distasteful then. Now, in a different mood, she could imagine his aptitude for the business. He would make up in technique what he lacked in temperament.

He began, in his rough, fluting voice, to discuss an exhibition of pictures he had visited during the afternoon. He talked all the time in the car while they were driving through the streets. . . . His remarks constituted an extraordinary patchwork of innate intelligence and acquired affectations. Jane congratulated him on his latest song, "A Cottage in the Moon." He said, "Sometimes one gets tired of buttering one's bread with treacle," and Caroline wondered if he had used that before.

During the evening Caroline amused herself by making him gossip about their mutual friends. She had seen very few of them since her marriage, and she could rely on Dick to give her elaborate and detailed information about them, which would be diverting even if it wasn't true. They sat and talked while Jane indefatigably danced with Bertorelli. "I shall write a song for Jane called 'Dancing Dagoes,'" Dick remarked.

Dick questioned Caroline about her life at Ditch Edge. "I suppose you don't ask me for week-ends because I'm too impossible?"

"Exactly."

"Your husband would think that?"

"Naturally." She saw that he was chagrined.

"I suppose your life's too utterly rustic?" he demanded. "Pigs and wallflowers and a post once a day? (Such really lovely hands you've got, Caroline, you ought to have them done in alabaster, for paper weights.)" He

touched her fingers appreciatively and she was interested by the sensation of this contact.

“Not pigs,” she said, “but wallflowers.”

“Have you children?”

“One.”

“How Marie-esque! Are you a good wife?”

“What’s your notion of a good wife?”

Dick tipped his profile ceilingward. “A woman who never appears at breakfast and keeps the eleventh commandment.”

“I don’t conform to the first demand, and—I haven’t any need of the second.”

He looked at her sideways for a moment. “Really?” he said. “How *too* Arcadian!” . . . “I like your dress,” he added inconsequently, and fingered the shoulder straps with discrimination. “Clever embroidery! A Worth model, isn’t it? Charming. Your figure’s improved so. You used to be—just a *little* healthy; Amazonian, rather. But go on telling me about your wallflowers, darling, and do you hunt?”

“Not rich enough.”

“Tennis?”

“Sometimes.”

“Golf?”

“Never.”

“Do you have hens that lay eggs and do you weed flower beds?”

“Dick, you are such a fool.”

He gave his difficult laugh. “I know. . . . And what are your bucolic neighbors like? And by the way, isn’t Stanley, the Guizot man, staying near you? I rather think his ex-wife mentioned to me that he was living in a village with a name—like ‘Pottage,’ but not that—that reminded me of you.”

Caroline explained that he had taken an ex-pub in their village.

“I met him once. Rather mannish, isn’t he?”

“Yes. Fairly.”

They got up and danced. Dancing together, their minds shut down, and they became alive in rhythm and movement. After they sat down a drugged and facile sensation of intimacy remained.

After a time, Dick proposed that they should leave Jane and her partner and go back to his flat, where they could talk and drink more comfortably.

Dick had a flat in Elizabeth Street, which consisted of a large studio embellished by a gallery—the bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen forming minor annexes. The luxury of its furnishing was due partly to his own taste and partly to the lavish expressions of his women friends. Caroline commented on a large photograph of a prim elderly woman who looked like a housekeeper in the nineties. It stood on the piano, framed in worn red plush—in this room of fantastic lamps and metal furniture and sophisticated divans.

“I pretend it’s my mother,” said Dick. “In fact, I bought it in the Tottenham Court Road, before Christmas. She inspires my song making.” He arranged some cushions on one of the divans and motioned Caroline to sit down. “I once wrote a Mother Song, but it was never published.” He strolled to the open piano and touched the keys with his left hand, holding a cigarette in the other. “It’s called the ‘Ædipus Blues.’” . . . He played some bass chords, hummed casually with an American accent.

“I’ve got the Ædipus Blu-ues. . . .
I can’t help sighin’ to be,
I can’t help cryin’ to be,
Whatever happens to me,
In Poppa’s sho-oes. . . .
Because I’ve gotten
Those rotten
Æ-dipus Blu-u-ues.”

He stopped, gave his high, casual laugh, and banged down the lid of the keys. Caroline smiled. “Rather nice. . . . Jane tells me you’re writing a revue. What’s it going to be called?”

Dick poured out a whiskey and soda and brought it to Caroline. Then he poured out one for himself. . . . That was the trouble, he couldn’t think of a title. . . . “I’ll play you some of the tunes,” he said, and went back to the piano.

He played, at first intently, then casually, keeping his eyes on Caroline. . . . She smiled at him, the music running up and down her spine, her limbs drowsily relaxed along the divan. “Delicious,” she murmured;

“too clever you are.” After a few minutes the whiskey began to go to her head, and at the same time gave her a slight not unpleasant indigestion. She closed her eyelids for a moment. Dick was playing a waltz which felt like lying under a shower of warm scent.

“Too entrancing,” she murmured and opened her eyes, and he was smiling at her and his smile came to her rather queerly, but she wouldn’t, couldn’t, get out of its way. And he went on playing; said, “You’re rather tired, honey, aren’t you?” and she nodded an amused acquiescence, for indeed she was, wonderfully, beautifully, and this was a new sensation, for she had never been in her life before like this, and her head was filled up and swimming with music (syncopated now: “This is the ‘Love Duet,’” he said). And then he said (for she wasn’t so tight after all, she thought, and sat up, carefully propped two cushions between her back and the wall), still playing, idly, casually, but still playing:—

“Are we going to spend the night in sin, darling?”

She reflected, very slowly, leaning against the two cushions, which were at last in place.

“I don’t think so, Dick.”

“—because I should adore to,” he said, playing faster. “You know, I’ve always felt what the Americans call ‘that way’ about you, darling. (Now here’s the waltz again; ought to be too aphrodisiacal, for it’s meant to be, anyway.) And you were so virginal before you were married, but, as they say, ‘L’appétit vient’ (which is why ancient women are so ravenous, I suppose). . . . Darling, do look more responsive, or are you waiting for me to come over and give you a passionate embrace? I shall in a minute, of course, but first of all I’m going to play you . . . It isn’t my own . . . don’t you recognize it? Isn’t it quite too delicious, even if it is a little banal? . . .”

“L’après-midi d’un Faune.” . . . But no, she thought; no, she told herself; not with Dick. (Or shall I? What does it matter, for Maurice is selfish and Peter a complicated bore, and at least you know where you are with Dick?) But no, she told herself, fumbling to get hold of the “no” properly, because, she discovered with a startling lucidity (like seeing a white pebble in a pool), “because I should want to remove Dick out of existence afterwards” (like some insects, queen bees or something, or Thais, who solved the aftermath of light love by throwing her young man out of the window). So she said to Dick, who was watching his own hands on the keyboard:—

“You see, I should want to throw you out into Elizabeth Street.”

Dick stopped playing.

“Darling, why? Too sadistic?”

“No. I don’t mean as an expression of passion. I mean afterwards.”

He giggled, and at the sound her decision became stronger. He said:—

“When lovely woman stoops to folly she draws the curtains and leaves the window open.” He leaned on the piano and lit a cigarette.

“Are you sure you won’t, darling? It’s so—so lacking in a sense of form to go off, leaving our evening so—so unconsummated.”

She got to her feet.

“And you’re so lit,” he remarked. “It’s going against all precedent for an intoxicated woman to leave a man’s flat at 2 A.M. unsexed.”

Caroline said: “Ring up for a taxi.”

He looked at her from between his long eyelids.

“Now if I were to put over a little rough stuff you’d probably be utterly vanquished.”

She repeated, “Ring up a taxi, darling,” thinking how right he was and how lucky it was (Or wasn’t it? Was it simply a pity and missing something?) that he was too conceited to take her by any method that might seem an effort on his part.

He rang up for a taxi.

“It’ll be a minute or two coming. What shall I do to amuse you while you’re waiting? I haven’t got any albums or anything. . . .”

She came and leaned against the piano by him and he put his hand on her shoulder. She shivered. “Too sad,” he murmured, “but of course I should simply hate the window part of it.” He put his arms round her waist; the feelings in her head began to swim round again as if he had stirred them with a spoon. He kissed her forehead and she saw that he was smiling, and agreed that it would be nicer to sit down while they waited for the taxi, and they sat down on the divan and he kissed her lips, almost abstractedly, as if it were just something to do, and she thought, as he went on kissing her less abstractedly and yet with expert, slow graduation of intensity, “Well, this is too futile of me, but it’s delicious for the moment, delicious, and doesn’t really matter because Maurice doesn’t know how to keep me, and Peter—as for Peter”—“I’ll just tell him to wait,” Dick was saying when the bell had

rung, and he went out to the door and paid off the taxi and came back and switched out the lamps except for one, “a sort of Vestal Flame,” he said. . . .

“—for Peter,” she thought, “asks too much and too little of me, and I was never meant to stand the strain of his kind of Edwardian stuff about love. But if this were Peter,” she thought—“if this . . .”

IX

Caroline motored home the next afternoon. As she drove she reflected on the evening she had spent with Dick Rawdon, and was surprised to find that it left her with no more feeling of guilt towards Maurice than if she'd gone to London and had five ice-cream sodas at a sitting. Towards Peter she had a curious sense of satisfied revenge, though she wondered where and when the desire to avenge anything (what?) had become a motive in her expedition. She couldn't gauge what effect a revelation of this would have on Maurice. She didn't anyway mean to tell him.

Strange though—this enmity for Peter (and his for her sometimes); strange—dreadful. . . .

But, after all, where was the significance of such an episode—if you could only feel the “ice-cream soda” negligibility of the thing? It couldn't hurt Maurice, since he wouldn't know, and if he did would probably treat it merely as a symptom of her unrest. It couldn't hurt Anne (she wondered suddenly about Anne's cold). For the chastity of parents was as irrelevant to the nursery as the temperature at the north pole. It couldn't hurt herself—beyond the mere temporary nausea following on a silly indulgence. And it might be, she thought unhappily, a weapon to hurt Peter.

But when she got to Bicester she knew that she hated herself; and found vent in angry generalization.

Sex was a bore. A bore to belong to a species that had mating instincts all the year round, especially when the breeding instinct, which was the decent and natural end of it all, was suppressed—for all sorts of adventitious reasons. There wasn't any way out, though. Sublimation was nonsense (with a little truth in it, of course). Mental companionship was only real up to a point. How much time had she and Maurice had since they married for any real mental adventures? And how much did he really want that? And did she, for that matter, want to explore the mass of scientific detail which made up his interests? . . . Neither of them really wanted that. Though he might not recognize it, his need of her would have been fulfilled if she'd been kept quiet having his children. And she. . . . What a business it would have been! On the other hand, there wouldn't have been any time for Dick Rawdon and—more fundamentally, for Peter Stanley. (Or would there?)

The thought of Peter checked her muddled thinking. She wanted to see him. She wanted to be with him, even if she could only sit in the room while he worked and took no notice of her. She began to realize the perception that

had first come to her in Paris: that what she felt about Peter didn't come under any facile classification—physical—intellectual. She turned to him and to the idea of him with an instinct that wasn't physical, and with a steady impulse that wasn't simply a mental recognition of his mind—turned to some essential power in him that she needed, as leaves turn to light, as children go to people who understand them. . . .

She arrived home after tea. Maurice met her in the hall. There was a white, stretched look about his face. He said:—

“Anne's got pneumonia.”

She stood still and couldn't answer or move. Her mind tried to make her lips ask questions. He said, “She got out of bed yesterday afternoon after you had gone and hid in the stable to see Phæron come in. Nurse was ironing or something in the other nursery and didn't hear her go down; thought she was asleep. Peter found her there in her night things with not even a dressing gown on. He brought her in. When I came in at dinner time her temperature was 104. . . .”

They went into the library, and when she sat down he patted her on the shoulder rather mechanically and she felt cold inside while he explained that Rigby, the new man at Banbury, had come to see her.

He said: “Nannie's with her. Of course she's been simply distracted with self-reproach, though it isn't her fault. But I've sent for a trained nurse. I didn't know when you'd be back or where you were.” He said this quite incidentally and without feeling. He poured her out some tea and brought it to her. “There's nothing to worry about,” he said. “She'll be all right.”

The tea was bitter and nearly cold, and she drank it down a stiff throat and then put the cup and saucer on the floor. She asked:—

“When's the nurse coming?”

“She arrives at 7.25.”

“I don't want her. I can look after Anne. She'd rather—”

“Too serious for that, darling. It's all arranged, and anyway the thing would be too much for you. You'll feel easier, too, with a trained nurse. . . .” His tone was sympathetic, but she knew that he hardly saw her. She got up.

“I'm going up.”

He said: “All right. I'll come with you.”

They went upstairs side by side, separate in their fears. They stepped quietly as they got to the nursery landing. Nannie came out on tiptoe with a hurt mouth and dogged eyes.

“She’s asleep.”

They followed her into the room. A piece of newspaper was pinned round the lampshade. Caroline went to the cot. The sound of quick hard breathing, dreadful little quick gasps. Anne’s hair was strained back into two tight plaits, and she was lying cramped on one side, her eyelids shut, her cheeks flushed down to the jaw. Maurice was feeling her pulse, and Caroline watched his expression and then looked down again at Anne, and knew that she had never really felt anything before in her life.

When they were down on the landing he said, “Rigby’s coming out again to-night and bringing Nurse Ingram with him. But you must go and lie down,” he said, “because it’ll take about five days before her temperature drops and you don’t want to get fagged out.” And this, she thought, is how he must always talk to the relations; and went into her room, where she saw her suitcase that she’d taken to London lying on the chair. . . .

She went over to the washstand and drank some water, and half her mind remembered about Nurse Ingram’s sheets and soap (and put a spirit lamp in her room and a bottle of methylated), while the other half told her that if she were a religious woman she would see that this was her unspeakable punishment (but the idea was nonsense). . . . And all the same, as she went to the linen cupboard and helped Rose make up Nurse’s bed, and kept agreeing that of course Anne would soon be herself again, she became more certain that this was her punishment, and (seeing Rose’s red eyelids and nose) that it wasn’t only for last night, but for all the mean living and dull feeling she’d ever done. . . .

She sat down to an early dinner with Maurice, loathing herself and not daring to think of Anne.

Maurice asked her if she’d “had fun” in London, and then he said:—

“My dear, it was bad luck you should come back to this, just when you’d been enjoying yourself a little,” and his sincerity and the exhausted way he looked at her caught her hard by the throat so that she put down her glass and sat trying to keep up an appearance of calm.

In the middle of dinner he broke off a desultory conversation about new tires for the car and went upstairs. When he came down again he said, “She’s still asleep.”

Dr. Rigby and Nurse Ingram arrived just after eight. Nurse Ingram had a quiet face and blue eyes like speed-wells, and Caroline felt that Anne would like her and took her up to the spare room next to the nursery and pointed out the methylated stove on the washstand. Nurse Ingram said that she would just wash her hands before she went in with Dr. Rigby to see the little girl. She asked what her name was and Caroline said, "Anne."

And Nurse Ingram said, "Anne—I like the name Anne," and looked at Caroline with a calm and reassuring sympathy. And Caroline wondered how she'd look at her if she knew what the child's mother was really like, and hurried out to find Maurice and Dr. Rigby talking in low voices on the landing.

"Nurse is coming as soon as she's put on her veil," she said, and saw Maurice's mouth work in a spasm of nervous anger.

Nurse Ingram came out in a minute, and Caroline waited on the landing because they didn't seem to want her, and she didn't feel she could bear to look at Anne with all of them there. They shut the door, and she kept thinking of them touching her child, and moving her about, and she felt as if Anne were a baby again and they had taken her out of her arms. . . . (If she hadn't gone to London she would have been with Anne and she wouldn't have got out of bed. . . .) She heard Anne cry in a stifled, exhausted way and then stop; and realized that people without beliefs must pray sometimes from agony of mind (like grasping on to something when physical pain was beyond bearing).

Dr. Rigby came out with Maurice and Nurse Ingram, giving instructions, and Maurice was saying that he always used that too; and she wondered what.

Maurice saw her face.

"You must come down, my darling."

Dr. Rigby said: "She'll be quite all right, I assure you, Mrs. Vernon. There's no danger and Nurse Ingram understands all about these things, you know."

But Caroline knew from Maurice's face as he took her downstairs, holding his arm round her shoulders, that Rigby was simply being professional. When he was alone with her in her room she asked:—

"How bad is she, Maurice?"

And he said, "Pneumonia's always unpleasant. But there's no reason why she shouldn't pull through all right. It's simply a matter of keeping up her strength and not allowing her to waste energy while the temperature keeps up. She's bound to be round 105 until Thursday anyway."

"I wish I could nurse her."

He said: "You'll have to help, my dear. It's a matter of not leaving her." And then he kissed her with restraint, as if he were afraid of making any concession to emotion; and urged her to rest, as Nurse Ingram would want her help the next day.

When he got downstairs there was a message brought by a boy on a motor bicycle; the blacksmith's baby was worse and would Dr. Vernon come at once?

Maurice put on his coat.

Anne moaned and said queer things, and those dreadful gasping little breaths went on and on. She lay on one side, her eyes dark and dazed, talking about a goblin in a hayloft, and washing teacups, and Ramsay, and the fairy queen getting a new dress. . . . Talking and then dropping into restless sleep, and then waking and crying, "I've got a pain!" and staring round for somebody to come and stop her pain, and crying, "Mummie!" and then some notion going round in her swimming thoughts—"Our sheep haven't got golden fleeces, *our* sheep haven't . . ."

Dr. Rigby came twice a day and said that she was going on normally, and Maurice sat with her when he had time. Nurse Ingram showed Caroline how to make a cotton-wool jacket and spread the antiphlogistine inside it; and Caroline heated up grey paste and spread it on, and held Anne in her arms while Nurse Ingram placed the jacket back and front and sewed up the sides; and the clean metallic smell of the paste was mixed with the gasps of the child's feverish breathing.

In the night, whenever Caroline slept, she woke up with the same fear still clamped to her heart, and went upstairs at intervals in her dressing gown, to find Nurse Ingram sitting by the lamp when Anne was asleep, or slowly giving her a drink, or bending over the cot and cold-sponging her and soothing her with words.

On Wednesday Anne's temperature was still 105 and her face looked small and strange. In the afternoon, when Nurse Ingram came on duty again, Caroline went downstairs to the library and sat in a window seat with a

newspaper and looked out of the window. She noticed that there were some snowdrops out under the window and that the daffodil shoots were coming up under the beech tree on the other side of the lawn, and she felt that there had once been a vague preliminary life before Anne was ill, and that she was now in an unending tunnel which was real and which would never be over.

Rose came in and said:—

“Mr. Stanley brought round a book, and would you care to see him for a minute?”

She remembered about Peter in the other life and felt dully that she would like to see him.

He came in, and came and sat down beside her in the window seat. She was relieved in an indefinite way to see him and she noticed in the brisk afternoon light the lines at the corners of his eyes and the heaviness of jaw which were beginning to make him look older. He didn't ask how Anne was, and she remembered that Rose had told her that he came to ask every day.

He said, “Will you come round and have tea with me, Caroline?” and added, “I think it would be good for you. You'll be fresher when you go to the child again.”

She hesitated, because the suggestion reached her mind slowly. Then she nodded and got up. “Thank you, Peter.”

She fetched a coat, and as they walked down the street she realized that she hadn't been out of doors since she came home. She put her arm through Peter's, because she felt tired. He told her that he had been working hard, and took her into The Quiet Woman and made her sit down on the corner of the sofa near the fire, and slipped her coat off her shoulders.

Tea was ready. He asked: “Will you pour it out?”

She nodded, noticing that Mrs. Bredon always forgot the slop basin.

He sat beside her on the sofa, and she felt a kind of physical relief in having him near. She turned and looked into his face and found herself saying, “Peter, it is so awful!”

“You mustn't let it get the better of you. She'll be better. It's a tough business, but she'll get better. She's strong and she's being well nursed. Drink your tea, my dear.”

She obeyed him, sipping because it was hot.

“How quiet it is here,” she said, and then remembered it was quiet at home, too. He filled up her cup, made her drink it down, and, when he saw that she couldn’t eat, gave her a cigarette.

It seemed to him that there was a strange element in her passivity. He lit her cigarette.

“Thank you.”

He put his arm round her shoulder and she began suddenly to cry in a hard, subdued way, trying to press her lips together.

She said: “Please keep your arm round me.” Then, “Perhaps you wouldn’t if you knew.”

“Knew—” There was something wrong in her white profile, her rigid face. “Knew what?” What was she obsessed with, apart from the sheer dreadful strain? There was something else. “Caroline, tell me.”

For more than a minute she didn’t answer. Then she told him how she had gone to London and left Anne with a cold, and described, between dry ugly sobs, her evening with Dick Rawdon.

“So you see,” she ended, “whatever happened and whatever happens will be my fault.”

He said: “I’m going to get you a sponge to wipe your eyes.”

He went and fetched it and came and sat by her again. “You see,” she said, “what I’m like.”

He sponged her eyes and forehead. “Darling—” The immediate thing was to get her right about this.

“My dear, don’t you see that your assumption is wrong and hysterical? . . . If you allow yourself to think that, then when the child’s better you’ll spoil your whole relation with her—because you’ll have an altogether false and exaggerated sense of obligation to her. Caroline, don’t you *see* it’s fantastic?”

She shook her head; caught hold of “when she’s better,” saying it to herself as if she were trying to find its meaning. Then she sat still, looking at him, holding on to his hand; she breathed his name once and seemed to retreat among her fears.

He felt that he would never forget her baffled expression. It seemed to reveal all the lost uncertain qualities which lurked under the surface of her behavior and made her strange, and different in spiritual substance from

other women: her laziness of will, her inability to calculate; her fear of vague forces and her negligence of realities; her instinctive honesty and her helpless facility for make-believe. . . . He felt a violent pity for her—felt, as he realized what she had told him, that perhaps at this moment he understood her for the first time, seeing her pitifully, as a creature living inconsequently in a world of consequence.

The church clock struck six; the chimes dropped one by one into the room. She said, “I must go back,” and got up.

“I’ll take you back.”

“Thank you.”

Just before they went out of the room she put her arms round his neck and kissed him, and as they walked up the street she kept her hand in his.

Caroline slept in the early hours of the next morning, and when she woke, Maurice was sitting on her bed and holding her hand. She sat straight up and said:—

“What’s the matter?”

He said, “It’s all right, darling,” and he explained that Anne’s temperature had dropped and that her pulse was normal and that she was asleep.

Caroline said: “Does that mean she’ll be all right?”

“Yes.”

She sat expecting a feeling of relief, and conscious that she could hardly bear it. And then she realized that Maurice (who was dressed now, she saw, and hadn’t been to bed)—that Maurice was going to cry. She held out her arms and drew his head on to her shoulder. “Darling—darling . . .” she said. And he was murmuring something: Had she thought him hard? But it would have been unbearable to be anything except matter-of-fact . . . for her, too. . . .

She held him closer.

“Darling,” she said. “Darling—I love you so much,” thinking how strange it was (strange and sweet even in this ebbing moment) to hold his spirit as well as his body in her arms.

By the time Anne was getting better, March had almost gone and the garden was flaring with daffodils. In the last week of March the weather was suddenly soft, gentle, and Anne was allowed to get out of bed in the afternoons and sit on Caroline's knee by the window and look at books and listen to stories.

One afternoon when they had been reading "Hansel and Gretel," and then laughing at a fat thrush who was eating worms off the lawn before the window, Anne became tired, her eyelids drooped, and she fell asleep with her head on Caroline's shoulder. . . .

Nurse Ingram came in and suggested carrying her back to bed, but Caroline shook her head, half smiling, and Nurse Ingram left them again, her white veil blowing out as she opened the door.

Caroline shifted her position to make the child more comfortable and Anne smiled in her sleep and her fingers curled round her mother's wrist like a baby's. Caroline looked at the small petal-white face against her shoulder and saw in the wedge-shaped chin, the nervous closed lips, the arched delicate nostrils, a determination which had made her go down to the stables to see Phæron, because a too arbitrary power had prevented her going to the meet.

A breath of wind came through the open window, bringing the sharp faint scents of spring; stirred across Anne's hair, fluttered the muslin on the blue jug of barley water. Caroline felt the warmth of the small body against her own, felt the lightness of its form, and the curling fingers on her wrist. She bent to kiss the soft tangled hair, and glanced out into the garden, the fragrance of the child haunting her lips and making her sensitive to the magnificence of sailing clouds and the beauty of lawns and orchard crystallized in the sunshine.

She thought that she would like life to stop, now, at this moment.

For now she was happy. A stabbing happiness, an aching fulfillment—with Anne asleep in her arms, and the garden painted pale gold, and the spring wind coming in through the window. . . .

She wondered at the eddying emotions and impulses of the last six months. . . . She thought that there was nothing in her life that mattered except Anne. Peter was unreal, and Maurice was real because he was Anne's father, and because he was a part of her established life. . . .

Peter was unreal.

But as the shadows grew across the gold lawn and Nurse came in and took Anne, still sleeping, out of her arms and laid her in her cot, and moved about quickly, making the room smell of disinfectant soap,—as Nurse Ingram closed the windows and said, “She’ll soon be waking up for her tea,”—Caroline began to think of Peter two hundred yards off across a huddle of cottages, and to wonder what he was doing.

X

Early in April, Jane decided to have a fancy-dress dance. She began with the idea of something informal, and ended, inevitably, by organizing a large function to which the inhabitants of the three neighboring counties were asked.

She decided to make it an Easter dance, and engaged two bands and planned that the ballroom should be decorated with white roses and white satin Easter eggs and white balloons.

When Anne was up and Nurse Ingram had gone, Caroline allowed herself to be drawn into Jane's preparations. Jane rang her up a dozen times in the day to discuss decorations and invitations and her own costume. At first Caroline was bored by it all, for she didn't like being distracted from Anne. But after a time she found herself interested, and soon began to divert herself on purpose with all the preparations. She had a brief note from Peter saying that he was going to be away for ten days. She didn't want to stop and think how this affected her deliberate indifference of mind. (Why had he gone? Why? When would he come back? Why hadn't he explained? Had he seen that he didn't matter to her—when Anne was ill? When Anne was ill. . . . But now? Would he explain when he came back again?)

When Jane rang up and said she simply couldn't decide whether to be Helen of Troy or the doll out of the *Boutique Fantasque*, Caroline discouraged her from being Helen of Troy.

Jane was sorry and only half convinced. "You see, she was a blonde and I'm a blonde"—and then she asked Caroline to come over that afternoon and really help her decide.

Maurice came in just as Jane's car arrived to fetch Caroline. She waited to see him for a moment. Her feeling for him had gained a new curious intensity in the last few weeks. For he had been irritable and driven and rather silent during Anne's convalescence, and sometimes, when a door slammed or some trivial arrangement irritated him, she'd felt his nerves twang as if they were her own. She said:—

"Darling, I won't be long at Jane's."

"It's that dithering dance, I suppose. I shan't go, anyway."

She pulled him round by the shoulders and leaned up to kiss his cheek, but he pushed her away, unresentfully but firmly, and she went out feeling

miserable and got into Jane's car and let herself be tucked in a rug, thinking that if he was growing to hate her she deserved it, but that if he ever really did hate her she would want to kill herself.

The motor sped past blossom in the hedges and she reflected that she wasn't, anyway, capable of killing herself. She was the kind of character that just hung on and clung on and got what it could and ended in a long-drawn-out bout of materialism. No better than Mother. Worse. For Mother could never have seen the light she sinned against.

Caroline saw her old age, shadowed, hideously dogged by the prostituted spirit that had been her youth.

Jane said, "It's only ten days off now and pretty nearly everybody's accepted and I just know the whole darned thing'll be a failure." And she sat down among a litter of books on costume and folders of prints and etchings. And Comfort, who was sitting moodily on a window seat, remarked that "Well, if she couldn't go as Beatrice d'Este she didn't feel like going at all"—and Jane snapped, "Well, honey, if you're so cross you *had* better stop away." She appealed to Caroline.

"My dear, I'm in a perfect *despair* about my dress. I must have something distinctive and I like the idea of something historical. Mary Queen of Scots always attracts me so, but I'm not a brunette and I haven't really her style. . . ."

Caroline listened to a distrustful catalogue of all the characters that Jane hoped might express her and yet feared might be "just wrong." For, as she pointed out, she was too petite to be a Mythological Figure, and not classical enough (Caroline was right, perhaps, about Helen), and Queen Elizabeth wasn't her type; and, it was quite true, Comfort was more Renaissance than she was, and Eighteenth Century always meant *poudré*; and yet she didn't want to be just something sort of modernistic in pyjamas or an Annette Kellerman with rouge on her knees. . . .

But why not the doll from the *Boutique*? Caroline asked. Jane said that was just about the size of it, and Caroline cheered her up by pointing out that it would be much more amusing than being "Summer," which lamentably struck Jane's fancy. She was firm:—

"No, Jane, *not* Summer. But"—an idea struck Caroline. "But Comfort ought to be the Primavera," she said (Comfort looked interested against her will), "with her Botticelli face and hair. . . ."

Comfort came away from the window seat. She was imagining how Peter would suddenly come face to face with her, and see her (for her pensive features and pure brow would look well framed by a wreath) as the very incarnation of Youth and Spring (her neck rising like a white column). "I like Mrs. Vernon's idea," she said, and went off to find her book on Botticelli with the colored plates.

Jane supposed she'd have to decide on the *Boutique* dress anyway right away. She had a book on the Ballet, with illustrations, she said, and she'd drive up to London to-morrow and get Raphael's to make it.

And then, as tea was brought in, she asked what Caroline was going to be. Caroline said she hadn't decided, but thought that she'd copy Beardsley's "Toilette of Salome."

Jane said, "I shouldn't think that was much more than a little dusting powder."

Caroline asked irritably (for she thought jokes about nakedness were a bore) if Jane didn't remember the drawing of Salome sitting at a fragile black dressing table, in a billowy white crinoline and a sweeping black and white sacque, while a masked Pierrot ties on her hat with a veil.

Jane said, "It sounds chic, but I don't remember seeing it."

"My father had a copy of the illustrated *Salome* and left it to me. I could easily make up like the Salome and lace in like her."

Jane said that she had never figured Salome that way, but that of course it was artificial and clever. She gave her husky pretty laugh, throwing back her curls, and said she'd tell Colonel Lane that Mrs. Vernon was coming as Salome, and "Hell, won't he be disappointed!" she exclaimed. And Caroline began to laugh too, for, as Maurice said, Colonel Lane was the kind of man who would lurk late at night in his own garden in the hope that one of the maids would undress without drawing the blinds down.

"And what's Maurice going to be?"

Caroline shrugged her shoulders.

"He doesn't take any interest."

Jane said after a moment: "I suppose Peter's gone to London to get his fancy dress there. . . . I imagine a sort of Buffalo Bill affair would suit him—or else one of those bronzy-looking Roman emperors."

"My *dear* Jane! No one was ever less like an emperor than Peter."

“Oh, I think he’s sort of handsome,” said Jane absently.

Caroline shook her head.

“I don’t,” she said.

Comfort, who had come back and was leaning on the back of the sofa behind her mother, said, looking hard at Caroline out of her limpid eyes: “I think he’s like Lorenzo the Magnificent,” and Caroline thought, “The child adores him,” and wondered when he was coming back from London and why he had gone.

XI

Maurice had decided to come, but not in fancy dress. He felt the whole thing was a nuisance, but he didn't want to hurt Jane's feelings. And Peter was going; and he felt that Caroline might find some motive in his own absence if he stayed away. While he was dressing he told himself that anyway he might get some amusement out of it if he drank enough champagne and avoided too many "duty dances."

When he was dressed he went into Caroline's room and found her putting a beauty patch near her left eye. She seemed to him strange, but strangely fascinating, in her queer black and white get-up, her hair swept up and back from her pale face to a halo of black hat, her tight-laced black bodice, her white billowing skirts, her sort of dressing-gown coat with trailing sleeves.

She smiled at him with bright lips and fastened a minute white veil over her features and pinned it up to her hat.

"D'you like it?"

"It suits you."

"I wish you'd been sensible and let me do a dress for you."

Maurice didn't bother to answer. She asked, putting a powder puff in her bag:

"What's Peter going as? I haven't seen him since he came back yesterday."

"I only saw him for a moment this afternoon in the stables. I didn't ask him."

Caroline thought that he might have come in for a moment to see her. He avoided her. He didn't want to see her. He didn't care. The whole thing had been an—amusement for him, and now he was bored. . . .

But she knew that wasn't true.

The society of three counties had put on fancy dress to attend the notorious (but "really so very good-natured") Mrs. Krebs's ball, and at the gates of Arrowe Park Maurice slowed down to join a procession of cars varying in build and opulence from limousines to sports models of the flashier and cheaper type.

One by one the cars disgorged under the portico their freight of notable people in disguise: a dowager clad as Carmen, another as a Milkmaid; a Justice of the Peace as Bill Sikes, an M.F.H. as a Spanish Grandee; a crowd of Pierrots, Toreadors, Costers, Hamlets. Fancy Dress attesting in each case at least the fancy—if not the imagination—of its wearer: Fancy Dress Allegorical and Historical (the echoes of local pageants); Grudging Fancy Dress—Jockeys or Uniforms (young men not caring to make fools of themselves); Dashing Fancy Dress—athletic young women expressing hidden longings for low life in Bathing-Belle attire; Coy Fancy Dress—outbursts of crinoline and bare shoulders and ringlets; Schoolboys' Fancy Dress—middle-aged men in the guise of pirates, highwaymen, and every type of cutthroat; Facetious Fancy Dress, such as the Personification of Indoor Games (with Ping-Pong racquets arranged as wings). The throng pressed into the hall, and in the light, under a firmament hung with white toy rabbits, Caroline noted Mary Lane as a Bacchante, Roger Haviland as Wolsey; a Juliet, a Mary Pickford, a Drake. . . . It seemed to her that the society of the countryside were expressing their several daydreams, their suppressed ambitions—(some “mute inglorious” Fairbanks).

In the cloakroom Caroline met her mother—as Ninon de L'Enclos. She exclaimed, “Is that your Aubrey Beardsley dress, darling? I must say I wish you'd introduced a touch of color,” and then went back to a cheval glass for a final survey of her brocades.

Lady Haviland said in her Irish voice:—

“Why, Caroline, I heard your dress was going to make us all sit up! But it's very pretty, though there *is* more than we expected,” and gave her loud pleasant laugh, looking altogether too handsome and full of life to be the Virgin Queen, and adjusting her farthingale with a weather-beaten ringed hand.

As Caroline moved in the crowd towards the ballroom, she caught sight of Jane's gold head and white ballet dress by the door. Perhaps Peter was dancing already. The music throbbed towards her. She said “How d'you do” here and there, and acknowledged the comments and congratulations on her dress. And Jane exclaimed, “Why, darling, you look *just* marvelous!” and “D'you think mine's all right?” and kept Maurice back for a moment, and, while he wrote out his dances on her programme, reproached him for not coming in fancy dress.

“If *you'd* asked me, Jane—” Caroline heard him say lightly while she moved into the room looking among the couples, and caught sight of

Comfort, dancing, looking to the last melancholy inflection of her prettiness so exactly and perfectly like Botticelli's Spring.

Maurice was captured by a buxom young woman whom Caroline recognized as somebody or other's niece. She saw Colonel Lane coming in her direction buttoned into a uniform which she had already heard him assuring someone his great-grandfather had worn at Waterloo. She immediately hurried young Belleville on to the floor with her, asking him what he was supposed to be, and nodding when he told her he was supposed to be a "Cavalier" and all that sort of thing. He said he supposed she was meant to be some sort of black and white advertisement, whiskey or something. And she explained that there were some illustrations to a play by a man called Wilde. . . . He said he had read *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and thought it jolly clever. He said, "I like a book that isn't simply detective stuff."

They sat out in the long library downstairs under Krebs's portrait, and the Belleville boy asked if she knew whether Mr. Krebs was here. Caroline said that he was in America at the moment, and the Belleville boy said, "He always seems to be away; rather bad luck on her. I think Mrs. Krebs is awfully pretty," he added with a glow of shy enthusiasm.

As they were going up the staircase for the next dance Caroline felt a touch on her shoulder and turned round. It was Peter. He said: "Are you dancing this next one?"

"No."

He was dressed in an 1830 costume, double-breasted blue coat with brass buttons, high white stock. She said, controlling her nervousness: "The stock suits your late Georgian physiognomy, Peter."

He followed her into the ballroom. She saw that he was nervous, too. He said as they began to dance:—

"I like your dress. The air of decadence comes out very well. . . ." He smiled briefly. "The lilies and languors of vice."

She didn't want to speak. She couldn't. He danced badly, but she didn't want to stop dancing. But he kept on making remarks, commenting on people's costumes, and asking her blank questions about what she'd been doing. He told her that he'd seen his publishers in London and that they were in a hurry for "Melbourne." She asked him what his plans were for the summer.

He said he didn't know, staring over his shoulder. (She thought: "Summer—summer? And Peter gone. . . .")

He didn't know. He couldn't think of a coherent course to follow when he'd gone. Life would close in again. The old life would close in. But she would remain (would she remain?), close and strange, sweet and uncertain—haunting him, haunting him all his life, like the bitter scents of their winter, like the guttering beauty of their winter. . . .

The music came to an end. They went and sat out. They sat down without looking at each other, and then he took her programme and wrote down his name for other dances. Jane passed them flirting with Lord Selchester, whose Hebraic profile, dear to the political cartoonist, was surmounted by a wreath of laurels.

Peter said, "How pleasing of Bernard Schön to masquerade as Dante—Dante inhabited by Silenus. . . ."

Caroline watched them cross the hall. She wondered how Peter could bear to talk and talk.

Maurice had the supper dance with Jane and drank a lot of champagne, and saw Peter and Caroline having supper at another table with Roger Haviland and a pretty girl whom he remembered was old Selchester's daughter, and another young man and Comfort Krebs. He said to Jane, "Comfort looks down on her luck. She doesn't look as if she were enjoying herself. I've got a dance with her—number eighteen, I think."

Jane said, "Oh, Comfort hasn't got any *joie de vivre*—she's like Hamilton."

Maurice reflected that certainly Jane's own attractiveness lay in that quality. He complimented her and got a momentary startled look, and then a peal of laughter.

"A compliment from *you*, Maurice!"

Maurice began to feel his habitual tension give way to a vague glow of amiability, and thought, "I'm getting drunk enough to enjoy it all," and kept saying to Jane, and thinking how well soused he must be to say it, "What a jolly party! There really is nothing so good as a party for waking one up. . . ." He kept seeing Caroline and Peter and observing their expressions as if they were people in a movie. And after a time, talking to Jane and hearing the din of talk round him, he began to feel that he too was like

someone in a movie. All his actions seemed very definite and very significant and a little unreal; and Jane's gay profile and Jane's scent became merged into an attractive consciousness of her proximity; and he liked it when she slipped her arm through his and, at the end of supper, made him drink out of her glass. He felt irresponsible, and at the same time he was aware of a sort of hidden rage that grew stronger in him as his mind became lighter.

After supper he went to claim his dance from Comfort, and as he turned to go Jane said, "Don't forget the one after that's with me, darling."

He went to find Comfort, telling himself that there was something really very jolly and attractive about Jane—and noticed Peter and Caroline standing in the further doorway of the ballroom. They seemed to be hesitating as if they were deciding whether to dance or not. He reflected that Peter hadn't spoken to him the whole evening. He saw Comfort and went up to her and reproached her in a bantering tone for trying to cut his dance. She looked at him empty.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said, "I'm sorry"—wondering what Peter would talk to Mrs. Vernon about, for she had seen them going towards the Chinese room. . . . (Peter had forgotten number eleven, his dance with her, until she found him leaning against the wall watching the dancers. . . .)

Caroline said: "I couldn't bear it. I couldn't bear another moment of that awful music. This is quiet."

The room was cool, and the trees on the wallpaper gave it a life of its own. Peter shut the door.

He remarked: "I like this room." He walked up to the mantelpiece and examined the details of a piece of jade. Then he turned round and came back to her.

"Caroline?"

His tone touched her to stillness.

"Yes?"

"Caroline. I'm going away."

"Away? Going away?"

"Darling, we can't go on with this, any more. . . . And you know what we agreed to—in Paris?"

She made out slowly:—

“What you—insisted on—”

“There was no other way. You know that; you know that, Caroline.”

She shook her head without speaking.

He went to one of the tall windows and pulled back a curtain and seemed to look out, and then dropped its folds again.

“What other possible way was there?” he asked.

“No, I know.” She shook her head again. She couldn’t believe that there hadn’t been a way, but she couldn’t think of one. . . . They were so complicated, he—and Maurice. . . . But now—now, Peter was talking about going. . . .

She said, “I can’t bear it if you go,” feeling strangled so that she couldn’t cry.

He came and took her in his arms.

“There is a way,” he said. “But it won’t do. You can’t take it. And I couldn’t let you if you would.” He held her as if he couldn’t let her go, but he didn’t kiss her.

“What is it?” She heard her own whisper in the room.

He said: “You would have to choose . . .” He saw her gaze dilated and then veiled. “Darling,” he said, “you won’t have to. . . . I couldn’t bear to hurt you,” he said.

“You’ll hurt me if you go,” she said, edging away from the problem, and knowing that he knew her cowardice; that he could see that “choosing” was something she couldn’t do, that she wasn’t strong enough to do.

“I’m going in a fortnight,” he said. “During that time we can meet, but —”

“Oh, no!” Her tone startled him, and the sudden grip of her arms. “No, Peter.” She saw that it was real now and that he would really go. “I love you, Peter.”

“You wouldn’t come—if—even if I’d let you, even if I’d take you.”

“Give me time. . . . Let me think.”

He said: “I shan’t hurt you, my dear. I wouldn’t take you. . . . I wouldn’t break your life and make you miserable.”

She couldn't answer. She felt small and mean—the futile object of an emotion whose power she could feel, and whose workings she didn't understand. She was bewildered because she couldn't say that she'd leave Maurice, Anne. . . . And yet, if Peter went, she wouldn't care any more to be alive. She said:—

“You'll break my life if you go.”

He shook his head. “No, my dear,” he said. “This is the last time I shall ever have you in my arms, Caroline.” And then, looking past her, “Perhaps one ought even to be grateful—” He spoke to himself.

“Grateful?”

He said, “Grateful,” blankly, thinking that a last embrace could be so ugly and stale a thing, not this live pain. . . . (And yet, would she grow stale, could she?)

The door was opened before he knew it, before Caroline could turn. As he let her go, Comfort was staring at them, and behind her he heard Maurice's voice finishing a sentence—“much better go downstairs and—”

Maurice saw them. He saw them standing apart like figures in a play. He said, “Hello, Caroline. Keep me a dance later. I'm having a hell of a time, Peter. Flirting with every half-witted female in the place. . . . See you later. Come and have a drink downstairs, Comfort.”

But Peter said brusquely:—

“No. Comfort's coming with me. I've only had one dance to-night.”

Caroline found herself left alone among the trees on the walls.

Maurice said: “Come on, Jane, it's our dance, but we'll sit it out.”

She looked up into his face and wondered if he'd really had too much champagne, or whether this volatile Maurice, ironically flirtatious, attractively and queerly inconsequent, was simply a side of his nature she'd never perceived. . . . But she wasn't in a mood, she told herself, to analyze him. She was only too glad to feel a sort of recklessness in him that matched her own; to feel he was hers, that he was hers even for a moment. She said, “Come and see the new picture in my boudoir,” and led him there, his arm in hers, his glance bent to examine her face, the music following them with a fainter and fainter rhythm up the stairs.

They discussed the picture, but Jane realized that he was half attentive. She lit a cigarette and gave it to him, and then lit one for herself. He looked at her and said:—

“Come here, Jane.”

She went up to him and locked her hands round his neck and lifted up her face.

“What is it—darling?”

“Do you want me to kiss you?” He realized that he’d always known she wanted him to kiss her, but never bothered about this fact.

She asked: “D’you want to kiss me, Maurice?”

He said: “Yes, I do, at this moment.” . . .

She was startled by his brutality.

Gradually, through a tangle of emotion and sensation, she began to perceive that she hadn’t merely charmed him in a light-hearted, dizzy-headed moment, but that he was possessed by some impulse that she couldn’t explain. . . .

He let her go suddenly. He seemed abruptly to be sober. He looked at her, crumpled on the sofa, and said, as if she were someone he hardly knew:

—
“I apologize for being crude.”

She stopped staring and burst into tears.

For a moment he hesitated; and then left her. He felt that he really couldn’t bear the noise of a woman crying.

He passed the ballroom downstairs. “Yes,” he said to Lady Haviland in the hall. “Yes, I’m going. . . . Have to get up in the morning.”

He found the car at last in the waiting regiment of motors in the drive. He got in hurriedly, still dazzled by the headlights, and bumped into something on the front seat—somebody. . . . He saw that it was Caroline. She was sitting next to the driving seat. She said, “I was waiting until you came to drive home,” in a funny little empty voice that reminded him of Anne. He jarred the gears and they passed down the rows of headlights down the drive.

They didn’t speak on the way home. While they were undressing, Caroline said through the door:—

“What a muddle life is.”

He didn’t answer. He hadn’t heard. She couldn’t imagine what he was thinking. . . .

Jane arrived at eleven o’clock the next morning. Caroline was still in bed and told Rose to show her up. She came in and sat down on the edge of Caroline’s bed—Caroline perceived, through her own lassitude, that Jane looked ill under her hurried rouge. She asked if anything was the matter. She even wondered, with a sensation of surprise, if Peter had shot himself and Jane had come to tell her. (She realized that if he had she would feel resigned and sorry, but that it would be all the easier for her to go on with life.) But Jane said:—

“Caroline, I’m going to give it to you straight from the shoulder.”

Caroline wondered drearily at Jane’s tone, and felt jarred by her slang.

“What’s the matter?”

Jane turned her head away and stared out of the window and said:—

“You’ve got to stop all this stuff with Peter. Believe me, I know more about the world than you do, Caroline (that isn’t difficult, either), and I happen to realize, my dear, that you’re making a terrible mistake.”

“Stuff? What stuff?”

Jane still stared out of the window.

“You’re playing around—” She paused, turned a stiff face, broke out. “You’re playing around with two men’s lives. It’s wrong, it’s wicked, it’s cruel!”

“I’m—not—playing.”

Jane’s hard, husky rhetoric pushed the protest aside. “Of course you’re playing, even if you don’t know it. If you weren’t—Hell! I know it sounds Irish, but if you weren’t, you wouldn’t be. . . . If you weren’t, you just couldn’t stand the situation you’ve got yourself into.” She was breathing quickly.

Caroline said painfully, “Do you think I’m not unhappy?”

“Oh, I daresay you’re unhappy—at times. But it doesn’t seem to strike you that Maurice may be unhappy and wretched and—you don’t care—”

“I do care. And he isn’t—unhappy. He’s quite—detached. . . . He’s sure of me,” she said wretchedly, angrily.

Jane said: “Last night Maurice was half off his head, because of you.”

“Nonsense. As a matter of fact I was astonished to see how much he enjoyed himself.”

Jane pushed a curl off her forehead. Her eyes looked big in her small face. . . . “If you want any proof that Maurice was half mad—” She gave a laugh which made Caroline wonder for a second if she was going to have hysterics; she said, “If you want any proof—he started a petting party with me! . . . *See, darling?*”

Caroline saw.

She couldn’t reply. She took in the full implication of what Jane had said. She felt cold and sick.

Jane got off the bed to go. She said, “I’m sorry if I’ve shaken you up. But I had to. . . .” She added, going automatically to the looking-glass, “I’ve had a bit of a shaking up myself.”

Caroline supposed that Jane’s incalculable Puritanism had been outraged at Maurice’s behavior.

After Jane had gone downstairs Caroline lay still, thinking. Strange, if it was true, that she’d driven Maurice to—to flirting with Jane! Fantastic (as Peter would say). But the idea hurt. She hated herself, hated Maurice, hated Peter. . . . She wondered if she wished that Peter had never come to The Quiet Woman at all; and knew that she didn’t, and that in some other part of her mind there was a freakish hope that, in the end, he wouldn’t go away. . . . But she didn’t want Maurice to be hurt (if it was true that he was hurt). She hadn’t wanted anybody to be hurt, she reflected, feeling that she was unfairly up against emotions that were altogether too solid and intractable. She hadn’t, above all, she thought with a kind of startled irony, wanted to be hurt herself. . . .

She remembered that she must get up, and that a package of groceries had to be fetched from King’s Norton station.

Maurice put down his pen with a mutter of surprise and annoyance.

“All right—of course *do* come in.” The last thing he wanted to see or bother about was Jane.

She stood with her back to the surgery door and said, "I won't keep you a minute, Maurice."

"What is it? By the way—I apologize about last night. . . ." He was angry and awkward.

"I understand all right," she said, with a pathetic inflection of sentimentality. "I understand you better than you do yourself," she said in a tone that made him feel scratchy with embarrassment. (He liked Jane cynical or flirtatious or jolly; but this sentimental stuff!) "That's what I've come to say. That I knew it was just as—a sort of an outlet about—something else, and you were feeling sort of crazy. . . ." She saw, as she tried to get even a momentary sympathy from him, how hard and clear he was; how utterly uninterested in anything she could say or explain. "I'm awfully fond of you, Maurice."

He said, "Thank you, Jane; I think you're being very nice." He went on perfunctorily: "If you can forgive me, then we can forget about it, can't we?"

She managed a gayer "Of course we can. We're too good friends not to, aren't we, Maurice?" And then she asked: "Maurice, you're not troubled—about anything?"

He looked at her, took her in with his unfaltering attention. He thought that she was losing her looks. He remarked:—

"My dear Jane—I really haven't time or interest for emotional luxuries. My troubles exist mainly in my work, and wouldn't interest you at all."

Later, when she had gone, he reflected that perhaps it was just as well he'd got his apology over for last night. He remembered that feeling of shock when he'd come upon Caroline and Peter in the Chinese Room. He wondered now, in the white daylight of the surgery, if his impression of impending crisis had been false.

He had been suddenly afraid. And the feeling of fear remained.

XII

Lydia Stanley came down to stay with Peter for a night, the week after Jane's dance.

Peter took her for a walk in the afternoon and she was charmed by the blossom, and the green horizons under a pale sky, and by the different birds, all of which she knew by name.

After tea he took her round to call on the Vernons. They found Caroline on the lawn with Anne, and as she came towards them, her dress blowing, carrying a Teddy bear in one hand, Peter saw that she was unnerved by their arrival. She accepted him too casually, telling him to fetch some chairs.

He obeyed. Lydia and Caroline sat down and Peter was glad to be carried off by Anne to see the "baby rabbits."

"—I hear she was so ill," Lydia was saying.

Caroline, watching Peter and Anne, said, "Yes, she had pneumonia."

Lydia took it all in. It had turned out as she supposed: another tangle of emotions and obligations, with all its inevitable fraying of nerves and wasting of powers. They talked about children's illnesses, and when Maurice arrived and began to talk to Lydia she got an impression of a mind perpetually exasperated by little extraneous tugs and pulls. It was just as she'd seen it—in Paris. She felt sad for the girl and her husband, and sad and angry for Peter. All this waste—and whose fault? ("Passions spin the plot—we are betrayed.")

"King's Norton church is rather lovely," Caroline was saying.

"I think your view is so delightful, Dr. Vernon."

"It is jolly, isn't it?" Maurice supposed this was Peter's sister-in-law whom Caroline had seen in Paris. She seemed nice, but he couldn't see what was so extraordinary in her; a nice expression, and held herself well.

Peter came back with Anne. An unusual child, Lydia Stanley thought, her father's air of detachment, her mother's elusive capacity for beauty. Caroline explained that she was afraid she couldn't show Mrs. Stanley her pictures as they had nearly all gone to London for her show, which opened next week. Lydia asked where, for she would be still in England.

"At the Richmond Galleries."

"I'll write that down."

Peter said, "I'll escort you to the Private View, Lydia."

The atmosphere was too unhappy, Lydia thought, feeling the pitifulness of each of them pulling her different ways: Maurice Vernon hard and natural in his manner, watching his wife when she wasn't looking at him; Peter restive, unconscious how often his talk lapsed into silence; and the girl's spirit battered to and fro over the conflicting depths of the men's feelings. . . .

Lydia was glad when they went.

After dinner Peter told Lydia briefly what had happened; and, after some hesitation, indicated the talk he had had with Caroline at Jane's dance.

Lydia watched him all the time he was speaking. She saw that his feeling for Caroline Vernon was deeper than any emotion he had ever had in his life, and that it had brought out a curiously romantic and selfless element in his character. And though she said at last, with the full force of her reason and experience, "She can't go away with you," she could imagine for him a widening of outlook, a new sensitiveness of experience, if this girl were to throw over her life because she loved him. . . . (And then she realized that it wasn't Caroline Vernon's possible sacrifice and blunder, of which she was thinking, but her own. . . .)

"I know," he said. "I know she can't. And I know I oughtn't to take her if she could."

"Why do you stay here any longer?"

"Because—" His cigar had gone out and he was trying to light it. "Because it's a sort of last desperate, fantastic, futile attempt to carry out the condition that I asked of her in Paris, and which Maurice and I somehow agreed to (I think without trying to understand what we were really at). Anyway, I'm off the week after next."

"And if she changes her mind?"

"She won't."

"You want her to?"

He broke out: "My dear, I do and I don't! . . . I want what's best for her, and most of the time I know that the only thing for her is to stay with her child, with her husband; and yet there are moments when I know too that the other thing she said was true—that I could make her live . . . and that she could make me—" He broke off. . . . "I can't sleep . . ."

Lydia ventured, because there seemed no other truth in the confusion of half truths. “You must try and see what’s right and then stand by it. Nothing else can help you.” (Reflecting how men always told you when they didn’t sleep.)

“Right!” he exclaimed. “The wrong was in my ever coming back here after Paris . . .”

“I’m going to say something which you may resent, Peter. But if you can ever come to believe it, it’ll make your part easier for you.”

“What is it?” he asked, with half his attention. “What is it?”

“I think she’ll forget you very soon. . . . I’ve watched her. . . . At first she’ll be terribly hurt—and then you’ll begin to—to fade out like a story she’s read . . .”

He didn’t answer: remembering, “Not switch off, not so sudden, people simply fade out.”. . . He saw himself passing out of the incandescent light of her “present,” becoming a shadow. He said:—

“I know—and that’s one of the things that makes me want her most . . .” And then he added, as if he were questioning himself, “And if she left Maurice—how soon would *he* forget? . . . How soon would he begin to feel free?”

Lydia said, “You’ve no right to that kind of logic, Peter. Even if it were true. . . . Human situations, even if they’re wrong, even if they’re in some way harmful, can’t be torn up like weeds.” (“Wherever you destroy,” she thought, “you destroy some form of life, some chance promise of regeneration. . . .”)

Lydia traveled up to London with Caroline the next day. Peter drove her to the station and they discovered Caroline already on the platform. She came up to them at once and began an account of how she had to go up to see her pictures hung at the Gallery. She kept on talking with an awkward gayety until the train came in. Peter thought she looked ill and wondered if it were true after all that she’d forget him so easily. In the drafty station, dressed in black with pearls round her neck and clean gloves on, she lost some of her strange distinction, and seemed to partake, rather sadly, of ordinary pinched human destiny; conventionally smart, she seemed conventionally vulnerable (a French heel of Achilles).

He helped Lydia into the train first; then, as Caroline got in, he said:—

“I suppose we shall meet next week at your Private View.”

She paused, one foot still on the platform:—

“Are you coming back to—Ditch Edge after that?”

“Probably. For a few days—to pack up.”

“I see. . . .”

He found himself asking her, against his will, if she'd lunch with him when the Private View was over.

She said, “Yes, I'd like to,” and felt a sort of stage fright; as if there were going to be something crucial and irrevocable about their luncheon. The train began to move, and she got in. Lydia Stanley glanced past her at Peter.

Peter looked through the window from one to the other, muttering a perfunctory farewell which they couldn't hear. He took in Lydia's last glow of anxiety; and Caroline's look, silently and painfully questioning. . . .

Lydia sat down in a corner and took up the *Times*. Caroline sat opposite her and began to glance through *Vogue*. The third occupant of the carriage, a short woman who smelt of peppermint, gazed above Lydia's head at a photograph of the Esplanade at Weston-super-Mare. After a few minutes Lydia put down the *Times* and, in her beautifully drawing-room manner, came across and sat beside Caroline and began to ask her questions about her work. She said, “I'm told your last exhibition was such a success.”

Caroline tried to be gracious in her replies. She was always surprised afresh by people's assumption that she must want to talk about her painting. Lydia Stanley was saying, “I know it's a—banal question, but what do you feel makes you paint?”

Caroline tried to stop thinking about Peter. She said:—

“Just an impulse to mess about and get something off one's chest. I suppose it's a sort of exercise that makes one's soul get hot and perspire, and does it good.”

Lydia looked at her curiously.

“I envy you, Mrs. Vernon. Some of us have the impulse but not the talent.”

Caroline felt that she would like to paint Lydia Stanley—interesting bones in her face. . . .

“You have an escape,” Lydia added.

Caroline repeated doubtfully: "An escape? You mean an escape from life?"

"Yes."

Caroline looked out of the window; said with an abrupt bitterness: —

"I always feel that life escapes from *me!* I'm always trying to get hold of it and it's always—elusive. . . ."

Lydia didn't answer. The confession curiously confirmed her theory that Peter was important to Caroline Vernon, not for himself, but because he'd become for her a new and vivid expression of life, his strength magnetizing her unresting spirit, his half-sophisticated, half-casual charm tantalizing her imagination. She asked: —

"Do you ever feel you get hold of it?"

Caroline shook her head and said that she didn't know—"sometimes, perhaps." She couldn't even try to explain an incoherent sequence of ideas—that when, if ever, she did "get hold of" life it was through a physical or a spiritual experience, through a revelation of the heart or senses, through pain or delight, through some shock or passion. Whereas Maurice was different—fastening on a real life of the mind, impatient of passions and affections which beset him like an annoying and recurrent dream. . . .

Lydia allowed herself regret for the indulgences of mood, the pursuit of feeling which she'd never known. Her life was measured, its vistas cultivated and familiar, while this girl, this woman, beside her wandered by instinct or caprice—shying off a shadow, idling indifferently, working arrogantly; seizing a sensation, lingering over an unsought pleasure, dreaming through a half-drugged pain. . . . And: "Do you like my portrait of Peter?" the girl was asking. Strange, Lydia thought, to be able to ask it with such perfect simplicity; to say "Peter" simply, as if the sense—the feeling "lover"—had never come near that name. . . .

"I think it's very clever," said Lydia, "but I'm afraid I think that it shows only half the real Peter."

Caroline asked intently: "Which half, Mrs. Stanley?"

Lydia sought a just expression of her thought.

"The half," she said slowly, "that you evoke in him—that you demand."

Caroline took in the other woman's meaning. She said: "The qualities that Peter, himself, described in it? . . . He calls it, you know, 'The World,

the Flesh, and the Library.’” She smiled unhappily, locking her gloved fingers together. “What have I left out?” she asked humbly.

Lydia seemed to avoid the question. She made a little polite grimace as if she felt that they’d become altogether too inconsequent. “My dear Mrs. Vernon—”

But Caroline insisted: “Tell me.”

Lydia put on an air of soft finality, glanced at the *Vogue* on Caroline’s knee, and yet just admitted, not too gravely, “He’s so much simpler—so very, very much more—gentle, than that.”

XIII

Caroline stood in the middle of the Gallery beside Maurice, responding to innumerable remarks, made to her by innumerable people, about her pictures. She wore the Paquin dress her mother had given her for the occasion and felt that somehow its elegant lines and texture had become part of her mind; so that it was really quite easy, and even natural, to be gracious to Lady Selchester's metallic insincerities, to acknowledge Sir John Haviland's ignorant compliments, to delight in affected delectations, and nod gravely at pompous analyses of her work.

People came in in clusters, spread out into the long room, and then formed smaller clusters round the walls, gazing and murmuring, exclaiming and bending forward and backward in front of the pictures, raising lorgnons, fluttering catalogues, screwing up their eyes in awed gaze at the walls, and widening them in sideways peeps at one another; and making their way, sooner or later, to the central group, where they could express such comments as they thought impressive to the artist herself.

Lady Snow, in a picture hat and dress that upholstered her contours with expensive taste, moved up and down the room, greeting friends, seizing on acquaintances, rattling out here a little gossip, there a little art criticism ("Oh, of course I can't pretend to like *everything* my daughter paints! . . ."), overhearing, whenever she could, people's private comments on the show, and showering her friendliness on any young man or woman whose arty or shabby appearance led her to believe that they were what she had lately heard referred to as "the Press." (Caroline, listening with rigid amiability to a young man's explanation of why her pictures had such "significant form," heard her mother telling inaccurate stories of her infant precocity in painting to a young man who eventually edged in the confession that he wasn't, in fact, "the Press," but had been "brought by a friend of Dr. Vernon's.")

Maurice, on the other hand, was captured by the art critic of *Future*, who explained Caroline's work to him in terms invented to describe sounds. . . . When Maurice had agreed that the "rhythm" of the trees in "Morton Farm" "rose to too loud a crescendo," and that, though the "motif" in "Village Street" was well worked out, the whole picture lacked harmony, he escaped; only to be captured by a maternal-looking woman in a cloak who gazed at him from under a felt hat brim and used superlatives about "darling Caroline's work."

Caroline mustered her amiability against the onslaught of Colonel Lane. He began with self-satisfied jocosity to ask her why she hadn't painted him? For, if she'd painted Haviland here, and that fellow Stanley, he must say he didn't see why . . . Then he started on another line—that these pictures weren't as modern as some he'd seen! By Jove, he went into an art dealer's the other day, and well, he thought he'd got into a very different sort of shop—ha, ha! . . . But perhaps she didn't paint women? Left it to the young men to do that! What! Eh! . . . But Jane blessedly appeared, dressed in green from head to foot, and carried off Colonel Lane, telling him that she was going to improve his mind, and giving him one of her irresistible upward smiles. . . . Caroline saw her nod to Maurice, chaff him, and pass on. The sight of Jane, with her curls and her green shoes and her sunshade, only added another bright blur to the unfocused whole of her impressions. . . . She couldn't believe that it was she, Caroline, standing and talking and shaking hands here—for she herself was suspended somewhere, in a sort of vacuum of time, waiting to have luncheon with Peter. . . .

She saw her mother showing someone the portrait of herself. She saw Maurice, looking handsome and tidy and rather truculent, listening to a man in a stock whose name she couldn't recollect . . . and asked herself if Jane's whole interpretation of that business at the dance hadn't been false, and typically romantic. . . . Some obscure desire of Jane's to reassert her own dignity. . . . (Somehow the idea of Maurice making love to Jane was rather farcical. . . .) She saw Jane's green dress again, and Comfort in a leghorn hat tied with blue ribands, and Roger Haviland, and Bertorelli carrying a white top hat. . . . She saw Lydia Stanley come in, followed by Peter. . . .

Lydia Stanley came up to her before she went. She said, "I think some of your work is beautiful, most lovely! You have great sensibility. . . . A curious power to make one feel the—mood you have seen the thing through. . . ." She said, looking round the walls again, "All the things—flowers, or a sky, or a man—they're so beautifully—what you have felt through them—or about them. . . ."

Caroline thanked her, conscious of Peter standing at her side.

Lydia said: "I'm flying back to Paris this afternoon. . . ." She added a few more sentences of farewell.

Peter came back when he'd taken her out of the door. Caroline stood watching him walk round the walls and look at the pictures. She went up to him at last and suggested they should go now, since it was nearly one

o'clock. He agreed, and asked her what Maurice was doing for luncheon. Caroline said that she didn't know; he liked going by himself to an Indian Restaurant and eating curry.

As they went out they met Dick Rawdon. Dick was effusive—"he'd got up at half-past eleven in order to get here before luncheon." He let himself be introduced to Peter, and then asked Caroline how she was—"and all the pigs and things?" And she murmured an irritable good-bye and followed Peter, who had gone out.

Peter made no comment on the encounter, and walked beside her as though he'd forgotten why she was there. Then he seemed to jerk his mind into life. "I've ordered a table," he said.

They sat at the far end of the room at Boulestin's, and Peter ordered a long luncheon, choosing each dish after consultation with the waiter. He took no notice of Caroline's protests that she couldn't eat, and she gave in, and sat still beside him, staring at the details of other people's faces and clothes without taking in any impression of what she saw.

She drank the cocktail that was put in front of her. Peter began to talk about the show, and what the *Times* critic had said to him. He talked in short sentences, hammering at her attention as if he wanted to hurt her.

The waiter brought the smoked salmon. Their talk kept dying out and Peter kept putting fuel on—heavy observations which only seemed to choke it.

Caroline tried to eat. Peter drank lager beer and urged her to have some. He wondered why he had ever asked her to come. He'd go back next week and pack up and come away at once. He said: "I'm sorry to be such bad company."

Their glances met. He felt her dangerous fatalism. She saw his fear of betrayal. She said, "I'm absolutely content."

". . . Content?"

She forced on him, abruptly, "Because I'm with you."

He couldn't answer. The waiter brought another course and they ate some of it. His question broke out: "Will you forget me?" He saw her impulse to protest, her hesitation, her dreadful doubt, her appalling honesty. . . .

“I—don’t know.”

The waiter brought strawberries.

“Strawberries in May?” she said, some part of her mind automatically pleased.

“Caroline!”

She felt his look close on her face; the strawberries hypnotized her, scarlet, glistening—she began to count them.

“Caroline. If you came away with me next week . . . would you forget Maurice, and your child?”

He saw her hesitation, her fear, her dreadful certainty.

“No,” she said, staring at him. “I shouldn’t forget them,” and knew that her words (half a dozen sounds forced out of her by an instinct she didn’t understand) had settled the rest of her life.

After a moment, Peter said, “Will you excuse me if I smoke?” He felt the shock of their danger in the same moment that he knew it was over. He saw that her involuntary honesty had saved them both, instead of his strength, that he’d so counted on, saving her. . . . He could say now, without danger:

—
“I shan’t forget you.”

She didn’t take her eyes off his face. The talk and chatter went on around them. He heard her say his name. . . .

(He had always liked the way she said his name— “Peeturr”—where most people said “Petah.”)

When they came up into the clattering daylight of Covent Garden she realized that she was going away from him—in that taxi the commissionaire had called for her. He saw that she couldn’t speak, so he said:—

“I shall see you both next week before I go.”

She wrenched her hand from his and got into the taxi.

Peter walked down towards the Strand.

Later he found himself in Whitehall. He walked on towards the Houses of Parliament. Big Ben was striking three. He looked at his watch, which indicated two minutes past three. He went past the Houses of Parliament, along the Embankment, and then paused and leaned on the balustrade and looked at the river. He remembered walking along there and looking at the

river fourteen, fifteen years ago, and discussing social reform with another young man (whose name he couldn't remember now). But he remembered their talk and their hopes and their magnificent intolerance. . . .

His thoughts came back to the present, to his ironic consciousness of a spirit twisted by the loss of one woman, maimed by the possession of another (for Rosamund had destroyed irrevocably a belief in life which had survived four years of war—Rosamund had left him meaner, duller).

He walked on again. That was the real, the enduring power of women: they must either give—or take.

And Caroline? . . .

He realized, turning back towards Whitehall, that Caroline's power over him lay in his feeling that she could have given him back a sense of adventure.

EPILOGUE

EPILOGUE

Jane's white dining room was lit by candles.

The white velvet curtains were drawn back and framed a green dusk in the garden. The windows were open, for the air was warm and full of drifting scents, as though Summer had stirred in her sleep. . . .

Jane sat with her back to the windows, Maurice opposite to her; Caroline and Peter saw one another between the flames of the candles.

Jane's talk never failed her. She was gay, sentimental, a little wild. . . . Peter was going to be a loss to the neighborhood, she said; and what would Ditch Edge do without its Literary Figure?

Caroline smiled, crumbling her bread, feeling that this honeyed light must be the dreadful glow of a dream. . . .

"What are your plans for the summer?" Jane was asking Peter.

"I'm not quite certain. I rather think I shall join my brother and his wife at Étretat—for part of the time, at any rate." He lifted his glass to his lips, and saw Caroline, and looked away. She said:—

"I believe Étretat's very nice in the summer."

"They have a villa there; they go every year with the children."

"Some friends of ours said it was so nice for children." Caroline felt Maurice look at her. If she were to laugh, she thought, in the shifting grasp of fear—if she were to laugh now . . . if she were to laugh and never stop . . . She felt her breath shudder uncertainly. But Maurice said, saving her, calming her:—

"The only thing about all these places is that the drains are so bad."

"Yes," Jane said, "they are bad. And the French never seem to care."

Peter saw Caroline saying something; something to Jane about drains, about typhoid—helping herself to potatoes. Her eyelids were stained. . . . This awful dinner. If he'd had the sense to say no. Betrayed by his desire to see her again; to see her once more. He helped himself to a *tournedos*.

". . . Yes, it's being serialized first," he answered Jane.

"I suppose that means it won't be published immediately?" said Maurice. He fidgeted with his knife and fork. Jane's glance touched him for a hidden moment, clung to him, slipped away.

Peter said: "It'll be published next spring, I expect."

Caroline dragged her gaze from the candles, from Peter. Outside the windows the green dusk had grown dark. Outside the windows the world had come to an end. And here they were, in here in this lit pale room—four masticating people chained to a circle of looking-glass. . . .

"You'll have to come back next winter, Peter," Jane said.

"I shall be going abroad next winter—"

Next winter! thought Caroline. . . . Next winter; chill; dragged evenings; bare days. . . . "How can I go on to that?" she asked herself, and knew the question as a mere gasp of pain, a reflex quiver of her mind. . . .

"How lovely to travel!" she remarked, and Maurice gave her a look, uncertain, unhappy. She turned to him to give him what she could: "Sometime we must have six months to travel, darling—"

His glance lit so easily, so gratefully, that she was moved for a second by a belief in her own redeeming devotion. His happiness was a sick child asleep in her arms. . . . But men don't live for happiness, she thought. (When the child was well her arms would be empty.) . . . And Peter's tones, talking to Jane, spared her no touch of their dearness. . . . (His voice would be gone. That seemed queer. His voice gone. . . .)

Jane was sentimental.

". . . Everything comes to an end," she said. And Peter said:—

"The Royal and Ancient Game of Platitudes, Jane!"

"Hell, you are rude!" She was gay and a little wild, and laughed, hitching her shoulder straps. Maurice wondered if she had really meant what she said that evening. He believed not. And this belief tidied a corner of his mind.

"We ought to drink Peter's health."

"No," said Caroline. "Oh, no, Jane! We don't want to be formal . . . do we?"

"All right, darling, just as you say. I'll drink his health alone to-night in my bath water!"

She saw Caroline's white face; took Peter's glassy "I won't ask that of you, Jane."

A moth fluttered round the candles and fell like a leaf. A footman's gloved thumb and forefinger removed it.

Jane went on talking to Peter. It seemed to her that she would be able to die talking nonsense.

Maurice occasionally joined in their talk.

Caroline sat speechless, watching Peter, watching his every movement . . . forgetting Maurice now, forgetting Jane, thinking monotonously that if Peter were to ask her to come with him now she could only go—whatever she hurt, whatever she broke. . . . And all the time she was aware that this longing of hers was twisting itself in futile gestures and shouting with dumb lips. . . . He was so far away already (and yet, by leaning across and stretching out her arm, she would touch his hand).

She didn't take in by what conventional and usual process they all four arrived afterwards at being in the drawing-room together. She didn't observe clearly, though she made some perfunctory phrase of permission or agreement, how she came to be alone in the room with Peter, standing with him by the open window.

They stood, speechless and unmoving, between the glowing room and the dark garden.

Something was dying, she thought. . . . Dying. They shared its deathbed. . . .

Jane came in again, and Maurice, carrying the portable gramophone—discussing records; and Jane began to look through them. “That's a marvelous song, and that . . . and this is simply gorgeous! . . . But, Peter, must you *really* go so early? . . . Well, I expect you have a lot to do if you're going in the morning. . . . I'll see you go, then. . . .”

Caroline stood still by the window. She listened to Jane's voice out in the hall. . . . She heard Peter say good-bye. She heard him go out under the portico—heard his car. . . .

She looked out of the window and saw the beams of his headlights traveling across the open park and flicking far off between the trees. . . .

The lights disappeared.

After an indefinite lapse of time she became aware of an arm round her shoulders.

She had forgotten that Maurice was in the room.

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 *Portrait by Caroline* by Sylvia Thompson]