Chariot Wheels

Sylvia Thompson

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CHARIOT WHEELS

BY

SYLVIA THOMPSON

Author of "The Hounds of Spring," "The Battle of the Horizons"

An Atlantic Monthly Press Book

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To
ROSEMARY *and* ELIZABETH

PART ONE

I

Floyd Stobart wiped his forehead and leaned back in his chair. A groan of warmth and exasperation escaped his beard. It was quite impossible, literally impossible, to concentrate one's thoughts with that chattering going on upstairs; impossible. . . .

He pushed aside yet another sheet of foolscap scored with headings. He wrote for the fifth time:—

THE LESSON OF SOUTH AFRICA
BY
FLOYD STOBART

"—but the white is *much* more becoming!" twittered his wife's voice out of the window above. "After all, Cressida—"

He raised himself out of his chair, thudded across the parquet, and banged the French window. But it didn't catch, and swung open again. Damn! This time he drew it grimly and slowly inward, and fastened it deliberately. He had an impulse to close the inside shutters too, a gesture excluding the heat of the morning and the antiphonal prattle of his wife and daughter upstairs. But he reflected, with one sticky hand on the knob, that he would thus exclude all light—and he recoiled from the idea of Catherine coming in to find him working by gaslight.

He drew down the blinds and returned to his desk. A sheet of foolscap had blown to the floor. He bent heavily and picked it up. Rereading what he had thrown off as a possible introduction, he became calmer. "It is not untimely, I think, at a moment when flags are flying, bells are pealing, and the air is rent with the shouts of Victory, to pause and reflect upon the fundamental lessons of that Victory; and, rather than congratulate ourselves without stint or reservation, to ask ourselves whether Victory might not have been won more quickly and at a less terrible cost—that is to say, with greater efficiency and by more adequate equipment."

He sat down and crossed out "by more adequate equipment" and wrote, "with better and more adequate preparations."

"—and, after all," said Catherine Stobart to her daughter, "you *never* know who you are going to meet, and it's foolish to talk about *saving* it for the Lesleys' ball on the twenty-eighth, when the pink one will be ready by

then, and you'll be longing to wear that. One more fitting for the bodice, and Madame Claude said it would be finished—that is to say, if the roses she's getting from Paris come as soon as she expects."

The pretext of "saving" had failed; Cressida appealed from her heart:—

"But, Mother, as a matter of fact, I think I look so much *nicer* in the blue one." (The white was really too "fuss-buttony," she thought.)

"Nonsense, child. Nothing is more banal than people with blue eyes wearing blue. They always do, and it's always banal. I'm sorry I let you persuade me to get it."

"But I do so *like* the blue, Mother."

"White and pale pink are far more suitable for a young girl—like rosebuds. Those strong shades make you look anæmic."

"I am anæmic."

"Lots of girls of your age are. When I was nineteen, I was, too."

"Mrs. Faraday saw me in blue at Lady Cartwright's at home and said how well it suited me."

"It's quite different in the daytime, in a costume and with a cream blouse."

"Elsie Faraday has got a green dress." (Delicious green, like moss in the sunshine.)

"Elsie Faraday is quite a different type, a Rossetti type. You are 'piquante.'"

Cressida rearranged the feathery fringe across her forehead.

"But, Mother, I don't *feel* piquante." She swept up the sapphire garment from the bed and held it out in rustling imprecation. "Mother, *do* let me wear it. Elsie says it's going to be a very intellectual dinner party, and I shan't feel so young in this."

Mrs. Stobart hesitated.

"Mother, *do* let me."

"When I was eighteen," said Mrs. Stobart, "I went to one of the Tademas' evening parties, where *all* the intellectual and clever people used to come, and I wore a white dress and real snowdrops in my hair, and a young artist there—I forget his name (he became quite well known—he painted dogs mostly)—told me that I looked like a figure of spring."

Cressida smiled, for she couldn't help thinking that now her mother looked richly like summer.

"Did he paint you?"

"No, dear. I told you. He painted dogs. But young people are very different nowadays. They seem to have no time for sentiment. As Lady Cartwright was saying to me yesterday at luncheon, they think of nothing but ping-pong and bicycling."

"Then you will let me wear it, Mother?"

"I suppose so," said Mrs. Stobart; for, with this craze for sports, she reflected, it wasn't surprising, though it was certainly a pity, that girls were becoming very different. And anyway, it wasn't as if the Faradays mattered quite so much. For they were, though of course Floyd liked them so well, a little odd—though, as Floyd said, many Liberals were charming people.

"It must be a very hard life sometimes for poor Mrs. Faraday," said Mrs. Stobart, indicating to Cressida that for poor Mrs. Faraday the blue wouldn't, of course, matter.

"Why should it be?"

"Well—a Radical *milieu*, you know. It's never quite the same thing. Of course, lots of interesting people go to their house—but then, the drawback to that is that it must be so difficult to draw the border line. I mean, once you start having all sorts of artistic and radical kind of people, one never knows. If it weren't for your father, I shouldn't let you go."

Cressida asked, gazing out on to the garden, "What are you afraid of, Mother? After all, you must have run such social risks when you wore your snowdrops."

Catherine Stobart rose from the chair by the dressing table.

"Things were quite different then. You young girls read so much—I saw that book by Bernard Shaw hidden in your workbasket!—that you make your minds open to insinuations that we should never have understood."

Cressida blushed. Her conscience could never quite free her, on this question of books, from a childish sense of disobedience.

"You know I don't agree with you, Mother. There *are* facts, Mother, and they ought to be faced." ("And yet," thought Cressida, "I say 'things' and 'facts'; and if she were to ask me what I meant, I shouldn't want to go into details. Which shows," she reflected, "a cowardice in one's own beliefs.")

“There are a great many things,” said Mrs. Stobart as she drew down the blinds,—the sun had come round and she didn’t want the carpets faded, —“that one would rather not think about.”

She snapped down the central blind and Cressida stepped back from the window, irritated by her mother’s access of bustle. She clasped her hands together. Snap! went the third blind. Cressida breathed sharply. She would, she *would* stand by her beliefs and not be beaten by the “atmosphere.”

“Such as brothels, Mother.”

“Really!” Catherine Stobart wavered. “Really, Cressida!” For it seemed to her too painful that her daughter should speak in this way—and crude. A swan having hatched a goose, she stared at Cressida. And yet, she thought, no girl looked more refined, more *distingué*. A little more color and roundness and she might be really pretty. But reading such books, one might have expected . . .

“Mother, I’m sorry—if I hurt you, I mean.”

“You hurt me very much.”

“Yes, I’m sorry, Mother. But I must stand by what I believe.”

“There is *no* need, whatever you believe, to use such terms. No need,” repeated Catherine Stobart with a gesture of her ringed hands, yet with a sense of perplexity, because, it seemed, the child was really earnest and upset, and perhaps really hadn’t meant to be so crude.

“But—how,” Cressida implored, thirsting to be understood (though she knew that Mother never would understand what she called “abstract ideas”), “but how can the world ever be clear and simple until people can face its facts clearly and simply?”

She broke off at the sight of her father standing in the doorway. He said ill-temperedly:—

“People never will, Cressida, because the facts themselves are neither clear nor simple. Far from it. You’d think it was a simple thing for a man to sit down and write in his own study in his own house. Far from it—*very* far from it.” He turned to his wife. “A fellow is tuning that damned Bechstein of yours. The sounds he makes don’t interpret or inspire my thoughts.”

“Oh, dear! Dear me! I’m sorry, Floyd.”

“Come for a walk with me on the Common till it’s over, Father.”

“Too hot.”

“We can walk in the shade. I won’t speak, and you can think.”

Cressida went to a cupboard and took out a hat. Mrs. Stobart, relieved, went downstairs.

“Mother doesn’t like the Faradays,” said Cressida, jabbing the pins through her hat.

“She never did. She disapproves of Mrs. Faraday.”

Looking at Cressida’s reflection, he thought that that sailor brim made her face look more triangular and insignificant than usual. Her glance met his in the glass.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she said. She turned, still smiling, but he could see she was hurt.

“We can’t all be handsome and have auburn beards,” she laughed.

He clasped her cool hand and they went down the stairs and through the hall and out on to the gravel drive.

“You’ll need a parasol.”

“I like the sun.”

They strolled down the drive and out across the road on to Wimbledon Common.

“Why should anyone disapprove of Mrs. Faraday?” said Cressida. “She’s lovely, I think.”

“Yes. Very good-looking.” (“And if she hadn’t met Charles Faraday that summer in Munich,” thought Floyd, trying to imagine some concrete stages by which he and Gwenda Faraday—Gwenda!—would together have reached a state of mature domesticity.)

“Faraday’s brilliant,” he said, “though I never agree with a word he says. Radically wrong and wrongly Radical sums him up.”

“Mrs. Faraday says you’re a double-dyed red, white, and blue imperialist.”

He smiled. She would say that. But still, it was just as well, he thought,—he often thought,—that he hadn’t married her. For you didn’t want a woman mixing up her mind with your work. She was too ubiquitous, too irrepressible. “It wouldn’t have done,” he asserted to himself, jibing at a memory of Gwenda in a punt at Cambridge, twenty-five years ago. It

wouldn't have done (he knocked down a buttercup with his stick); a man didn't want . . .

"I wish you'd send me to college like Elsie Faraday."

A lark rose up from the grass before their feet and soared high into oblivion.

"I *know* there's a nest somewhere near here. I do hope none of those Sunday crowds will hurt it. Some of the boys are so horrible."

"You know that I think this idea of college education ridiculous—it's no use your opening the subject."

"I know."

They passed into a grove of birches. Floyd took off his hat and mopped his forehead.

Staring into the green heart of the glade, Cressida asked:—

"What do you expect me to do?"

He answered irritably, flicking a fly with his hat:—

"I don't know. Marry, I suppose."

"Yes."

That intense green brought tears to her eyes. She shook her head. Marry! Hearing him say it, irritably, matter-of-factly, like that, excited her.

"I do hope I shall."

He was surprised. He hadn't thought her romantic. At home she combated her mother with a gentle yet obstinate realism. He was half annoyed, half touched, by her shining look.

"Marriage is the best life for a woman, of course," he said. But he added, veering his judgment to an angle quite new to him: "All the same, you know, even for a woman, it isn't always clover. She's got to give and take, you know, just as the man has to."

Cressida didn't answer. Looking up at her father's profile, she made his age and dyspeptic temper an excuse for such a dry belittlement of life.

You couldn't, she reflected, discuss it with him. For, rather than admit that he had spoiled or thrown away the great chance, the great revelation (for love must be something blended of chance and revelation, she thought), he would—especially in this mood—simply deny that love, in the greatest

sense, existed. Like hundreds of other middle-aged hard people, he would deny its existence—because as far as love was concerned he had in some way failed. The only failure which people seemed to make without shame. The Faradays, she thought, hadn't failed. You could see that they loved each other—though it was queer to think of loving that ugly little man.

They sat down on a seat under an oak tree, and became silent. Cressida leaned back and looked up into the vaults of leaves. She sighed and then shivered with pleasure.

Sometimes the happiness of moments was so sharp that she wondered whether great happiness, when it came, wouldn't be almost beyond bearing.

II

There was something relentless about the horse's hoofs, cloppeting along the road. Cloppeting (lōng, shŏrt; lōng, shŏrt) in broad daylight. For the Faradays lived in Chelsea. Wrapping one's cloak round one, feeling naked in the six o'clock sunshine, with the children still playing on Putney Heath and a crowd collecting at the "Green Man" at the top of the hill.

And Milward staring out of the carriage window, her nose in the air, and her best velvet blouse on.

Relentless, trōt trŏt, trōt trŏt, however shy one was; feeling a little empty under one's bodice, a little cold and apprehensive down the back of one's arms and elbows.

"How soon the grass gets brown, doesn't it, Milward?"

"Yes, miss, it does."

"And it's not July yet." If only Milward would talk, one might shake off the grip of preparatory shyness.

"No, miss, it isn't." ("And only three days till Sunday night now," Rose Milward was thinking; and wondered if he would repeat what he'd said the Sunday before last.)

"Oh," Cressida exclaimed, "there's Mrs. Hammond with her niece—I wish we had 'chestnuts'!"

Milward refrained from saying that she'd heard from the postman who was walking out with the parlor maid at "Amberly" that Mrs. Hammond had her tea leaves used twice. Put back into the silver caddy and brought into the drawing-room. By which practice, Milward thought, you could tell that Mrs. Hammond wasn't a real lady.

Not like her mistress, Mrs. Stobart, who would have everything just so—and wear a hat three summers; but the lace on her things must be real, every bit of it, and a change three times a week even if the laundry bills did run up. And Miss Cressida the same. Dainty and particular in her ways, but more easygoing than her mother. Milward was sometimes sorry for Miss Cressida, though she couldn't tell why, except that, as cook said, Miss Cressida was so delicate-looking and seemed to do such a lot of reading.

"I hope we shan't be late, Milward!" Cressida leaned to stare at the gate of "The Pines," No. 2, with a pang of hope. But she had never yet seen Him come out. Only once, on the Common, she'd descried a little man tripping

along a footpath, his head flung up as if he were looking at the tree tops; and when she'd whispered the name, reverently, with all his own orchestrations of words bursting up in her heart, her mother had raised a lorgnon to that tawny crest.

"I should think it could scarcely be anyone else," she had remarked, and turned their steps in another direction.

The carriage rolled slowly over Putney Bridge in a procession of vehicles. The river, blue and pale and sparkling, would soon be drowned in darkness and chained and pierced by a myriad lights.

"A terrible lot of traffic there is, miss," said Milward, catching the eye of a young man in a passing hansom cab, and then looking down her nose.

"Yes," said Cressida, envying Milward that bold casual look, and swerving round to the strip of mirror in the frame of the door, and grimacing because she never could reflect a cornfield blue and golden beauty (nor even a black-browed overspiced kind of handsomeness that Heaven allowed to one's mother's maid). "Sometimes," thought Cressida, "I would sell my soul to be stared at in the street." For what was the satisfaction of having "distinction" and small hands in this hurrying full-blooded world? And flying a little cambric pennon ("ladylike," in Mother's view) among a host of bold and brilliant standards? And how lovely, what an intoxication, to be able to be a little too conspicuous!

"All false pathos," Cressida told herself. For one could be different, with a little will. She smiled at herself, not far from tears: "With a little rouge!" she thought angrily, remembering how she had written for that box, and tried it one night in her room, and seen herself lit up by those dabs on her cheeks—and then burned the box.

Milward wondered why Miss Cressida looked so glum all of a sudden.

"And it's all this cursed heredity," Cressida thought. "I've got all Mother's conventionality and all Father's narrowness. If they'd only had more children it mightn't all have been worked off on me. Dabbling in the shallows," she told herself, "too timid (and easily contented?) to go further in."

What was the use of reading books by free-thinking people; what was the use of sniffing and longing for the salt ocean—and still sitting in the shallows like an overfed child in awe of its nurse; and what, anyway, in Heaven's name, was the use of making silly metaphors (or was it similes?) about one's own silliness? For, after all, books were one thing (Bernard

Shaw in one’s workbasket) and living was another: Milward smelling so warm in her velvet blouse, and the buses clattering past, and the sky growing pink over the housetops of Chelsea, and . . .

“What’s the time, Milward?”

“I haven’t my watch, miss.”

For to be too early would be dreadful—being first in the drawing-room and never knowing if there mightn’t be another, and terrifying, early guest. Too late would be worse. The drawing-room full of people and voices; and Mrs. Faraday kissing so much and laughing at one and patting one’s arm; and all the eyes pricking one all over.

Oh, dear—why, why on earth did one set out in a careless, nonchalant kind of way to go to parties?

III

Hurtling down the narrow turns of the staircase, Lester Midge recollected that his latchkey was in the pocket of his mackintosh.

As he sped down the last flight of steps, an evening batch of letters was rattled through into the cage on the front door.

He delved in his mackintosh (which, he reflected, he needn't take to-night). It was hung at the back of the hall passage in company with the mackintoshes of his landlady, his landlady's husband, and his landlady's daughter. The latter's brown mackintosh gave out a stale aroma of wallflower scent and momentarily choked his haste with a gulp of half-sweet, half-distasteful association. Louisa . . .!

He slipped the key into the pocket of his dress trousers, donned his opera hat, stood on tiptoe for a flash of his face and tie, and finally, seizing two letters from their cage, scurried out of the door, down the steps, and up the pavement in the direction of Kensington High Street. He would take the bus halfway and then a hansom. Or a bus the whole way if there was time; but, looking at his watch, he didn't think . . . Brace had kept him so long this evening talking over this project of making the *Epoch* into a weekly.

The policeman at the corner said, "Good evening, sir."

"Good evening."

Lester Midge couldn't remember whether Mrs. Faraday had said eight or a quarter past eight. On the other hand, she wouldn't know herself. But then, he reflected, the cook would; and Mrs. Faraday, who was always—so Elsie Faraday had told him—suffering from her cooks, would suffer again. Though he couldn't imagine Gwenda Faraday having even customary, far less any positive and conspicuous contacts, with a kitchen. He tried, darting across the High Street, to envisage her lips and eyes responding to the small urgencies of larder and pantry. Gwenda Faraday saying, "We'll have the beef done up to-morrow, cook"; staring at a trussed chicken rather as she stared at a guest whom she invited and forgot to expect—as if he were, despite all her good will, just a little too much for her.

Lester hailed the bus. He climbed to the top and went to a front seat near the driver.

"Oicks—ugh—ah—oicks," the whip cracked. A breeze fanned Lester's cheeks. Leaning back, he examined his letters.

One was a proof sheet of his article for the *News* criticizing the Education Bill. The other was addressed in his father's copperplate hand:—

To Mr. Lester Midge,
Care of Mrs. Skate,
33, Thrapton Road,
West Kensington,
London,
Middlesex.

The letter was brief:—

DEAR LESTER,—

Y'rs of the 12th received with thanks. Shall be pleased to see you here next week as you propose. Cathie sends regards.

Yours,

J. E. M.

P. S. The clergy are showing up badly as usual.

The driver spat diffusely and glanced round toward Lester.

"Warm weather, ain't it, sir?"

"Pleasantly so."

"Oh, yes (Oicks! Hah! There!). It's a *change* orlright."

"Yes."

Lester watched a girl in a grey dress cross the road, her skirts swaying from her small waist, the toes of her patent shoes twinkling at his attention.

" 'Ope we get it fine orlright for the Coronation."

"Yes—indeed."

The girl vanished in the crowd.

"Are you going?"

"Ain't I jest!"

Lester took stock of the man—burly, beery-eyed, exuding a porcine amiability. Ten years ago, Lester reflected, we should have dosed the man with an invective against pageantry,—and all its implications,—followed up by a platform appeal. Didn't he, the bus driver, realize that he was in every

respect not only the equal, but, by virtue of his toil (here the Marxian *soupçon*), the superior, nay, the master, of kings, princes, and suchlike! But at twenty-four, Lester reflected, one's views had a beautiful simplicity. *Panem et circenses!* What nobler self could emerge if the bus driver were freed from these distractions? And where were his alternatives? Beer and the Turf?

Blowing a smut off his cuff, Lester Midge brooded on an amphitheatre of bus drivers—and in the arena a Guelphic troupe in tights and spangles. And then (Lester smiled over the horses' ears emerging from their straw hats), and then the sea lions—Parliamentary sea lions all whiskers and flippers and the gloss of black unwieldy bellies.

He leaned back in the hansom and folded his arms, and his mind reverted to his talk with Brace—or, rather, Brace's talk with him; for there was an almost too fruitful quality in Brace's conversation—a loaded ripeness and richness of ideas, which the listener tacitly gathered up and sorted and stored. Profiting oneself by such labor, one had the sense that Brace, after the manner of nature, was wasteful by virtue of his very abundance. Proliferating schemes, programmes, arguments, beliefs. The *Epoch* was his; he had, Lester reflected, formed and inspired it. But he, Lester, had worked and hammered at it, and George Driscoll had been prepared to finance its beginnings, on Lester's recommendation. And now Brace wanted to transform it into a weekly! Every Thursday; speed up its whole tempo. Better "literary" stuff. Make it more Fabian; wipe off the Liberal tinge. Give it more life and less didacticism.

But would Driscoll stand for that? Driscoll, reeking of the Eighty Club?

Lester tried to get his own point of view clear. Wasn't he in fact, though not in name, as Liberal as Driscoll—or very nearly so? How far had he, Lester, traveled—or reversed—since that episode at Plimmer-Schön's five years ago? That fatal, and yet, he thought, really rather funny episode. Rather grotesque, he thought, with a vision of Bernhard Schön pacing his office on that rainy morning, glaring humorously and yet relentlessly from behind his gold-rimmed glasses, booming from under his moustaches. ("Midge, you are the most able man we haf in our Research Department. All the same, you must go. Your book is excellent, though it iss a little—*exalté*. But you should haf written it under another name.") It was a question, Schön had said, of efficiency. Midge's possible influence on the employees outweighed his commercial value to the firm. "But a cleffer book!" Schön had repeated. It lay in Schön's desk. They had looked at it and smiled.

Enlightened Despotism in Industry. "You might as well have called it 'The Plimmer-Schön Works'," Bernhard Schön had said.

Lester fumbled in his pocket as the hansom swung round the corner from the King's Road. There was something endearing about a man like Schön. Logic, power, subtlety; no scruples, and an enormous sense of opportunity.

The hansom drew up behind a private carriage. While he paid his cabman, Lester saw a strapping young woman in a dark blouse get out and hold the carriage door. Lester nodded good-evening to his cabman. A girl, grabbing a cloak round herself, emerged from the carriage and hurried across the pavement and up the steps. Lester, following, saw that she had dark hair and blue skirts rustling below her cloak. She half turned, confronting him with a shell-colored little face, which flushed at the realization of his approach. She was breathing quickly. Lester felt sensitive to her embarrassment. He absurdly felt himself color.

"H-have you rung?" he asked.

"Yes. Once." She poked out a hand between the folds of her cloak and rang again, and stood staring at the door as though her gaze must pierce at least a tiny hole through which she could burrow and disappear.

"Why," thought Lester, "is there no social formula for this particular situation?" Two people on a threshold, isolated for want of the introduction that must so inevitably be theirs on the other side of the door. To another, a more—or else a much less—sophisticated, type of young lady one would be able to comment upon the piquancy of such a crisis. But to this girl, whose ears flared her confusion! If only "they" would come. "And in ten, twenty minutes, perhaps," he thought, examining her mouth and chin, "we shall be talking!" The notion displaced his present awkwardness by a sense of anticipation.

Their silence was merely a wedding, a finale of admirable verbal chastity.

"Goodness," thought Cressida, "is this door never going to open!"

IV

"Throw your cloak on my bed," said Elsie Faraday, who was in her petticoat and a spotted muslin dressing jacket. "Bother this earring—it never will screw properly! My ears ought to have been pierced in infancy, like a dove's!"

"Doves don't have ears." Cressida wished she had Elsie's courage to wear earrings and no stays.

"Don't they?" Elsie was intent against the mirror. "How inconvenient for them! Hand me my dress, there's a pet—I'm so late."

"Mother'd be appalled if I didn't wear stays," Cressida broke out.

Elsie nodded.

"Mine isn't. There's the difference. Oh, curse! *Where's* a hanky?" Elsie rummaged. "We each have the cowardice of our mother's convictions," she threw off.

"M'm." Cressida felt she liked Elsie's pomegranate wallpaper less than she used to. "I was afraid I was very late."

"I don't think so." Elsie rang the bell.

"Another guest arrived with me—a man. And we stood on the doorstep together without saying a word, and I felt so silly that I was quite furious with him for being there."

A housemaid came in and began to hook Elsie's dress.

"How absurd! I wonder who it was. I never know who Mother's asked. A young man?"

"I should think so. I only looked at him for a moment."

"Small?"

"Small—medium. About my own height."

"Healthy and lively-looking?"

"I don't know. He wasn't at all lively on the doorstep. He just stared rather."

"Oh, if he stared, it probably was Lester Midge. He has rather a gobbly glance for the female form divine."

“Lester Midge! You mean the writer?”

The nervousness that had relaxed in Elsie’s familiar atmosphere clutched afresh at Cressida’s equanimity. Lester Midge! And to have been so—so *gauche*! And yet, she thought, what else had there been for her but *gaucherie*, of as negative as possible a kind?

Elsie dismissed the maid.

“Now I’m ready. You’re a dear to wait for me. Let’s hope we shan’t find a starving and angry rabble. You *liked* his novel, did you? To my mind, he’s got no style. But Father thought it awfully brilliant. So did Mother. But there, she likes ’em all, geese or swans—though she *does* know, certainly, which are which. Your dress *is* becoming!” Elsie murmured as they crossed the hall together. For poor little C., she saw, was in one of her sudden moods of apprehension. Nervy, Elsie reflected, conscious of her own self-assurance.

Cressida rallied. Elsie with her pot of social balm. Dear Elsie! And——

“Cressida, *darling* child!” called Mrs. Faraday, sweeping across the room. “I supposed you were upstairs with Elsie—like cherries on a single stalk.” She held Cressida’s face between her hands and kissed the girl’s nose. “Delicious creature!” she laughed.

Cressida, wondering whether she only imagined a moist mark on the tip of her nose, was swung round to face the subjects of Mrs. Faraday’s introduction. The names grazed off her attention, save for the final: “Mr. Lester Midge—Miss Stobart.”

He smiled. Cressida felt that her response showed him her discomfiture.

There was a marshaling of the company. “Mr. Stanhouse,” Mrs. Faraday was saying, “*you* will take in Miss Stobart. There is nothing Mr. Stanhouse doesn’t know about Chinese porcelain, Cressida.”

“As if,” thought Cressida, laying her hand through the extended crook of Mr. Stanhouse’s arm, “as if that’ll help!” and burned with the feeling that Mrs. Faraday might, somehow, in her really dear kindness, have arranged for Mr. Stanhouse to know rather less about anything in particular. For the worst of specialists was that their “speciality” never helped one conversationally; rather than an approach, it constituted a paddock.

Lester Midge was on Cressida’s other side. He had taken Elsie in, and he was laughing at something that Elsie said as they sat down. Mr. Stanhouse, sipping soup between his calm lips, seemed to expect an utterance; and what was there to say except:—

"I'm afraid I don't know much about Chinese porcelain."

He relished his soup serenely.

"Very few people do, though one has always found that many pretend to. It's an extraordinarily difficult study. I'm writing a book on the subject."

"Oh—how interesting."

"Yes, it is." Satisfaction shone quietly from his monocle, though he wished that he had Miss Faraday for his dinner partner.

"It must be very hard work."

"Well, it's my hobby, so I don't regard it in that light. One gets saturated with it, you see; and, as Henry James said to a friend of mine the other day, saturation is what matters—simply saturation in what one is doing."

Cressida became silent. What a fish of a young man! Though he must be clever, of course, or he wouldn't be here. Across the table there was a woman with auburn hair who never stopped smiling and talking to a neighbor hidden from Cressida by the sweet peas. How heavenly to be able to smile and talk so vividly! The woman threw Cressida a smile, casting it across, casually, from her golden store. By the time Cressida had decided to render it, diffidently, the woman had forgotten her existence.

"But I don't think I dare," said Lester to Elsie Faraday. "I could see Miss Stobart took a dislike to me," he added. He felt a real resentment beneath his pretended plaintiveness.

"My dear Mr. Midge, what should she have done? Fallen and kissed your feet—or what? As a matter of fact," said Elsie, seeing Cressida engaged again with Mr. Stanhouse, "she was intensely interested when I mentioned your name."

"Oh, was she? Why should she be?"

"Your novel and your writing, of course."

"Oh, really! How interesting! You mean she's read my stuff?" He felt reassured.

"Yes, indeed. She thinks *Marion Dewar* wonderful." Elsie saw the pucker disappear between his eyebrows.

"Oh, she liked it! Did you like it, Miss Faraday?"

"In a way. The story interested me because it was so full of life. But if you want the truth, it seems to me your manner isn't up to your matter. I

hope you don't mind my being frank?"

"Yes, I see. Yes. Of course not. I like people to say what they think." Elsie Faraday's features were altogether too pronounced, he thought. His gaze strayed. He crumbled his bread.

At one end of the table Charles Faraday was talking to Lady Berberry, his excited sentences breaking against her imperturbable attention, his gestures seeming, at moments, to threaten her sequined torso.

At the opposite end Mrs. Faraday was listening to the German art critic whose distinguished name Lester hadn't caught. Every now and then her glance slid down the table, flicked to the sideboard, and glinted back, with renewed beauty, into the face of her neighbor. "*So?*" Lester heard her say; "*Ach, so!*" and "*Das ist aber merkwürdig!*" The phrases tapped at Lester's memoirs of those two crammed workful years at Heidelberg. Frau Holli's cooking. Perger; Lehmann; Rudi Marx with his eternal discourses on Schiller and women; Scheurer, dueling and philosophizing and periodically threatening suicide. Now, who was that woman opposite with the copper-colored hair? He wanted to ask Elsie, but she'd turned away. He recollected that he'd been annoyed by something she said—about his book! A twinge of annoyance returned. But the young woman of the doorstep sitting on his right had liked it. And now, at last, she seemed to have been relinquished by that youth with the orchid.

"I thought you were never going to take any notice of me."

Cressida hesitated.

"I—well," she said, "I was talking to Mr. Stanhouse." She was disconcerted by some quality in his address.

"So I saw."

Her disconcertion indefinably linked up with this trace of pettishness.

"He was telling me about his book."

"Really. And were you interested?"

"Very—though, of course, I was rather an uninformed listener."

"But surely it is his business to inform you?"

"I think he found me too primary. I mean, not *up* to it."

"Should you be bored if I were to talk to you about *my* book?"

“Of *course* not!” And was he, or wasn’t he, disappointing, she puzzled, gaining assurance from the way his vanity capered at her. “I shall have more data in your case, Mr. Midge.”

“Tell me what you think of it.” He watched her pale, peculiar little profile. The intensity of her hesitation puckered her brow and thrust forward her square underlip.

“You mean *Marion Dewar*?”

“Yes.” What else, he wondered, could she have read?

“Well. Parts of it were like champagne distilled from all one’s own most rebellious feelings! I mean,” she faltered hotly, with a renewed sense of who he actually was, “it’s a perfect miracle, apart from anything else (the writing and description and so on), how you could *know* what she felt—that bit where she goes into her mother’s rose garden and says ‘Damn’ out loud, over and over again, to hear it echo. It’s so appallingly real! And that awful family in the Manse. It’s just like some of my father’s Scotch relations.”

“I’m intensely interested that it should have given you so much.”

Lester was suffused with a warmth towards this girl. There was a fineness and a freshness about her, a bloom of conventionality. The daughters of Philistia had the fragrance of their limitations. This girl (her father—what had Elsie Faraday said? An ex-professor of something—military history, wasn’t it?)—this girl was, for no reason one could get at, *better* than Louisa (Louisa’s blouses and kissing and moping prudishness), better than Clare (eleven-fifteen he’d said he would fetch Clare at the theatre); or not, he argued, perhaps better (listening to Cressida’s praises of a minor character—“So gloriously silly,” she said), but so different in texture.

“Are you writing another, Mr. Midge?”

“I’ve begun another.”

“What’s it— But *do* you hate being asked? I mean, is it tiresome of me to prod you like this?”

“My dear Miss—?”

“Stobart.”

“Miss Stobart. I knew, but I’d forgotten. My dear Miss Stobart, your intuition must tell you that I couldn’t find you tiresome, and that I’m always simply bursting to talk about myself and my work. We all are. All artists—and all men—are. It’s a natural impulse. We want to preen ourselves, and

puff, and pour out to you. And you listen and drink it in, and even when you aren't interested in what we say, your instinct tells you that all this puffing and outpouring is us; and consequently your attention remains devoted; and you think you're listening, and we think you are. Which," he concluded in a higher tone, seeing that the copper-haired woman opposite was listening —"which is the basis of a lasting relation between the sexes."

Cressida couldn't comment on his words. For here was "talk," as she'd imagined talk must be—carelessly and invaluably scattered; she could only grab up the coins and keep on running breathlessly beside the carriage. "Well, then, what is the new one going to be called?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure. Perhaps . . ."

Why should his eyes make her suddenly think of the pair, horribly fixed together by a wire, that fell out of the unwigged head of her doll, Fifi? (Fifi of the "real" lashes, brought from Paris and dressed in lace and pink silk.) "What were you going to say, Mr. Midge?" (Fifi's parasol, pink silk, with a frill.)

"Perhaps if sometime I could read you parts of it?"

"Oh, but I'd *love* it!" But how would Mother, Father even, accept such a proposal? A "dreadful writer" with the most advanced ideas! A Socialist! Mother didn't know that, probably; but Father had *Enlightened Despotism in Industry* in one of two lower shelves, the margins ferociously blue-penciled.

He leaned towards her (Oh, *bother* Fifi's eyes!): "I know, I can quite imagine, what your family might feel at your touching—such pitch!—Miss Faraday, I want Miss Stobart to let me read some of my new novel to her. How are we going to manage this?"

Elsie looked at Cressida's flushed cheeks.

"You'd better ask Mother, if you want managing."

To Cressida's shame, he was addressing Mrs. Faraday up the table. "How shall it be managed?" he was asking. And the German critic was staring, and Mrs. Faraday was proclaiming, "Any time, Lester, under my disreputable roof. Only don't bore her. To-morrow if you like."

Cressida broke in.

"To-morrow I'm going to Patti's concert with Mother; I can't."

Mrs. Faraday nodded, "Settle it together." She returned to the disagreement she had created between the eminent German and the young

pianist on her left.

"De speedge of de Kaiser to de Poles wass stupid, *dat* I admidd. But de *brinciple*—"

The pianist, a Pole, was white.

"No! No! Wrong! Wrong! 'E insult us. De Poles will not be insulted."

"Next week," Elsie said, "you can both come here and inspect my embroidery class."

"I'm going up to Oxford next week—for two of the Commem balls."

Lester was annoyed. Oxford! Why should she be going to Oxford, to dance with a lot of young insipid men?

"And are you also going, Miss Faraday?"

"No. I've only just come down from my term at Cambridge. I've had enough university for the moment."

Cressida felt, anxiously, that she'd been ungracious.

"I suppose you feel the glamour of these 'ancient universities'?" said Lester.

"Not exactly. But I care for Oxford. You see, we lived there until three years ago, when Father retired. We only came to live at Wimbledon because Mother had always wanted to. Father and I christened the house 'Sans-Souci,' and Mother was very pleased. The tradespeople call it 'St. Saucy.'"

"So you'll be glad to go back there next week?"

"Yes." She tried to trace the flaw in their friendliness. And she so wanted him to read his manuscript.

"Do you know Oxford?" she ventured.

"I've been there once or twice, to various political conferences. I studied in less glamorous surroundings—in Manchester."

So *that* was it, thought Cressida, filled with wonder that Lester Midge could be so silly. For how could he, with all his "being" and "doing," mind *where* he'd been, or not been? For that was the kind of thing that Mother minded about!

"I wish I weren't going, compared to how much I want you to keep your promise," she said.

And when, over the dessert, he became eager and talkative again, she felt satisfied.

As the ladies got up to go, he asked Elsie, “Who is that woman with the copper-colored hair?”

“Oh—Fay Neilson? She’s the wife of Neilson, the playwright.”

V

“So you enjoyed yourself.” Mrs. Stobart bent to blow out the spirit lamp, holding the frills of her dressing gown against her diaphragm. “You haven’t told me—” she poured the milk carefully into a glass—“who your dinner partner was.”

Cressida sat on the edge of her bed pulling off her stockings.

“A young man called Stanhouse.”

“Stanhouse? Now *do* drink this, dear, while it’s hot. Stanhouse? Now isn’t he the son of . . .”

“No, Mother, it’s *too* hot—I can’t drink it yet. If you’d put it down on the washstand.”

“Very well, dear. The son of Sir Robert Stanhouse who was at New College with your father and has that lovely place—near Dorking. Now, Cressida, don’t let the skin get on it; you know how you dislike skin. It’s really not at all too hot.”

“I don’t know. He didn’t mention his parents. He was rather dull, I thought.”

“What a pity!”

“Probably because he was bored with me.”

“I think that’s a foolish attitude to let yourself take up, dear.” (But the modern girl didn’t know how to interest a man, regretted Catherine Stobart. Cressida was apt to be too reserved—a mistake. Who was it—it must have been some clever Frenchman—who said, “A woman’s business is to please”? Still, she seemed to have enjoyed herself.)

“What did Mrs. Faraday wear? Now do finish your milk, dear; you *know* it does you good.”

“Black. I don’t remember the details.”

“Black. Well, that’s a change. She usually wears such light colors. But, still, I suppose even she is coming to realize that we all have to grow old sometime. That is where Parisian women are so wise. They wear far more black. Let me brush your hair for you, Cressida. No, dear, I love to do it for you. Your hair really is beautiful—if only it curled a little more! You must tell me if I hurt you.”

“You don’t hurt a bit. It feels so nice!” Cressida smiled at her mother’s reflection.

“And what did Elsie have on? Something very ‘arty,’ I suppose?”

“Elsie?” Cressida closed her eyes. The soothing swishing rhythm of the hairbrush! “Elsie? Oh, rather gorgeous. Purple, cut square at the neck.” (The strokes of the brush dragging and rising.) “Shaped rather; a kind of Italian Renaissance effect.” (What was it? “Before the laughing mirror.”)

“I suppose she looked well?”

Inclining her head back, Cressida watched the rise and swerve of her mother’s arm.

“Very handsome.”

(“Loosening her ribands, looping down her hair.”)

“I expect she’ll marry young—in spite of her college education.”

Cressida agreed, inattentively.

(“. . . were this wild thing married.” . . . “More love should I have, and much less care.”)

“Who else was there, of interest—besides Lady Berberry and the German you mentioned and the writer you spoke of—what’s his name?”

“Midge.”

“Yes. What a name!”

“No—nobody else that you’d call ‘of interest,’ Mother. There was a young pianist, a Pole.”

“Oh. Did he perform?” (Wasn’t there something significant in the fact that the girl hadn’t mentioned him before? A Pole!)

“Yes. Divinely. It made one feel quite empty with happiness.”

“Oh,” Mrs. Stobart hesitated, brush in hand. But one mustn’t be hasty, she reflected. And Cressida was apt to be exaggerated about music and pictures.

“Did he speak English?”

“Rather well. He told me at the end of the evening that he would like to sit on a rock with me and watch the colors of the sea change in my eyes!”

Mrs. Stobart put down the brush.

“Really . . . of course, foreigners are apt to be very—well, one takes what they say with a grain of salt.”

Cressida laughed. “Darling Mother! With all the salt in the Channel!” (Poor little Pole, with his heavenly, heavenly music! And poor Mother, with her ridiculous, so perfectly ridiculous, suspicions!) “You needn’t worry, Mother. I’m perfectly heart-whole. Truly I am.” (And in a fortnight Lester Midge was going to read her (*her*, Cressida!) his manuscript.)

“Well, I’m very glad. Now good night, my dear, and get into bed quickly, or you won’t be fit for the concert to-morrow.”

“Yes, Mother.”

(“Were this wild thing married . . .”)

“I’m not really so wild, Mother.”

“No, dear, I never said so. You’re a dear child.”

A final kiss.

Mrs. Stobart padded across the landing to her own room. Floyd was reading by the bedside lamp. She said, automatically, “Don’t strain your eyes, Floyd, dear.”

He didn’t reply. She got into bed and lay down in pleasurable contact with her hot-water bottle. If only, she thought, her gaze locked in the familiar diagonals of the wallpaper pattern (a grey trellis adorned with blue roses), if only Floyd were a little different, she could have said something. For it was,—even if there was nothing in it,—it was always such a mistake for a girl to attract the wrong kind of man. Such a great mistake. . . .

When Floyd Stobart at last put down his book, he remembered that Cressida had been to the Faradays’; and Catherine must have come in just now after seeing Cressida, as usual, into bed. He’d meant to ask whether the girl had enjoyed it. And now Catherine was asleep.

He turned to look at his wife. Looking down at her face, he was reminded of a prize peach he’d seen at some flower show, lying in cotton wool. There had been a ticket:—

FIRST PRIZE: ——, Esq.

He turned out the light. To his annoyance, he was wondering what Gwenda’s face looked like, asleep on a pillow. Worn, perhaps—when her eyes were quenched? For she’d lost her complexion, whereas Catherine . . .

Or did the corners of her mouth still turn, one up, one down? Or was she, when she slept, sheer sleep, utter quiescence, as in living she was sheer life?

He turned over angrily.

But as the moments passed and he couldn't sleep, he grew sad. Gwenda's image slipped away. Gone, with so much else. For life was short; and goodness knew what one did with all one's days. His mind stared at the past. A rubbish heap of days that hadn't seemed to matter.

VI

Mrs. Faraday arranged the roses fastidiously.

"Elsie, fetch me a cloth; the water's soaking through the newspaper. Quick, child! Oh, damnation! . . ."

The Polish pianist had sent the roses. Elsie, handing over a dishcloth ungraciously, saw the stages of her childhood as eyes, nose, chin, and finally waist, rising above a table on which her mother was arranging the flowers which people had sent her.

"—the *trouble* about little Midge," Gwenda Faraday continued, her shoes soaked and the water dripping on to the carpet, "isn't that he's what you call bumptious, Elsie—people must bump a bit in such a bumpety world; the trouble is—how *lovely* they smell!—that he isn't a gentleman."

She pressed the bell by the fireplace. "Bring me some salt, Alice, please."

Elsie decided on the palest green wool for those triangular little trees on the hill. She pulled out a strand.

"I don't think that matters. It's utterly irrelevant."

"(*Thank* you, Alice, thank you.) Oh—in theory!"

"He's brilliant in his way."

"He's a clever journalist."

Elsie sucked the end of the wool. "The little man's got force—personality."

Mrs. Faraday watched the grains of salt scattering slowly down the vase. One corner of her mouth smiled.

"I don't like Englishmen not to be gentlemen," she said. "One doesn't *want* that particular thing of foreigners, in the same way. One wants them to be—charming, or gallant, or witty, or—or—just foreign."

"I don't agree."

"But Midge," Mrs. Faraday ruminated, adding another pinch of salt with a sense of fatuity in doing so, "is a pity. He would be a nice little foreigner, but he really is a most horrid little Englishman. I watched him last night."

"Mrs. Neilson liked him. She'd wanted to meet him for some time."

“Fay Neilson’s a fool.”

“And Cressida.” Elsie smiled. “Cressida was positively reverent about him.”

“I should have thought she had more *humor*.”

“Not about ‘cleverness’!” Elsie watched her mother sweep the stalk ends and leaves off the table: half of them missed the waste-paper basket.

“Oh, *Elsie*, help me pick these up. Floyd has very little humor, and *Catherine* Stobart has none (which really is a good thing for her), but Cressida is a *darling*.”

(“And how do you manage to be a darling and have your face carved into such a fine peculiar little structure,” Mrs. Faraday wondered, “when your mother is like that and your father is such a dear bore?”)

She got up from her knees and, glancing apologetically at Elsie, who was angrily picking up the last leaf from the parquet, took the roses over to her husband’s writing table.

“Father’ll only sneeze, and you’ll have to move them, Mother!”

Mrs. Faraday drew out one of the buds so that it drooped toward the inkstand. She had a fancy that it wanted to read its future in the pool of ink.

“I think I should have *died* of exasperation, if I had married Floyd,” she said.

VII

Lester slipped Fay Neilson's note into the breast pocket of his coat.

"I shall be back on Monday evening, Mrs. Skate. No, I shall be out to dinner."

"Very well. Very good, Mr. Midge," breathed Mrs. Skate, who had asked him if he would be in for supper. "I hope you'll find your father fairly well," she added.

"I hope so, Mrs. Skate. Being well is one of his peculiarities. Good-bye, Miss Skate," he glowed to Louisa, who was simpering, yet a little hurt, behind her mother's shoulder.

(He hadn't been the same, not one bit the same, Louisa felt, this last day or two. Not half so "larky" as before; seemed "busy," she felt; not himself; and when she thought of that afternoon when he'd come into the parlor . . .)

Her fish-mouth pouted at him.

"Don't forget me, Miss Skate," he joked.

"Well, I'll try hard not to, Mr. Midge."

(He was "a bit fast," Louisa had told her friend, Alice Pettit; but what she liked about him, she'd told Alice, was that you could see he was a gentleman. Very different from the last "gentleman," *so called*, that they'd had!)

"Lou!" A raucous call from within the parlor.

"Yes, Father?"

"Lou, run up the road and get me an evening paper. If 'Devil's Daughter' 'asn't won the 2.30 I'll never trust my bleedin' luck again."

"Orlright, Father!"

She overtook Mr. Midge.

"Well—Louisa?" Why on earth was the girl running after him? She was going to be a nuisance.

"Father wants an evening paper."

"Oh!" So she hadn't been running after him. He felt disappointed.

"I thought you were coming to help me find a cab."

She stepped beside him. Her shoes had triple bars sewn with jet. A glimpse of openwork stocking made him wonder if she weren't, after all, in her flabby way, quite attractive.

"Oh," she said, "did you?" (That pin in his tie must have cost quite a bit. You could tell a man, Alice said, by all sorts of *little* things.)

"What about that walk you promised me one evening, Louisa?"

"I never—"

"But you know you did," he said softly, yet with the banter which was her incense. "Some evening next week?" For she demanded so little, and would do so comfortably, sitting on a twin seat in the Park, and simpering and withdrawing her hand in its cotton glove, and giggling foolishly over her fellow creatures.

"Oh . . ." said Louisa. "Well . . ."

Seated in the train, he was glad she hadn't committed herself to any particular evening. He put his feet up on the seat opposite and opened the *Times*. C.-B. and Asquith at the Eighty Club. Pity he hadn't gone, accepted Driscoll's invitation. But Mrs. Faraday's had been interesting (and that girl, what was her name?). The *Times* report was tight-lipped as possible. (The *Times* did more harm by its tacit disapprovals than any amount of anti-Liberal ranting!)

"—rarely in the history of parties has any Government at the same time challenged the favor of destiny and fired the zeal of its opponents, by producing in one session two such measures as the Education Bill and the Corn Tax. . . ." They were in, anyway, for a prolonged storm of fiscal controversy.

"Showery Weather Expected." The Education Bill was breaking up the Conservative camp. "Education Bills"; a few ill-directed prods, here and there, when the whole question ought to be dug up by the roots. A mass of underpaid, ignorant teaching. The blind putting blinkers on the young beginnings of vision. Lester thought of his own years at the Grammar School. "Please, Mr. Sharpe, why must I do literature when I could read all that out of school?" "I hope, Midge, you have healthier things to do out of school." "Why can't I study science all the time?" "Because you would become one-sided. Try not to show your lack of intelligence too flagrantly, Midge!"

A smut blew in. Lester squinted at it on his nose. It left an exclamation mark on his handkerchief. Pushing back the handkerchief, he felt Mrs.

Neilson's note.

Cathie was waiting on Leckendean platform, a grey toque ("doubtless," Lester conjectured, "one of her own 'creations'") set upon the waved and frizzed abundance of her auburn hair.

She held him affectionately to the high ridge of her bosom.

"You're looking really *very* well, Lester." With pride she noted the quality of his clothing. She adjusted herself beside him in the four-wheeler.

"And you're looking as smart and blooming as ever, Cathie. The shop's doing better than ever, I expect?"

Her hand, swelling a kid glove, joined its fellow on the handle of her parasol.

"Yes, I am glad to say the business is doing very well." But she switched him to a topic which she determined to master before they got home and her questions should be restrained by her father's presence.

"We saw in one of the papers you were dining with Lady Marion Creed the other day, Lester. It—it must have been a delightful—gathering."

"Most, Cathie. Intellect and aristocracy mingling in a beautiful harmony. Your brother resplendent with wit . . ."

She ignored his banter. She would have her answers—before Dad was there.

"What did Lady Marion wear, Lester?"

"I don't remember. Probably something unbecoming."

"Did she wear a tiara, or just a simple ornament, Lester?"

"My dear Cathie, I can't really remember. There were more interesting objects in the room than my poor dear hostess. Probably she wore a mermaid's tail and her hair down."

He smiled out at the plane trees and the pavements.

Cathie colored over the plump area of her cheek bones.

"It's no good your going on so silly with *me*, Lester. I've not known you thirty-three years for nothing. It's no good your pretending to me." Her tone tossed off an elaborate superstructure which she fastened so carefully as to confuse hat with head—"the lady" with the Cathie Midge who kept wages at

rock bottom and prices flying triumphantly (God in the plate-glass window, and Mammon in the workroom). “It’s no good,” she said. “I’ll bet you were as pleased as punch with your invitation card and stuck it up on your mirror, and whenever you looked at it you felt you were getting on in the world. As indeed you are,” she softened. “Which is a wonder, with some of the opinions you’ve got hold of from Father. Socialism and the like.”

“You’re a wise woman, Cathie. We’re brother and sister, blood and spirit. The only difference in the way we please our patrons is that you cover where I fill their heads. In either case the result is short-lived.”

Cathie lifted her veil and dabbed for perspiration round her nostrils.

“You’re very clever, Lester,” she stated. “Here we are,” she said, and then she patted his knee again, for he was looking sulky.

“Cheer up, Lester,” she said, feeling suddenly maternal towards him and his sulks. For hadn’t she been a mother to him ever since he was three years old?

“*Here* we are!” she repeated, and Lester sprang out and glanced up at the familiar porcelain lettering across the glass windows:—

FUNERALS ATERED FOR
ECONOMY & REFORM

“Why doesn’t Dad have that ‘C’ renewed?” he panted, pulling his suitcase out of the cab.

Cathie slipped her key into the side door.

“Oh, you know what Dad is,” she said.

VIII

John Midge was sitting at the round table bent over his book. The print grew in clumps under the light from the parlor window, richly assailing the progress of his vision.

"Or, apart from all Transcendentalism, is it not a plain truth of sense, which the duller mind can even consider as a truism, that human things wholly are in continual movement, and action and reaction; working continually forward, phasis after phasis, by unalterable laws toward prescribed issues? How often must we say, and yet not rightly lay it to heart: the seed that is sown, it will spring! . . ."

John Midge leaned back to relight his pipe. He threw the match on to the carpet, where it burned a hole and went out.

"So that when your Epimenides, your somnolent Peter Klaus, since named Rip Van Winkle, awakens again, he finds it a changed world. . . ."

Epimenides? John Midge stared before him. Epimenides? He fingered the strands of his drooping grey moustache. His eyes, ironical, astigmatic, closed up behind the gold-rimmed glasses.

In the Encyclopædia maybe?

He got up stiffly. The Encyclopædia was up in his bedroom, hidden from the ravages of Milly's duster. (For Milly was thorough, Cathie said.) Epimenides. . . .

But there they were; out in the passage already, he felt impatiently. He closed his book. Cathie's stumping tread. Her mother had been a heavy walker. And Lester . . .

"Here he is, Dad! Here's Dad, Lester."

"Hello, Father."

"In your shirt sleeves, as usual!" Cathie commented as she took up the volume of Carlyle from the centre table and put it on the side table, behind the fern.

John Midge gazed his son up and down.

"How are you, my boy?"

"All right, thanks."

"You look fat."

“I don’t think I am.” Lester felt his stomach.

John Midge smiled at his son’s annoyance.

“I didn’t say you *were*. But you look it.”

“Oh, Dad,” Cathie exclaimed, “you think everybody’s fat, just because you’re a skeleton yourself!”

John Midge turned to look at her as she unpinned her toque at the mirror over the mantelpiece. He took out his pipe.

“I like fat women,” he said.

Cathie saw her reflection blush.

“Your mother was a fat woman,” John Midge added, and went and sat down in the horsehair chair by the hearth, nodding to Lester to come and sit opposite him.

“Now, me boy, give an account of yourself.”

Lester lit a cigarette, reflecting that it was extraordinary always to feel, as he did now, constrained with his father; a little, even now, in fear. You never knew what he thought.

“I’ve been very busy.” Lester blew out the match.

“That’s good hearing. So have I. What have you been busy about? Still writing, I suppose?”

“Political journalism. And getting forward with my latest novel.”

“That sounds all right.—Cathie!” he shouted to his daughter, as she went out of the room. “Tell Milly if she makes the tea as weak as it was yesterday, I’ll bury her in unconsecrated ground to-morrow.—I read an article of yours last week, in the *Despatch*, Lester; showed some sense, I thought.”

“I’m glad you liked it. I’m doing a series—half a dozen articles—for the *Manchester Leader*, on the political future of the trade-unions.”

“M’m. Interesting subject. *Very* interesting.”

“Arrowsmith wrote and suggested it. I got to know him—d’ you remember?—over *Enlightened Despotism in Industry*. He wrote to me about it at the time—”

“I often think it was a pity you left.”

“Left Plimmer-Schön?”

“M’m. You were doing well.”

“I was doing well in a system I condemned.”

“They pay their men better than any firm in England. They’ve never had a strike, you told me.”

“Yes, they pay, but they own their men too. Their efficiency’s a portent, and I believe it’s a vicious portent. Enormous capital plus enormous efficiency will be running the world in fifty years’ time. And owning the workers, simply by paying them high wages and dropping them an occasional twopence-halfpenny extra, and calling that profit sharing. It isn’t humanly good. It’s too good to be human. It’s hothouse prosperity—for the workers.”

“People nowadays,” said Cathie, stumping round the table and settling herself on the horsehair sofa that propped the piano, “seem to think they can do no work and ask what they like. *What* they like! Why, I had a girl come in to the workroom last week——”

“As you know,” John Midge said to his son, “my theories are ‘State ownership and State capital,’ *and* so forth. But as to practice . . .” He knocked out his pipe. Screwing up his eyes behind his spectacles and pretending to look through his son, he looked at him. “You oughtn’t to have left,” he said. “You might,” he said, his eyebrows twitching up, “have become a partner.—Get me a match, Cathie.—Success is worth more than idealism in this world.—Thank you, Cathie, my buxom wench.—You might have become the first Baron Midge! Eh! Schön had his eye on you. You were going to go far.—You needn’t look so dolorous, Cathie; I don’t mean what I’m saying.—Not that I’m accusing you of idealism when you left, Lester. You got the S.A.C.K., and stuffed it up with idealism afterwards.—Don’t *rattle* those damned cups, Milly.”

Milly banged down another cup and saucer.

“We’ll have the pheasant paste in, Milly,” said Cathie.

“Will you ’ave the goozbry jam in as well as the strorbry?” Milly asked.

“Yes, Milly, we will. Mr. Lester,” she added fondly, “has a particular fancy for gooseberry.”

“How extraordinary it is,” Lester thought, “that they never change. Father as incalculable as ever, and Cathie with her button eye for ever on the ‘girl’; and the trellis out there in the garden overgrown with clematis.”

“Ada Fancy’s staying near by, and she said she might look in this evening,” Cathie announced, settling herself at the table and rearranging the teacups before her. “She wants to have a little chat with you, Lester, I expect.” Cathie looked coy. Ada Fancy was one of her oldest friends.

“Isn’t she married yet?” Lester asked.

“Come and sit down, Dad. Sit down, Lester, the tea’s drawn. . . . No, she isn’t; she’s living with her married sister at Banbury just now. May Fancy that was! You remember? Mr. Fred Barwell was quite anxious to marry Ada. But she’s very particular.”

“She wasn’t very particular about Lester twelve years ago,” said John Midge. “She must be getting on,” he added. “She wasn’t a chicken then.”

Lester smiled, remembering what a jolly girl Ada had been. Ada had known how to live. Good-natured and merry-hearted, overdressed and prodigal of a hundred thoughtless caresses, she had been a relief after the sentimental Fräuleins of Heidelberg.

Ada Fancy came in just after eight o’clock. Lester, clasping her warm hand, saw that she had lost her comeliness, but that her good nature was more apparent than ever. It seemed to have overgrown the whole façade of her personality, and her eyes beamed out like the pleasant little vulgar windows.

He thought, as she beamed to his father’s greeting,—“It’s good to see you again, Miss Fancy!”—that he had never seen a woman less embittered by spinsterhood.

“Dear Cathie!”

“Ada, dear!”

Ada’s kiss smacked. Ada’s kisses had always smacked, he remembered. He had always thought the very jolliness and relish of her kisses had been her protection.

“Well,” she breathed. “Well, well, this is a treat!”

He met her gaze, her twinkle and her broad smile, with an enormous renewal of liking. (What an absurd crimping of her brown fringe across her forehead! And those coral earrings and apple cheeks, and her dimpled chin resting on its double!)

“And to think of finding *you* here!” she said to him, settling herself. “I came running round to see Cathie soon after I arrived at my cousin’s house, and she told me you were expected.”

“And why should I be so supremely unexpected?”

“Oh, ho! There he goes,” she beamed, pointing her plump arm at him. “So sue-premely,” she imitated, “un-ex-pected. Dear old Lester,” she chortled, “always had a way of *putting* things!”

“She thinks you have grown too grand to come home any more,” said John Midge, thinking as he glanced at Ada’s outlines, so stolid in moss-green velvet, and as he breathed the comfortable vivacity of her presence, that it was a pity (and if she’d only been ten years younger!) that Lester couldn’t have married a girl like that! For Ada Fancy, he thought, was just the woman to hold a man like Lester, and keep him in order. Ada Fancy could have “managed” Lester, John Midge thought.

“Yes,” said Ada. “And why not, seeing how you’ve been getting on, Lester?”

She nodded at him tenderly, thinking of the wrapper of *Marion Dewar* calling out to her from the railway bookstall. “I know the author,” she’d told the man. “I used to know him pretty well,” she’d let out, thinking of those high old times.

“I want you to put your autograph in my copy,” she said. “You must be very proud of him,” she told John Midge.

“Yes,” said Cathie, turning up the gas. “Lester is certainly doing very nicely,” she conceded, thinking of Lady Marion Creed.

John Midge trailed his fingers down the ends of his grey moustache.

“What d’ you think, my boy? D’ you think you’re doing nicely?”

“I don’t pull myself up by the roots more than I can help. I feel—” A conviction came fully to him, and as he leaned back in his chair Ada Fancy was struck by his glow of physical well-being (“like a woman carrying a child,” she thought). “I feel enormously interested in my life,” Lester said.

Ada beamed. “*That’s* good hearing. It isn’t everybody’ll tell you that!” she announced triumphantly to John Midge. For the old man had never properly appreciated Lester, she felt. A selfish old devil he was, she thought.

They drank tea.

Secretly Lester thirsted for a whiskey and soda. He wondered in what words his father would condemn such a demand. Cathie was in her vein of theatrical gossip. She was talking of Gertie Millar.

"Yes," said Ada, "and they say she was only a mill girl to start with."

"I'd rather hear Harry Lauder," pronounced John Midge, sipping from his saucer, "than listen to any number of bedizened wenches."

"I never can understand what you see in him, Dad."

"No, Cathie, I don't expect you to. You like to sit and make sheep's eyes at the heroes of romantic dramas."

"I only heard Harry Lauder once—that was last winter," said Ada. "And I must say," she chuckled, "that I laughed until I was fit to die."

"M'm?" Cathie sniffed skeptically. "Will you take another cup of tea, Ada?"

"No thanks, dear."

"And now," said Lester, "you must reveal my future in the cards, Ada."

"Orlright, Lester."

Lester fetched the cards from the cupboard in the passage. Still the same case stamped "M. L.," his mother's initials. They had been Mary Lester's patience pack. Coming back into the room, he was struck by the warm smell and brightly lit ugliness. The gas shades were like Canterbury bells with crimped pink edges.

He sat down at the table opposite Ada. She smiled absently at him and began to shuffle the cards. Cathie drew up to the table.

"You told me you didn't believe in the cards," Cathie reproached him.

"All the gentlemen *say* that," Ada winked, laying out six cards on the plush cloth. "Choose one," she ordered.

Lester turned one up.

She looked at it, and nodded, and shuffled it back into the pack.

John Midge fetched the volume of Carlyle from behind the fern and returned to his chair by the fire.

"This is too absurd," thought Midge, leaning forward on his elbows and counting the rings on Ada's fingers, while she laid out a circle of cards, face upwards.

“Well, Ada,” he chaffed, “what portentous events d’you see there?”

She brooded. The band stand at Whitby, set in jet, rose and fell on her bosom.

“You can never tell anything much from the first round,” she said, counting with her eyes. “One, two, three, four . . . *nine*. That was the ten of diamonds. One, two, three . . .”

“There’s some money—not much, but a small sum—coming to you shortly. . . . You’ll be going a short journey by land very soon indeed.”

“*Well*,” said Cathie, “that must be when you go back to London on Monday!”

“Yes,” he smiled. It was astonishing that a fool like his sister could run such a successful business. But possibly a combination of conventionality, parsimony, and snobbery was exactly . . .

“There seems to be a fair man . . . But I don’t exactly see how he works in. . . . I dare say he’ll turn up in the next round.”

She shuffled, smiling at him with an abstracted gaze, and laid out the cards again.

“Yes,” she said, “*there* he is, as plain as plain. A fair man, and he’s got something to do with you over money matters.” She brooded again. “There’s that journey again—and a dark woman at the end of it. A young woman, I should say. . . . There’s a lot of business, one way and another, and a little bit of worry, I should say, but I can’t tell you what about, and a letter coming to you, to do with business from over the water. You’ll get that letter in two or three days, I should say. . . .”

She picked up the cards.

“After this next round you got to choose out a card and wish,” she said, shuffling.

The solemnity of the two women amused him.

“There’s that dark girl again, facing towards you. There’s that small sum of money, but not as near as I thought. . . . There’s a ginger woman. You better beware of her; she means no good. And a little bit of sickness, but nothing to speak of. . . .”

She picked up the cards and laid the pack face downwards.

“Now choose one and wish.”

He found himself hesitating, and drew one at random from the middle of the pack.

"The nine of hearts," he said.

She took it.

"Orlright. You wished?"

"Yes."

She shuffled thoroughly.

He wondered if he really wished for success more than for anything else. The word was elastic. What sort of success? (A query crossed his mind like a shadow; mightn't he, given a magic wish, desire six feet of height and a Greek profile? Which came, of course, to wishing to be someone else! And yet one's self was precious—was the thing, too, that mattered. One wanted "things" for the Self. . . .)

Ada laid out some of the cards in a square pattern.

"That's you"—she pointed out the knave of hearts.

"I wouldn't call Lester a heart man," said Cathie. "He's too dark."

Ada was certain. "His hair and moustache is dark brown, but his skin's fair and he's got light eyes. . . . There's that dark girl again. And there's that ginger woman over your head. Your wish hasn't come out yet." Ada counted, moving her lips. "There's a ring," she pronounced.

"Oh!" said Cathie, looking at her brother.

Ada nodded. She sat with her crimped head bent, her plump fingers interlocked. Lester envisaged her allegorically: Destiny naked and crowned with fern, the band stand at Whitby rising and falling.

"You'll *get* your wish," she hesitated. "There'll be a parting and the journey I told you of. And there's a marriage bed."

She took up the cards. "Cut towards me, please."

"Who are you putting him to bed with, Ada?" asked John Midge, looking up from his book.

"*If* you please, Dad!" Cathie protested.

"There's a flaming angel over my head——"

Ada interrupted, gazing over the new array of cards.

“Your wish has turned up again, and there’s that dark girl, and there’s the ring. There’s that little bit of sickness (but nothing to speak of), and you’ll get a letter in the morning. Beware of an old man. . . .”

Ada looked up; her gaze lost its intensity. She beamed.

“That’s all I can tell you this evening,” she said.

“The boy’s fortune seems pretty good,” said John Midge—“according to *you*, Ada,” he said, looking with pleasure at the nape of her neck.

“Yes,” said Ada. “I don’t mind if I do have another cup of tea now, dear. —I only say what the cards tell,” she remarked to Lester.

“They seem an optimistic community,” he answered. (For the thing, he decided, that made Miss Stobart attractive was her eyes being set so wide apart in such a small face . . . and the way her head and shoulders emerged from that blue dress, a little pale, as from a vivid experience.)

“Now,” Cathie cooed, “you might tell them for me, Ada, dear.”

IX

“Who’s the girl in pale pink, passing now?” Robin Driscoll asked his friend, Ted Renshaw.

“In pink? The slim girl?”

“Yes.”

They stood outside in the starlit quadrangle. The door of the marquee blazed at them; a prismatic section of dancers. It was a relief, Robin felt, to escape for a moment out into this coolness.

“I think,” Ted Renshaw said, “that her name’s Sto-bart—Lady Conyers introduced me. I believe,” he muttered, feeling for the programme in his waistcoat pocket, “that I’ve got a dance with her later in the evening.”

Red followed pink, blue swirled across red. The kaleidoscope whirled to the lilt of a waltz.

“I wish you’d introduce me,” said Robin. “Hell!” he swore, feeling at his collar. “My second one’s collapsing already. Lucky I’ve brought four. I left them in Reggie’s rooms in Peck. I took last night as a warning.”

“Celluloid’s the stuff,” Renshaw chuckled.

They met her, coming out of the marquee. Reggie Knole, with her, was laughing loudly.

“Excuse me—Miss Stobart,” Ted panted, “but may I introduce a friend of mine—Mr. Driscoll—to you?”

Robin colored. He felt suddenly silly and precipitous. She must be thinking him bad-mannered. He stammered:—

“Is there—any chance—”

“Oh, buck *up*, Driscoll,” Reggie guffawed.

Cressida looked up into the boy’s face. She felt her color echo his embarrassment; she fumbled for her programme.

“Nineteen—or the second extra,” she gasped. And the point of the stupid little pencil was broken.

“We’re blocking up the gangway,” her partner proclaimed, pushing her elbow.

“Both, please. Nineteen *and* the second extra. Meet you here. Driscoll’s my name.” He was diffident and urgent.

She nodded, surprised by his urgency.

“D’ you know that boy?” she asked Mr. Knole as they strolled across the grass between avenues of fairy lights.

“Who? What?” barked Mr. Knole. “Oh, ho! Driscoll, d’ you mean? *Dear* old Robin! One of the nicest fellows in the world. New College man. Dear old Robin! *Dear* old Driscoll!”

Robin, changing his collar before the glass over Reggie’s mantelpiece, wondered vaguely why the name, Stobart, was familiar. (“And she’s not so . . . She’s almost *plain*—and yet . . .”) But, of course! Stobart’s *Rise of British Imperialism*. Perhaps she was a relation. (And she looked, thought Robin, as though she could dance like an angel.) And it was so like Reggie to have his looking-glass plastered with invitation cards and club notices. But Reggie—Reggie ha-haing and shoving that girl out of the tent—Reggie was bloody this evening. . . .

Waltzing with Mr. Driscoll. . . .

Lights swimming round her, colors and lights; rhythm swimming round her, rhythm and scents; her blood turned to music, music and lights. . . .

Glancing obliquely, he caught up her look. He smiled, trembling.

“And, what is it?” Cressida marveled, the lights reeling round her and his look still streaking them.

And was this life? Or was this the dream? Rhythm and scents, rhythm and lights. . . .

“But isn’t this life?” her heart cried, breaking upward in a shower of stars. (His chin on a level with her eyebrows, his mouth smiling.) “And this must never end,” she prayed, “never, never, never. For this,” she sparkled, as the music quickened, “is the most heavenly fun! The most heavenly . . .”

“What are you laughing for?” he asked. She shook her head, looking up, still laughing.

“It’s all such *fun*.” She felt his tempo answer hers.

“Her laughing,” he thought, “is too nice for words.”

"When we get to the next corner we'll spin round in double time," he said. ("Even," he thought, "if it does mean the ruin of my third collar.")

"After that we *must* have something to drink!" she exclaimed to the stars.

"Shall I bring you something here?" he asked, as they stood by two chairs among the shadows of the cloisters.

"Please."

"Isn't it lovely?" he hesitated, thinking that those arches defining the far side of the quadrangle were the very skeleton of beauty.

Hearing his footsteps retreat up the cloisters, she wondered how many ghosts he was walking through. He might carry back her glass straight through the phantom stomach of a scholar . . . "And if the moon comes out from that small cloud," she wagered herself—"if it comes out before he gets back: if only it comes out," she fought. (But then, what? What if it *did* come out?) For it was hidden now, and the grass in the quadrangle was black and sweet, and her heartbeats shook as she heard a step.

It was only a couple.

"Perhaps we shall find some chairs over *there*," the girl said, as they passed behind Cressida.

"I wish that number twenty-one wasn't a lancers," said the young man.

"Well, I shan't mind sitting it out if it *is*! After three nights' solid dancing I'm beginning to feel . . ."

The cloud was passing, passing over, its stippled whiteness fringed with silver; passing over, glowing silver, glowing gold. She held her breath.

"I do hope you like hock cup?"

The tips of horns glowed out. She feared, startled, that they surmounted a cruel face. And yet, after all, it was *almost* at the same moment; only a second later. . . . But one must, one *must* be honest with oneself. At whatever cost.

"I believe you're bewitched by the moon," he said, holding out a glass. And indeed there was, he thought, something, just something, at this angle, of the Pierrot about her—her lips gathered in an O.

She took the glass.

“Perhaps I was.”

“Once,” said Robin, as they sat down side by side, “when I was a small boy, I pulled up the nursery blind and went to sleep with the moonlight shining on my face, on purpose, because I’d been told that it made one able to see fairies.”

“I thought it was supposed to make you mad.”

“Aren’t the two results synonymous?”

“What was the effect on you?”

“I never did see any,” he confided. (But did she think him an affected ass?)

“I don’t believe,” said Cressida, feeling so at ease with him (for that was strange, she wondered, to feel so at ease with this young man)—“I don’t believe that you do *see* them—with your eyes, I mean.” (And how absurd she’d been just now; for what did it signify if the moon . . .?)

“You ‘look not with the eyes, but with the mind’?”

“Yes.” (What was he quoting from?)

“I expect that’s true.”

They paused.

“I wish I were at Oxford,” Cressida sighed.

“You?”

“Yes. I mean at college.”

“Why aren’t you, then?”

“My people won’t let me.”

“What a shame. I should rebel,” he said, fancying her head thrown back, poised rebelliously.

“You think women ought to go to college, then?” she asked. For he didn’t, she reflected, look like the kind of man who believed in women being educated; he looked too—nice, too elegant—altogether, she thought, too tidy.

He crossed his knees. The toe of his shoe glinted. “Of course. Anyone who wants to learn ought to be allowed to. It’s evil to stop them.”

“My people think it’s almost evil to let girls be really educated.”

“It’s astounding,” he said, clasping his knees. “It’s absolutely astounding to me that in nineteen hundred and two people still have such barbaric prejudices. Parents ought to read their Meredith thoroughly. He’s always thundering on that door—to release women, I mean. He says some jolly things about it. And it’s still a burning question. I wonder,” he asked (for here She was, he felt—Womanhood—unfairly, stupidly, ridiculously caged, her lovely eyes shining through bars of shadow), “I wonder if by any chance you’ve come across a novel called *Marion Dewar*?”

“Oh—but—of course. Of *course*,” she said.

“Well, don’t you think that’s good as a study of a girl’s character fighting against unfair circumstances? The style isn’t first-rate; but the stuff’s so good! So alive! Don’t you think so? Don’t you agree?” he urged.

“I do, absolutely.” And what fun, she felt, to agree with this urgency. And how odd to remember Lester Midge, last week, at Mrs. Faraday’s. And to think that next Tuesday . . .! That was what he’d written!

“It does so express what I feel. About the barbaric way women are treated.”

“Oh,” Cressida laughed, for in the strong flash of her memory this boy seemed very young, “I shouldn’t call it barbaric.”

“He does. Don’t you remember? He contends that there’s no reason in the world why the women who are our wives and—and lovers—shouldn’t be our intellectual equals—and betters, for that matter.”

“I’ve met him,” Cressida said. “The author, I mean. Lester Midge.”

“Oh, have you? How fearfully interesting. I’ve always wanted to so much! My father publishes him, you know.”

“Oh! Is your father the publisher?”

“Yes. So he knows Midge very well, you see. He believes in him. I’m always trying to get Father to let me meet him, but I’ve always happened to be away at school or here when he came to the house.”

“He’s very interesting to meet,” she said, staring through her empty glass. For if Sir George Driscoll—who, Father said, published the most distinguished list of books in London—thought so much of him . . .! And hadn’t he, in fact, been “very interesting”? And hadn’t she had a feeling of working up to the thrilling climax of next Tuesday afternoon? “He’s writing a new novel now,” she proclaimed.

The call of a horn. The second blast cleaned the bloom off her image of Lester Midge.

"The next dance," she said.

He hurried at her side through the archway out into the greater quadrangle. He thought the marquee, across the sea of trumpery fairy lights, looked like a phantom temple to Terpsichore. "A temple, in full sail," he thought. And what a bore to be dancing the next with that Haviland twin!

"I suppose," he asked, "that you couldn't get your chaperon to bring you to luncheon with me to-morrow, in my rooms?"

She stopped. She had forgotten she wouldn't be dancing with him again. Her zest bubbled out. She looked up at him.

"She's going back to London, and I've got to go with her, to-morrow morning!" Having to go was too disappointing, too hard!

"I see," he said, crumpling his programme. He felt, as the couples paced and rustled past them across the grass, that he couldn't bear her to go back to London.

"I'm very sorry. Perhaps," he added, "I might come and see you in London?"

"How curious," she felt, "that I shall never forget his face like this." For it looked so still and so eager and so funnily beautiful.

"Yes. Do come. We're in the telephone book. 'Sans-Souci,' Wimbledon Common!"

They laughed.

As he pushed round the fringe of the dancers, looking angrily for the Haviland twin (who danced like a bathing machine), he told himself that he must see Miss Stobart again.

There was something too nice about her laughing. . . . And her voice, with the husky notes sprinkled about in it—like plums in a cake. . . .

"Well," the Haviland twin said ironically, for she'd been kept waiting, "punctuality isn't your long suit, obviously, Robin."

X

Cressida found Mr. Faraday in the hall struggling into his raincoat. He looked at her anxiously but absently.

"Good afternoon, Cressida." The raincoat was on at last. He straightened up. "I believe Elsie's expecting you. She's in the library," he said.

The maid took her umbrella.

"H-how's your father?" Charles Faraday asked.

"Very well, thank you. He sent you a message. He wants you to suggest a day and come out and play golf with him."

"Oh. Thanks. I should like to. Tell him my g-golf's gone to p-pot, though."

Mr. Faraday nodded, and bolted out into the rain. He meant to walk along the Embankment until his mood of depression was gone.

"I feel," said Cressida to Elsie, "that I'm sinning against the light. I tried to make myself tell Mother who I was going to see here, and I simply *couldn't*!"

"You've got too tender a conscience!"

Cressida flopped down on one of the sofas, which felt low and exotic after the stiffly rotund upholstery, so glazed, so rosy, in her parents' drawing-room.

"No," she said, "I don't think I have. I've borrowed bits of Mother's conscience and bits of Father's conscience, but I don't think I've got a real conscience of my own at all. I mean," she said, unbuttoning her gloves, "sometimes I feel that one could be quite alarmingly broad-minded." She folded her gloves carefully on her knee. It was difficult to put to Elsie, who was so clever, how stupid and yet how eager one felt. "As broad and shallow as a pancake," she said.

Elsie smiled.

"One supposes that depth will come with years."

Cressida nodded.

"Yes. Perhaps. One pancake on another," she said.

"What did you say to your mother?"

"I said I was coming to tea with you. It suited all right, because she was driving in anyway this afternoon to have tea with Mrs. Burton Claude—in Cadogan Square. She dropped me here, and she's coming afterwards to fetch me."

"Mr. Midge won't get much reading done, then," said Elsie, looking at the clock.

"Oh, Mother's going to Aunt Celia's afterwards, and that always means a long visit. She tells Aunt Celia how difficult I am—and Aunt Celia sympathizes because I'm so plain."

"Goose!"

Cressida colored, shrugging her shoulders. "I have no illusions about my looks. I'm—all right. But next to really handsome or pretty women—I'm simply snuffed out."

"Mr. Midge," the parlor maid announced.

Cressida rustled to her feet. He shook hands with Elsie and, turning to Cressida, he tapped a parcel under his arm.

"Here's the target for your criticism," he said.

She couldn't think of an answer. It was so inevitable, she felt, under his shining gaze, that she shouldn't be able to think of an answer.

Elsie said, "I shall give you both tea, and then I shall desert you for my embroidery class"—thinking how typically inapposite was Cressida's hat, trimmed with pink roses, for such a pouring afternoon. And how sweetly absurd Cressida was, sitting there tongue-tied, while Midge's remarks and glances played over her with a fitful intensity, like amateur limelight.

"But if you haven't seen it," Midge was saying, "you certainly ought to! I mean, simply to see *her*."

"Yes," said Cressida. "I know."

"It's a bad play," Elsie remarked with a sense of presiding at a children's tea party. Lester was the kind of little boy who showed off, and Cressida crumbled her scone.

"It's a good acting play," said Lester. One could have foretold that Elsie Faraday would condemn the *Dame aux Camélias*; since human passions meant very little to Elsie, he suspected. She was a cold creature, he thought, under her crimson garments.

He was relieved when she left them.

"Now!" said Cressida, feeling the atmosphere grow easier and warmer. And she couldn't feel really constrained with someone who had eaten five of those little chocolate cakes! "Now do read to me," she said.

"It's awfully good of you," he said, wondering why her voice had suddenly touched him—"awfully good of you to be so—so interested," he repeated, feeling the quality of her youth.

And, aware of being stale (and, after all, rather an absurd little man?), he apologized:—

"I hope it won't bore you, Miss Stobart?"

"*Oh—but—*" Oh, but how could he even imagine, she wanted to say, that she, Cressida, who had never met even any author, until last week . . . "Oh, but how *could* it bore me!" she exclaimed.

He undid the manuscript, and as he bent over he had a glimpse of his feet and thought how smug, how trim, how unutterably silly they looked; the kind of feet, he thought, that Cathie might have designed.

"It's called—at least, I think it's going to be called—'Mr. Leonard's Crucible.'"

"What's the meaning?" Cressida asked, wondering if she ought to ask.

He ruminated whether he exactly knew: though, of course, what he meant was the boiling down, the ultimate fusion, the elements of the stuff of Mr. Leonard's existence—in Mr. Leonard's mind. The distillation, as it were, of Thomas Leonard's experiences.

"I'm so sorry," she said; for he looked annoyed. "It was a silly question," she said.

"No, it wasn't. I was questioning myself. But I think the book explains—more or less," he evaded, looking down at the manuscript.

"Please begin."

When she said good-bye (for Mother, Elsie had looked in to say, was waiting in the carriage outside)—when she said good-bye, it didn't seem to matter that he should hold her hand fast, or stand close to her, so that she saw the lighter hairs on his moustache. And, leaving her hand warmly in his clasp, she could only say that it was "wonderful," her breath jumping in her

chest. And how stupid to say "wonderful"! And yet what could you say, but "wonderful"?

"I think it's very sweet of you," he said, breathing the close sweetness of her face. "One day soon," he said, "I'm going to ask you to let me read you some more." For this, he felt, must only be a beginning. There must be ever so much more of such an intimacy, such a friendship; ever so much more, he told himself, feeling tired and excited, of this radiance (why, tears in her eyes!), and her little cool hand, and her scentlessness (for Clare's scents cloyed you).

And Cressida, running down the front doorsteps, her skirts held high, could only marvel that it was still the same rainy afternoon and that she had ever thought—almost with amusement?—of Lester Midge. For—

"I'm sorry, Mother," she said.

"And we're late already," said Mrs. Stobart.

—for it was nobler and deeper than clever, she thought.

"Your Aunt Celia," Mrs. Stobart said, "was extremely annoyed that I hadn't brought you with me."

"I'm sorry," said Cressida, staring at the rain spangling the carriage windows, and thinking of Lester Midge's mind. Wooden casket! How stupid, for there was something attractive about him—like watching something burning. His mind. Lester Midge's crucible: Mr. Midge's crucible? Mr. Leonard's crucible?

"Your Aunt Celia tells me that the Lang girl is engaged. A very suitable match. A young guardsman called de Freyne. I must have missed it in the *Times*."

"One could rely on Ruth Lang to make a suitable match."

"They say he has plenty of money and they are to be married in November," said Mrs. Stobart—and imagined herself, seated in the drawing-room at home, saying to—to Celia, and Mrs. Hammond, and Lady Cartwright—saying of Cressida's engagement, "He has plenty of money and they are to be married in November." Mrs. Stobart sighed.

"That must be the Stobarts' carriage going off," said Gwenda Faraday, returning from the Embankment arm in arm with her husband, whom she had found at last leaning on the parapet by Battersea Bridge. "Thank goodness, I've missed Mrs. Stobart," she said.

"You're an angel to me, Gwenda," said Charles Faraday, thinking that he might still, if she hadn't found him, be standing by Battersea Bridge in such agony of spirit.

"My darling . . ." said Mrs. Faraday.

XI

"Driscoll ought to be here at any moment," said Brace.

Lester stood at the window looking down into Fleet Street. A man's street, he thought; a murky key; the sheen of an occasional silk hat the highest note. And Bond Street alive with parasols!

"He's come round?" Lester asked.

"Yes, I thought he would. After all, the change of political shade is very small in practice. I mean in the *Epoch's* practice, which isn't predominantly a political one. But what Driscoll won't have—and what he's afraid you're going to stickle for—is any truck with what he calls 'Socialisms Rampant.'"

"I. L. P.?"

"Yes, or even refined Fabianism, for that matter. It's to be generally progressive and independent. Not a party paper. And more than half literary and artistic into the bargain."

Lester turned round and looked at Brace's awkward, excitable height.

"How do you fit that with your own scheme?"

"I think," said Brace, standing over his desk, humping his shoulders and tapping on the blotter with his bony fingers—"I think," he chewed out under his oak-colored moustache, "that for the present Driscoll's right. Progressive principles in non-party jam. He wants us to run the paper, but he won't stand for our politics—entirely."

Sir George Driscoll came in. He shook hands with each of them, clasping them heartily, reading their faces.

"Well?" he asked, laying down his grey top hat and stick and gloves. He went and stood with his back to the empty grate.

"Well, Midge, what do you think?" he asked, thrusting his hands in his trouser pockets. "What do you think?"

"I've come round to the weekly idea. But, as you know, my politics are the same as Brace's," said Lester, contemplating anew Driscoll's fine presence. He had the air, Lester thought, of a studious cavalier. A charming ease hid an uneasy sensitiveness. One felt a hint of eruption beneath the slopes of the rich middle years.

“Fabians!” said George Driscoll, looking from one to the other, fingering his moustache. “You know,” he said, glancing out of the window, “I’m not so much concerned to run a political paper as an honest and intelligent paper. The *Epoch* was good before, but unequal. Like many monthlies, it lacked sustained animation. It blared out well—as a pacifist prophet two years ago, when we were backing Morley and Lloyd George. But that matter’s dead, however dishonorably. As Brace said six weeks ago, either the paper must sink into the jog trot of a literary monthly, or, as he suggested, reform itself into a really vital weekly.—By the way,” George Driscoll said to Lester, turning his gaze from the chimney stacks on the opposite side of Fleet Street, “the three-and-sixpenny of *Marion Dewar* came in this morning from the printers. The green cover looks well. I should suggest that we had a short thing of yours in the first weekly number of the *Epoch*.”

“Yes,” said Brace. He looked at Lester. “It might even point a moral. You do that well, Midge. A political fantasia in miniature, bristling like a porcupine, but full of concentrated meat. One might even,” he said, hunching on the desk and winding his legs together—“one might even make the porcupine a symbol of the paper itself!”

“We can rely on Brace to supply the bristles,” said George Driscoll.

“Yes,” said Lester, pondering. “I could do a sketch—something of a verbal political cartoon. One could make a weekly feature of them.”

“Talking of cartoons,” said Brace, straggling off the desk and pulling out a drawer—“where the—? *Here* it is. What d’you think of this?” he said. “By a young friend of mine—the boy I was talking to you about the other day, Midge.”

He held up the drawing. In the centre a negro’s bewildered face peering round a palm tree at a Dutch farmer and an English financier wrestling ferociously. Written below: “Strolling into his former territory, the African receives an impression of practical Christianity.”

“Clever,” said Driscoll.

Lester took the drawing from Brace and examined it closely.

“I suppose no one would print that?” he asked Brace.

Brace looked at the publisher. “Will you?” he said.

“Certainly,” Driscoll said. “I’d like to see the young man,” he added. His gaze wandered.

“How far do we really all agree?” he asked abruptly. Would Brace’s intemperate energy stand the actual business and detail of a weekly editorship? Would Midge bear the routine and self-effacement of his part? Wouldn’t Midge break into politics and Brace into philosophy? He smiled to himself at the notion. And, after all, one of the interesting things about Midge was his passion for reform, his practical inspiration. (And mightn’t Brace, he wondered, have been the finer writer? Finer—but then, not so potent; Brace was too subtle and too angry. . . .)

“We shall strike off better sparks by not agreeing,” said Brace. “Let’s give the thing a chance, and see what happens.” He began to walk up and down. “Now, as far as the staff goes . . .” he said.

Lady Driscoll met her husband as he came into the hall of their house in Park Crescent.

“How’s your headache, Gloria, dear?”

Her eyes grew large beneath the swerve of pale ostrich feathers.

“I had a wing of chicken in bed at half-past one, and I’m not too ill to be off now to the Chenistons’ garden party,” she said, adjusting the tulle about her long pretty neck.

“It was only the Wordsworth Society, then?”

“Yes,” she nodded, poised before the Italian mirror. “You know, George, as a *topic* I think he’s just one degree duller than Unmarried Mothers. I cannot *stand* nature poetry,” Gloria Driscoll said, “and I never can see the excitement in imbecile villagers and cowslips. Robin’s in the library,” she said. “He absolutely refuses to accompany me to my party. And as for *your* laziness, George, dear, letting me work myself to my social bones . . .” Her flow of words trailed off. She laughed, half at her husband, half at herself, and moved out through the front door, rustling up her skirts in one gloved hand, leaving drifts of carnation scent in the hall.

George Driscoll went upstairs infected by his wife’s vague amusement at existence. An amusement which he’d come to know as Gloria’s kind of genius, sometimes annoying, he reflected, and sometimes heroic. When her children were born, Gloria had managed to be, at moments during the process, vaguely amused. And there was nothing essentially more absurd in her tulle and garden parties than in his setting two incompatible young men to spend his money on a quixotic paper.

Robin was wandering up and down by the bookshelves. He looked round at his father; then his gaze went on searching the upper shelves.

"Why wouldn't you go with your mother to the Chenistons'?" George Driscoll asked. Robin was surprised.

"She never asked me to," he said. "She looked in just now and said good-bye and hurried off."

George Driscoll sank into an armchair.

"What book were you looking for?"

"I was looking for your Browning," Robin said. "My books haven't come down from Oxford yet."

"They're over on the far shelves near the window. Which do you want?" George Driscoll asked, wondering how many generations of young men would continue to read Robert Browning and find their own romantic pattern worked into his verse.

"I want *The Ring and the Book*," Robin said, his fingers traveling and hesitating along the shelf. And, "Here it is," he said, pulling out the volume and taking it with him to the window and settling himself on the cushioned sill. His father watched him fluttering through the pages; saw him turn the pages more and more slowly; saw the boy's face grave, intent, emotional, bent over the page his fingers had sought.

XII

If Fay didn't lie to him so easily, Robert Neilson felt that he could have borne it better.

She wouldn't risk boring herself by his resentment of the truth.

Robert Neilson turned the corner from Curzon Street into Clarges Street. "Why argue, Robert, darling?" she would ask. "You know I love you," she would say, smiling up at him as she had smiled just now, from her clever black and gold cushions.

Fay, smiling, with her head bent back; whispering that she wanted you to kiss her, he thought, his spirit sickened by a lurch of memory.

And the hell of it was, he felt, his eyes screwed up against the sudden sunshine and the traffic of Piccadilly, that that was what she did want. That was all she wanted, he knew now, hailing a hansom. ("The Garrick Club," he said. "Garrick Club, Garrick Street!" he repeated, climbing in.)

And she must know that he could hear her telephoning that little bounder this morning.

Lester caught sight of Robert Neilson climbing into a hansom.

Clarges Street was cool. The sun plunged on him again in Curzon Street. Mrs. Neilson's door was shining black; the knocker a brass talon. Her drawing-room was cool—and she was standing there by the beautiful mantelpiece, one hand on the curve of her hip.

"Mr. Midge," she said, measuring him afresh, gauging her effect—and gave him two hands, laughing. She drew him down next to her, talking easily of nothing. Her talk frilled about her, he thought, like a negligée, keeping your attention on the texture of her skin and the substance of her body.

She asked, "Is your next book going to be as wonderful as *Marion Dewar*?"

Wonderful! He thought of Miss Stobart. Mrs. Neilson's lips pronouncing "wonderful"—"wonder," like a kiss.

Lester felt sorry for Robert Neilson. Looking down at Mrs. Neilson's fingers playing with a black lace fan, he congratulated her on her husband's play.

"A six months' run is very good indeed," he said.

She opened the fan slowly, aware how closely he was watching her.

"I think it's a good play," she said. And: "Do you think the woman's character is like me?" she asked, letting him have the corner of her glance.

"I haven't much opportunity of judging," he said, thinking that, although Fay Neilson was a natural *cocotte*, she certainly wasn't the *femme fatale* of her husband's play. Though it was likely, he reflected, that she seemed so to her husband.

"Do you think she's an immoral character?" Fay Neilson asked, trying to account for her sense of being, unaccountably, criticized. "Some of the critics said so, you know," she remarked, turning to him so that he felt the heat of her faunlike empty smile.

"I don't hold the traditional views of morality," Lester said.

She hesitated, her smile still on him. She breathed deep.

"You think a woman should have as many lovers as she wants to?" she demanded.

"As many lovers as she *loves*," he said, watching the slow dilation of her nostrils.

She leaned back, closing her long eyelids, leaving her hand where he could touch it.

"Ah! You believe that passion's everything?"

He was annoyed by the phrase, and withdrew his hand.

"Then what about marriage?" she asked quickly, explaining his withdrawal, her eyelids still closed.

"Isn't it too hot to discuss marriage?" he said, suddenly getting up, angry at finding himself boxed in this glimmering drawing-room. And he'd told Brace he'd go back to the office at five-fifteen. And by the clock on the mantelpiece it was that already.

"Perhaps you'd like some tea?" Mrs. Neilson asked, her cheeks flushed.

"No, thank you," he said. "I don't care about tea," he said impatiently, standing restlessly on the parquet, thinking she was like a marigold.

She laughed uncertainly.

“Are you angry with me?” she asked. For, after all, it was likely, she thought, that he was merely in a panic.

“Not at all.” A marigold on a black cushion. She was laughing up at him. She was sure now that he was afraid. “Afraid of himself,” she phrased it in her mind.

“You’ll have a whiskey and soda, then?”

“I’ve got an appointment.”

“Before you go?”

“Very well.”

She rang the bell.

Sitting down again beside her, Lester reflected on Brace’s dismissal of women as doubtful instruments of simple pleasure.

XIII

The windmill, on such a sunny afternoon, seemed to Cressida, approaching on her bicycle, to be in a whirl of lunatic gayety. She pedaled faster, smiling to herself, but with a bubble of nervousness in her diaphragm. It was too annoying, Mother had said, that Cressida should have chosen just this afternoon to go for a ride with Mabel Hare—just this afternoon when Mrs. Lefèvre was driving out for tea.

How funny, if Mother had only asked, "Where are you going?" and she, Cressida, could have replied, with quite a hint of wit, that she was going to throw her bonnet over the Windmill.

Not that there was much of that, in so innocent an assignation. And, after all, she reflected, if you threw your bonnet over a windmill on Wimbledon Common, it would only land on Wimbledon Common the other side.

Was it really—undignified to meet him like this? "But what else," she thought angrily, jumping off her bicycle, "can I do—after Mother's rudeness?" Mother's "treatment" of Mr. Midge! "Just the kind of man," Mother said, "that Gwenda Faraday *would* pick up. And his books," Mother said, "are disgusting." "But she needn't," thought Cressida, biting her lip, "have been so altogether—insolent." Only women like Mother could be so rude; and only a man of Mr. Midge's calibre, someone with a sense of humor and an understanding of human beings, could have been so magnanimous. For it was heroic, Cressida felt, that after that dreadful "call" he should have written asking how he could see her again.

She wheeled her bicycle round to the small grass plateau on the other side of the Windmill.

He was already there, sitting on a bench with his bicycle leaning against his knees.

When he saw her his bicycle crashed to the ground and he came hurrying towards her.

"Oh," he said. "Oh," Lester said. "My dear—my dear Miss Stobart," he added, seeing her color so.

"I feel it's dreadful of me to come," Cressida found herself saying.

He saw that she said it without affectation.

"I feel it's very kind of you," he said humbly, realizing that she'd probably never sacrificed the principle of truth before. Or sacrificed any

principle, he realized, seeing the sweet fine grain of her character.

"But, you see," she said (for it wouldn't do, she felt vaguely, to let him imagine she'd come too voluntarily; it wouldn't do, she considered, wondering if such "pride" weren't after all false and silly)—"you see, on the other hand, I've felt I must come to apologize."

"I see." He turned away and picked up his bicycle. A Swift, Cressida noticed, like hers. A coincidence. How idiotic to think that!

"Mother was—was so—so unjust," she compromised.

Lester dusted over the handlebars with his handkerchief, thinking of Mrs. Stobart as the typical don's wife, upper middle class, choked by small snobberies.

"Possibly you're unjust—to her," he said, telling himself that the world was full of Mrs. Stobarts, who only reacted according to their youthful environment when they flung "public school" in one's teeth. "Full of damnable dull Mrs. Stobarts," he reflected, remembering how he'd felt the hit.

"Oh—you are—you are *good*," she breathed. For she'd seen him hit and writhed for his discomfiture.

"My dear," he said—"good?"

They started off.

"We'll go to Richmond Park," Lester said, feeling, as they passed a group of people, a pride in the girl's trimness—in her white shirt and white skirt and neat blue waistband.

Whenever they met a carriage, Cressida bent her head so that her sailor brim should hide her face. Alone, with a young man she'd met three times! (And those few letters. She remembered the phrase of his last letter—"Let me see you again, because there are some friendships between men and women that are beautiful and portentous and must come to fruition, or else there's a definite loss, and a definite wrong.") Cressida glanced at him, freewheeling down the hill beside her, and wished shamefully that he wouldn't wear clips round the bottom of his trousers.

He began to talk about the *Epoch*. "I'm going to take over the literary editing entirely," he said.

"That won't stop you working at *Mr. Leonard*?" she asked.

"Oh, no! I ought to get it finished before Christmas."

“So that,” Cressida thought, “is how authors talk about their work; quite simply, as if it were a cushion cover.” (And it would be a relief if she *did* get that cushion cover for Aunt Celia finished by Christmas.)

Richmond Park had the green tranquillity of an old print.

Lester thought, as they ascended a long incline of graveled road, that it was as if the word “Park” had made the drives faintly formal, had lengthened vistas for the sake of dignity, and framed the whole in a narrow black and gold molding. And yet it was wild enough for deer—and sequestered enough, on the deep slopes and among the rich English trees, for lovers.

“Sometimes I ride here before breakfast,” Cressida said, looking far down a grass avenue where, in the early mornings, the air was crisp and quiet and scented, and the dew broke into emerald blotches under the horses’ hoofs.

“Are you fond of riding?”

“Oh—*yes*.” (“For there’s no sensation in the world,” Cressida thought, “so lovely, so heavenly, as riding early on a summer morning.”)

Lester saw that her thoughts discounted his presence. And he couldn’t ride. And with that sparkle in her eyes she looked astonishingly pretty.

“I don’t ride.”

“Oh.” She felt sorry that he was hurt, and blamed herself.

“My early surroundings,” he said, suddenly pitying himself, “didn’t provide for equestrian diversions.” He remembered asking his father if he could ride one of the horses, so satin-black and plumed, back from a funeral; and Cathie had boxed his ears.

“Anyway,” said Cressida, “this is *much* more fun”—and saw his look lighten.

They left their bicycles under an oak tree and climbed a bank. “Why has she come?” he wondered, sitting down beside her. She was out of breath, and her eyes smiled distantly toward the blue pale enamel lake. Lester felt that he had no clue to the tender intricacy of her mind. “And why have I come?” he wondered, and asked her, “Do you always wear something blue?” thinking that his two hands could meet round her waist. And didn’t a preoccupation with blue mean a lack of passion? Blue was quiet; quietness, the color of spring shadows.

“Do I? I don’t know. I’m fond of it. I like blue flowers. Hyacinths, harebells, delphinium. But I think I love all colors and all flowers,” Cressida said, and felt the speaking of her love waken a nostalgia for all flowers and colors under heaven.

“I think it’s curious,” she said, “how flowers have given every color a smell.” She hesitated. “I should like a garden of my own—a really lovely garden; not like ours—Mother’s, I mean—laurels and fat rhododendrons chaperoning a lot of stolid pink and red borders. Something big, and with orchards, and bursting with life—and rather tangly and wild, as if it hadn’t always got a nurse at its heels.”

“Is that what would make you happiest?” Lester asked, surprised by her vehemence. She seemed to desire a garden as some women desired children.

“Oh—I don’t know.” She felt his thoughts closing round her like invisible arms. “Lots of things can make one happy,” Cressida said, sitting upright on the grass.

Lester was jabbed by a sharp tenderness for her, sitting so upright and troubled beside him, her hands locked on the white folds of her skirt.

“What are you going to do with your life, you sweet odd child?”

She shook her head, looking into his eyes.

“I don’t know,” she said, her heart gibbering. Why did he ask her? And how could she help it if he caught and held her so, without a gesture, without moving near to her? (For he was so good, and so wonderful!) And didn’t such a question, catching her by the throat, such a sudden question, mean that he understood how dreadfully she was tied up? And what a silly life she led?

“But with all the splendor and adventure and beauty of life before you, you must *know*,” Lester said. (Wasn’t there a heartbreaking sweetness in swift spring shadows? The petal of a delphinium had been smeared beneath her eyes.)

“Oh . . .” Cressida breathed out, feeling herself dazzled by “splendor” and “adventure” and “beauty”—three suns sprung to noon in the sky. “You see,” she said, “it’s different for you.”

“Why different for me?”

“Because you’re a man,” Cressida said, feeling her feet touch hard ground. For it was always, whatever one would like to believe, different for a man.

“My dear, it isn’t. It needn’t be. Not to-day, in the beginning of the twentieth century,” Lester said, feeling how his words held her. “Don’t you see that you and I are living at a time when we can see all the old barriers for women, and consequently all the old barriers between men and women, visibly falling?”

“Oh,” said Cressida, thinking of Elsie Faraday—“for *some* women!”

“You’ve only got to seize your privileges.”

Cressida stared into his face. It swam and flickered. Her tears rolled hotly down her cheeks.

“If you’re m-me, y-you can’t,” she sobbed, feeling her whole body knot in resentment and nervousness and swift shame.

“My dear,” he said. “My sweet darling—my darling child . . .”

“I stay at home,” she sobbed out, bemused by her own vehemence—“for m-milk,” she sobbed—“like any horrid little cat,” she said, grabbing the handkerchief he held out to her.

She scrubbed her eyes.

“I had no idea you were so rebellious,” he said. If he were to try and take her in his arms, he thought, passionately pitying her, she would probably run away.

And he didn’t want to lose her. He didn’t want to lose her loveliness of quality, her uncertain sweetness, her clean transparent youth.

Cressida got up and heard herself say huskily:—

“I think I’d better go home.” (“After having made such a fool of myself,” she thought, and realized his handkerchief in her hand.)

They walked back to their bicycles under the oak tree.

“I’ll ride back as far as the Windmill with you,” Lester said.

Cressida got on. She thought from his voice that he was annoyed. And no wonder, when he’d taken all this trouble to be friends with her, and she’d behaved suddenly like an hysterical schoolgirl. And why had she cried, she asked herself, empty with shame, thinking as they rode out of the Park how hideous that woman’s spotted parasol was. . . . And did she really care so much whether she was cooped up at home or not?

When they said good-bye, he leaned across his handlebars, looking into her eyes.

"I think I'm falling in love with you," he said.

When she got home, Cressida went up the back stairs to reach her room without meeting anyone.

She sponged her face with cold water and tidied her hair. The contents of her mind that had been so hot and turbulent out of doors seemed to set and become cold and gelatinous and opaque. She felt a distaste for them, and changed her shoes.

She went downstairs exhausted.

"Well," said Mrs. Stobart, who was sitting on the terrace outside the library. "It was a pity you chose just this afternoon to go for a ride on your bicycle."

"Why?" Cressida asked. "You mean because of Mrs. Lefèvre?" she said, bumping down into a garden chair.

"No. Oh, no; I know my friends bore you."

Cressida leaned back, staring across the lawn at the rhododendrons. Mrs. Stobart waited, holding her knitting in mid-air.

"No," Mrs. Stobart repeated at last, placing her knitting down on her knee. "As a matter of fact——" she said, as though in final concession to many guesses. "A very nice young man," said Catherine Stobart, watching her daughter—"a very nice young man called, especially to see you."

"A young *man*?"

"Yes."

"I—I don't *know* any—" For only Lester Midge's face was solid—its warm colors, the white teeth, the gusto of the arched nostrils and moist lips.

"A young man," said Catherine Stobart, coyly but reprovingly (it was so like Cressida, this), "whom you met at Oxford. A young Mr. Driscoll. Son," she said, "of Sir George Driscoll, the publisher. A very nice young man indeed."

"Oh. Yes . . ."

"He came all the way out from London this afternoon—by the Underground Railway. He seemed very disappointed. But I think he quite took to dear old Mrs. Lefèvre (her son was at Cambridge years ago, you know!), and she drove him back in her carriage."

“Oh,” said Cressida, for her mother’s word rattled back a shutter—and there were the fairy lights on the dark grass, and the footsteps on the grass, and his face looking down at her. . . .

That had been fun. . . . Fun?

“Yes . . . he’s charming. I liked him. He waltzes beautifully.”

“Of course,” Catherine Stobart remarked, “he’s young. But he tells me he’s going into his father’s firm. (I always feel publishing’s so different from business.) . . . Such a gentleman,” said Mrs. Stobart, annoyed by Cressida’s quiet—“which always makes *such* a difference! Something quite aristocratic about him,” she said, observing Floyd talking to the new undergardener under the pergola.

“Yes,” said Cressida, “he’s a very nice boy.” Her mother’s simplicity was sometimes beyond bearing. And yet, wasn’t he a very nice boy? she asked herself unhappily.

Catherine Stobart wondered if Floyd was beckoning to her or pointing something out to the gardener. He would be angry, she knew, if she mistook his sign. “You only missed him,” she said, edging forward on her chair, “by about two minutes.”

XIV

Cressida sat up in bed, late into the night, hugging her knees.

It was unbelievable that he should have said that he was falling in love with her. With *her*—Cressida Stobart! And you could see from his books that he knew what it was to be in love.

But did *she* know? she asked herself, pressing down her chin on her knees. Did she know? she wondered.

How strange it was that Lester Midge should be falling in love with Cressida Stobart!

"And could I ever love him enough in return?" she asked herself, listening to the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece.

And how could he ever find her adequate?

Adequate? She saw herself tip up in the kitchen scales, altogether too light, too feathery, and Lester Midge let down with a jerk, so that the kitchen dresser shook and the plates rattled.

"What did you put in?" (Somebody asking.)

"Cressida Stobart."

"What! All Cressida Stobart?"

"Yes. Cressida Stobart's soul and mind and body."

"Oh." (Somebody laughing.) "She rather let poor Lester Midge down, didn't she?"

"For he couldn't have said it lightly," Cressida thought, feeling sick at her own smallness.

It was his magnanimity that made him talk about all women as men's equals, and men's mates.

"And what's the use of his pretending to me," she felt, her eyelids hot—"what is the good his pretending to me that I'm his equal?"

She remembered her mother saying once that clever men so often fall in love with stupid women.

"But if I were beautiful," Cressida thought, "it would be different. . . ."

And yet you could tell from his books that he knew what it was to be in love. . . .

The next morning Cressida had a letter from him. She went down the garden to the summerhouse to read it. It began as if with a fragment of a complete beginning.

> I find myself wandering restlessly and helplessly about my whole storehouse of words; and none of them seem the right words to put into this letter to you.
>
> Isn't that queer, when you think how easily I can choose and discard and fashion them—for my art?
>
> But this isn't Art, Cressida. This is Life. I'm not throwing out a volume to a stuffy careless British Public. I, the absolutely essential me, is trying to say something to you. To the girl I know as "Cressida Stobart." And I keep coming back to the sense that so far we've only been funny little exteriors, man and woman, each labeled with our names, and each trying—oh, so pathetically and oddly—to find each other by stringing our little words into sentences and dangling them to one another as one holds some bright silly little possession one has to attract a child.
>
> So that now, when the real Me sits down to write to the real You, I find myself disinclined to use words, as if the currency weren't fine enough.
>
> And yet I must write to you, my dear.
>
> Yesterday, when I said I was falling in love with you, it was just as if the real Me got up suddenly and said to the amiable conversational young author sitting beside such a pretty young lady in Richmond Park:—
>
> "Do you realize that you are growing to love this girl as you've never loved a woman in your life?". . .

"But do I love him?" Cressida asked herself, deeply moved, looking up at the clear morning sky, and down at the gravel path.

She watched an earwig cross the matting on the summerhouse floor. For surely this scramble in her mind, and this jumping pain that was like toothache in her heart, meant that she loved him?

She got up, feeling that her thoughts would be clearer outside the smell of the summerhouse. The new undergardener touched his cap as she passed him. Whereas more important gardeners, she reflected, always wore bowlers; and found herself feverishly puzzling: Was there any symbolism in the bowler? Was the bowler a sign of encouragement to life in plants, as a top hat was a sign of respect for death in humans?

On the other side of the wall, in the kitchen garden, she heard Mr. Hinkthorne walking, as usual, with Mrs. Hinkthorne before he went off to the City; blowing his nose.

“The chrysanthemums are coming along all right,” he was saying to Mrs. Hinkthorne.

Marriage! To walk in the garden and comment on the chrysanthemums. To rattle against each other, as Mother and Father did sometimes, like dice in a box. Poor Father. Poor Mother.

“Poor Mother,” she thought, in a gust of anger. And how *like* Mother, how typical of her, to fasten her groping ideas on that boy. “So *nice*,” Mother said. “So distinguished,” said Mother—who could insult one of the finest minds in England over her own teacups. Poor Mother had seen him as her daughter’s first and last hope. “*All* the way from London”—as if it were condescension on the boy’s part; while Lester Midge had ridden on his bicycle all the way from Kensington, thought Cressida, grasping his letter and frowning away those clips round his ankles.

Not, she thought, pausing to pick a stalk of lavender and rub it between her fingers, that she didn’t like him, hadn’t liked the Driscoll boy very much. . . .

She stood still. The morning was quiet round her. She sniffed her hand; it smelled delicious.

She’d liked Mr. Driscoll very much indeed.

But what right had Mother to make him a reflection on the qualities of Lester Midge?

PART TWO

I

"Milward!" summoned Mrs. Stobart.

Milward turned to the dressing table to help with the fixing of the pad on her mistress's head. Milward often wondered how she'd feel if she had pink spaces among her hair. She took a glance at herself above Mrs. Stobart's anxious primmed-up face. She thought of Bert. Bert was always saying he'd like to see her with her hair down. Cheek. Bert! But a shiver ran warmly under her skin.

"When Mrs. Midge comes to stay here next week I want you to help wait on her, just as before, Milward!"

"Yes, Madam. . . . I can't hardly get used to thinkin' of Miss Cressida—like that," Milward confided.

"Yes, Milward, it does seem strange," said Mrs. Stobart, mildly disapproving. She didn't encourage confidences from servants.

She rose and discarded her frilled jacket. Milward fetched the blouse newly arrived from Debenham's.

"And the grey cloth skirt, Milward."

The skirt smoothed Mrs. Stobart's hips; the ruffles and pleats of the blouse foamed over her solid bosom. Chains, brooch, a bracelet.

Mrs. Stobart turned sideways and looked over her shoulder. Miss Gattrey had been very clever with those folds at the back, thought Mrs. Stobart contentedly. For Catherine Stobart's posterior proportions troubled her.

Milward proffered a handkerchief scented with eau de Cologne. Mrs. Stobart gave a last pat to each curl of her fringe.

She felt ready to receive her guests. Downstairs the chintzes looked so nice and fresh in the firelight.

There was nothing like a fire, Catherine Stobart thought, for making a room look cheerful in autumn.

Celia ought to be here at any minute. She glanced round with a refreshed consciousness of her delightful drawing-room. Those pink chrysanthemums looked so charming against the dove-grey moiré of the panelings. (She had never regretted having that put in, though Floyd had been so difficult about it.) The silver frames and ornaments shone with Ransom's care. And that

new shade in the standard lamp, again, just toned with the pink chrysanthemums and the curtains.

Ransom opened the door.

"Miss Osram, madam."

"Celia—my dear."

The sisters embraced.

"How are you, Catherine? I hope you're well."

"Of course I'm well." Mrs. Stobart was always annoyed by her sister's inquiries after her health. Celia had ruined her own constitution by thinking too much about health, Mrs. Stobart thought.

"And you're looking splendid, Celia," said Catherine Stobart, making amends, and gazing with a mixture of timidity and disapproval into Celia's high-nosed bloomily freckled face.

"Yes," Celia admitted. "I'm feeling much better. In fact, I'm feeling an entirely new woman; quite re-created," Miss Osram pronounced in her brittle voice, drawing off her gloves and gazing earnestly at her hands. "This Doctor Hay-Belthorpe, whom Agnes Card recommended—"

Catherine Stobart listened skeptically. She didn't believe in specialists. A good general practitioner was worth all the specialists in Harley Street put together.

"—He says that people manufacture their own poisons," Celia continued. "My headaches have been nothing but the result of poison in my system."

"I've always thought your headaches were due to that fine work you do," said Catherine.

"There is nothing wrong with my eyes. Nothing at all!" Celia Osram snapped, dropping her lids as if to hide the eyes from foolish imputations.

"I only mean, dear, that you ought to be careful. Sight is a precious gift."

"Twelve senna leaves every night—" Celia resumed.

"Lady Lang. Mrs. Lefèvre," announced Ransom.

"Well," demanded Lady Lang, placing her Dresden-china appearance on the sofa, "what's the latest news of the young couple?"

“They return next Thursday. Sugar, Mrs. Lefèvre? *And* milk? Yes, we’re expecting them here for a few days.”

“I always think that the visits of relatives are a mixed pleasure,” Miss Osram remarked. “No sugar for *me*, Catherine, *please*.”

Mrs. Lefèvre’s upper lip lifted and then extended into a soft smile.

“Dear young things. And where have they been for their honeymoon? I was so sorry I was ill at the time of the wedding,” she said gently, gazing sweetly and noncommittally from Mrs. Stobart to Miss Osram, and from Miss Osram to Lady Lang.

“They went first to the north of Italy, and they’ve been spending the last three weeks walking, in Provence—rather a tiring plan, I thought, for Cressida, but they seem to have been enjoying it. I believe it’s very picturesque there.”

“Walking!” exclaimed Mrs. Lefèvre gently.

“And is your son-in-law writing another book?” demanded Lady Lang.

“Yes. Cressida tells me he’s getting on excellently with it. He’s got more than three quarters of it done, Cressida says. He worked at it quite a lot while they were in Italy,” said Catherine Stobart, mildly pouting with a sense of achieved privilege. For not one of her guests could boast a matter-of-course intimacy with Literature. And she could tell that even Hester Lang, sitting there in her pearls and taffeta (and one of her peculiar black picture hats that were supposed to be like Watteau or something)—even Hester Lang was impressed by Cressida’s “match.” Even though Hester had “married off” Ruth to that young de Freyne,—who had plenty of money,—and though Ruth was now the Honorable Mrs. . . .

“I liked his last book extremely,” announced Lady Lang. “Very clever. One feels he has genius.”

“Oh,” said Catherine Stobart lightly. “Oh, there’s no doubt he has *that*.”

“Well, if he’s a genius,” remarked Miss Osrarn, breaking off an effortless chat with Mrs. Lefèvre, “it may not all be a bed of roses as far as Cressida’s concerned.”

Catherine Stobart flushed. “No sensible woman expects marriage to be a bower of roses,” she said with difficult mildness. “Life always has its little ups and downs.” She smiled deliberately, conjuring the phrase that had helped her when Floyd was irritable.

“No, indeed,” said Celia Osram. “That’s quite true. Marriages always make me glad to be an old maid.” She laughed sharply, a gust shaking her mind.

“And how is dear Ruth?” Catherine asked Lady Lang. “And are they settled in their house yet?”

“Ruth is as well as can be expected,” said Lady Lang, pursing her porcelain face, her eyes communicating the unsayable to her hostess.

“Really—well; I am glad”—and Mrs. Stobart flushed, for it gave her quite a pang to think that Cressida too might—be liable to Ruth’s condition. For it was so very queer to think of Cressida being married in just that particular way. . . .

“I hope Ruth and Cressida will see something of each other when they’re both settled,” said Lady Lang. “Ruth likes literary and artistic people. And I want your young couple to come and dine with me too—Lord Rockton was lunching with us the other day, and I find he’s most anxious to meet your son-in-law. He said he remembered hearing Bernhard Schön (*the* Schön, of Plimmer-Schön, you know) talking about your son-in-law, and saying that he was so clever—”

Ransom came in to clear away tea. It was a marvel, she reflected, how they’d cleared the plates. But then Miss Osram always ate enough for three, though she did look like a scarecrow. And her maid had told Milward that Miss Osram would eat as many as six ham sandwiches in bed at night.

“And have you,” Mrs. Lefèvre murmured, “seen anything more of that *nice* young man who called that afternoon while I was here last summer? *Such* a nice boy, I thought! And while we were driving back he told me in such a delightful way all about what he had studied at Oxford. History, you know—and I think he said he had taken ‘Napoleon’ as his special subject—”

“Yes,” said Catherine Stobart. “Mr. Driscoll. A nice boy—but very young, you know.”

“Ah, but I think there is nothing nicer than a boy like that,” said Mrs. Lefèvre. “Such nice manners. One doesn’t always find young men have nice manners nowadays. There seem to be fewer and fewer well-bred young people about,” she said softly, looking with vague inquiry at Miss Osram, who always seemed to be such an authority on everything.

“I quite agree. Breeding is most important,” said Celia Osram. “Brains are all very well,” she said clearly, “but breeding always tells in the long run.”

“Well, one needs both to make a world,” pronounced Lady Lang suavely, gathering up her skirts and preparing to go.

II

“*Des lettres pour Midge?*”

“Any mail for Hansard?” boomed the American over Cressida’s shoulder.

The concierge shuffled the envelopes.

“*Deux pour Hansard. Une, Madame Mitch!*”

He watched the English lady turn away with her letter and go to meet the monsieur coming down the stairs, who was her husband certainly, perhaps her bridegroom—for their luggage was new, and Madame appeared to be very young.

“A letter from Elsie,” said Cressida.

“Really. How like Elsie’s efficiency to know where to address it.”

“I sent her a postcard last week, saying we were going here.”

He slipped his arm through hers as they went towards the dining room.

“One of your innumerable postcards, darling! You’ll pay for all this greeting of casual friends when we get back by having to continue in the flesh what was so lightly begun on cardboard.”

“Elsie isn’t a casual, anyway,” Cressida smiled, as they sat down at their table. She opened the letter. Lester saw astonishment inform her features.

“Good *heavens*, darling!” Cressida cried.

“What is it?”

“Of all people!” Cressida exclaimed. “How dreadful! How impossible, Lester!” she insisted, staring at line after line of Elsie’s firmly formed handwriting. “She’s going to marry Everard Stanhouse!”

Lester laughed, for there was something delicious in Cressida’s air of prophetic dismay.

“Don’t you remember, Lester? That fair young man in the Foreign Office who knows about Chinese porcelain? And talks through the bridge of his nose? Don’t you remember him—at the Faradays’ dinner party?”

Lester remembered.

"Oh," he said, watching her face. "That evening," he said softly, wondering if it *had* been that evening that he began to care. For it was easy enough to imagine, looking back, and framing it all up, and so "drawing it together" into the squareness of the present. It was easy enough to forget the casual moment of attraction on the Faradays' doorstep, and call it a symbolical threshold.

"But you're not attending, darling," she protested.

"Yes I am—I'm sure he'll suit Elsie admirably. She's got all the makings of a diplomat's wife. All her mother's poise, without any of Gwenda's impulsiveness."

"You're always horrid about Elsie," said Cressida, puzzled. But then, Elsie had always been—well, critical about him, ever since their engagement. "An odd person for *you* to marry," Elsie had said. And, of course, he was! An astounding person for her to marry. She felt half triumphant, half uncertain. For just where was he, this person she had married?

The man at this table with her, looking so brown and alive in a horrid tweed knickerbocker suit?

Or the author with all the incredible little vanities and resentments?

Or the lover who disarmed her by the violence and sentimentality of his passion?

"Elsie knows exactly how thick her bread is buttered," Lester said (remembering Elsie's comment to him, on his engagement: "I suppose you want a permanent victim tied to your chariot wheels, Lester").

"You don't think she's married for butter, do you, darling?" Cressida asked.

"One doesn't condemn it."

"But no woman worth anything would," said Cressida, distressed and annoyed. "You might as well accuse me of marrying you for your reputation!"

"Are you sure you didn't?" he asked lightly.

"Darling," she said, and then hesitated. For, of course, in the beginning there *had* been that. And naturally you couldn't separate the two—at first.

"Of course—at first," she said gravely. "At first it—must have been—the glamour, well, I mean, your reputation—"

“Why ‘must have been’?” he asked warily, his spirits falling. What was she going to say? What did she mean? Did she mean that it had needed his reputation as an author to rouse her interest? “Do you mean to say,” he demanded, hurt, working on her difficult honesty, “that at first I meant nothing to you—as myself?”

“But Lester, darling—how could I have separated them?” she asked, seeing, miserably, that she had grazed his feelings. “Dear!” she begged.

“Yes, yes, of course there’s something in that. Nevertheless—I must have seemed—a man to you, a physical being?” he asked. “You must have looked at me and had some quite definite reaction?”

She colored, remembering how she’d thought him a plain little man. And even now . . . And he was always talking about the beauty of people’s bodies, and wanting her to agree, so personally, with him.

“Darling,” she said. “You know that I felt that it was wonderful that you should even speak to me—”

He sat back abruptly.

“I see. And now, at close quarters, my brains don’t impress you any more?”

She pressed her hands together.

“You’re being unjust,” she said. “You know how I love you. And you know that I’m only too aware of how great your mind is. And how absurd and feathery mine is in comparison,” she whispered.

Lester’s resentment dissolved.

“My dear love. I am a beast,” he said, laying his hand on hers. “I suppose I’m always wanting to feel more and more certain that you love me, and wanting to feel more and more sure of you. And that makes me seem bitter—or suspicious—” He withdrew his hand and seized his fork. “Being an artist makes one half a woman,” he said, flashing out a rich amusement, and filling his mouth.

Cressida took up her fork with uncertain fingers.

“I’m afraid being an artist’s wife doesn’t make me half a man,” she said, trying to laugh.

That afternoon they went for a walk round Avignon. To-morrow they would be going back to England.

They climbed the hill past the Palace of the Popes. On its steps beggars screeched and mumbled for alms. The old woman was selling postcards to two of the late autumn visitors.

A flight of birds passed overhead in the silver air. Cressida wondered if they were on their way south from England, and imagined them gathering on the roof of her grandmother's stables at Chalfont, flocking round the clock tower (while in the drive, under the beeches, you could stagger through leaves, making them rustle like tissue paper).

They climbed to the height of the gardens, past the fountains and the children playing round the shrubs.

They stood looking far down on the huddle of ochre roofs in the lower town, and on the Rhone's desolate width; and beyond at the fields and vine terraces, and away to the steel flat silhouettes of the mountains.

Cressida made a remark about the view. But he wasn't listening.

When he spoke he asked her:—

"Have you been happy, my dear?"

"Happy . . .?"

"I mean in these weeks together?" he asked, feeling suddenly alone and afraid, and staring down at the broken bridge over the river. "Have I made you happy?" he insisted, tautened for her reply. For she was so terribly clear that you could look through her words into her mind.

"Happy?" she asked herself. "Happy"—which was such a little word—like measuring infinity with a hairpin, she thought.

"You've made me feel that life is fuller and stronger, and—and more 'full of life' than I could have imagined," she said, thinking of "Sans-Souci" and the gravel drive between the laurels, and the housemaids flicking round! "I think you've made me drunk with life," she breathed, the last six weeks leaping and swinging and spangling in her mind like acrobats in a circus.

Lester turned to look into her face, and saw it as the triangular mirror of his own vitality, throwing back his own zest, his health, his restlessness. And yet, he thought, with a fearful tenderness, the mirror itself was quiet, and too subtle, too sensitive. . . .

"And yet," he said, "I don't want to make you drunk. I want some of your soberness, and some of your—tranquillity." ("But am I so tranquil?" she asked herself. "Isn't it just that I can't express myself? Or does he mean dull?" she wondered, with a pang of doubt.)

"I've such a gluttony for life," he said, "so that one becomes like an animal, out of sheer appetite for it—taking it in huge gobbets, and losing by that: losing the subtleties of taste, I mean. . . . Sometimes," he said, "I wonder if I haven't seized you too roughly and transplanted you out of the soil you were grown in—simply because I could only think that I wanted to have you and your atmosphere, and your companionship."

"But I think I was aching to be transplanted, my dear."

"You stand it beautifully—in fact, you even seem to bloom from it," he said gently, thinking that she was transfigured by new color in her lips and eyes.

She smiled without speaking.

This was all a dream, she thought, just as "home" was a dream, and the wedding, and the future. One dream slipping after another. Even through boredom or excitement or love or pain one could feel the liquid smoothness of the dream slipping past, carrying away the residue of each sensation, soothing away sensation into its own flowing nothingness.

"I love you so very much, my dear," she heard him say.

"I love you so very much," he said, hardly articulate. For suddenly in this final sunshine he reached the feeling that he loved her without desire or reason. He found himself thinking, "I shall never be so good as this again. (So good?) Never," he accused himself in a gust of fear and humility.

"Oh, my darling!" she heard him say, the words groping to her heart. "My darling—"

But she couldn't bear to see him cry. She held out her hands, through the swimming stuff of her dream. "My dear—what is it?"

"I shall never be so good again," he felt, agonized, mourning that dazzling oppressive moment, and letting her draw him into her arms. For they were alone in the gardens now, and he could let himself be a child, holding close to its mother for unspoken consolation.

III

Wimbledon Common was yellow and red with leaves, and the ponderous silhouette of the windmill and the wispy shapes of the trees stood against a tin-colored sky. Cressida shivered with Lester's arm round her.

"We shall soon be warm," he said, kissing her nose. "It's like kissing a hailstone," he said, laughing.

"How can you know?" she asked, smiling and yawning and shoving closer to him in the dark cab, and thinking of the bubbling whisper of the silver kettle, and the wicker cake stand, and how warm, how cushiony, how dreadfully, deliciously "cosy" it would be at home. "You were worse than me on the boat," she yawned.

"I shall be glad when one can cross in a flying machine," he said, feeling greenish at the memory of all those retching bodies down in the men's cabin.

"You'll hate that just as much, I expect. I wonder if the porter *did* put in the box of 'souvenirs'?"

"He did. It's on the roof rack."

"How Mother will love those laces! They'll be another excuse for edging something and adding to the linen cupboard."

"What did you get your father in the end? I've forgotten," Lester said, looking down obliquely and closely at the shape of her eyelids. "I wish you didn't look so tired, my sweetheart," he said.

"I'm only cold, darling. I got him that walking stick at Arles—don't you remember? Because you said he wouldn't use the carved pipe. And, darling," she said, sitting suddenly forward and peering out of the window, "there it is! Isn't that odd?" she exclaimed, staring at the two gateposts and the bank of laurels and shrubs. "Odd, I mean, that it's just, *just* the same! Even the postman's bicycle," she murmured, gazing at its red skeleton leaned against the gnarled holly trees.

"*There* they are—there's the cab," said Ransom, pressing against the pantry window bars. "Miss Milward," she shouted, "*here* they *are*!" While Milward came running across the passage from the servants' hall. And—

"I do believe I hear wheels, Floyd!" exclaimed Catherine Stobart, rising from the sofa. "Yes—yes—quite distinctly, Floyd, dear."

“You behave as if the girl had been away six years instead of six weeks,” he grunted, his anticipation driven inward by her flutter. “And it’s probably your imagination and not they at all,” he fidgeted, prickled by her lack of repose.

“But it *is* them, Floyd,” Catherine gasped, bustling to the drawing-room door, and out into the hall. “It is them. Dear, dear, and all in this rain—and—come along, Ransom, come along, go to the door, they’ll be soaking!” she exclaimed, seeing two shapes shifting against the stained-glass panels of the front door. “Cressida, my dear!” she cried, rustling forward, and holding out her arms.

“Mother, darling!” said Cressida. “Mother, darling!” she gasped out, so absurdly near crying because Mother was so solidly the same, her muff chain clinking against her brooches and her face smelling of vanilla; and there was the leopard skin mounted on blue felt. . . .

“And how are you, dear Lester?” asked Catherine Stobart, offering her son-in-law her cheek and quite determined not to feel awkward with him.

“Father, dear,” said Cressida, on tiptoe, while he embraced her, feeling that his face was surprisingly bony after Lester’s, and that perhaps (no wonder!) Mother hadn’t liked such bony kisses. But then it was always, she thought, answering her mother’s questions about the crossing—it was always so odd to think of historians kissing their wives.

“Yes, I’m afraid Cressida is rather tired,” Lester answered. “And I didn’t endure the crossing very well myself,” he added, letting Ransom take his coat. “It’s very difficult to retain any generous feelings towards one’s fellow creatures under rough Channel conditions. Horrible! I’ve always been a bad sailor. I detest the sea.”

“I always go to Devonshire for my holiday,” said Floyd Stobart, remarking to himself on the selfishness of Lester’s attitude. “I like to walk, you know. Proper walking, I mean. Twenty miles or more every day. Keeps you thoroughly fit,” he boomed, looking down at Lester with his prominent green eyes.

Catherine fussed her daughter up the stairs. “We’ve put you in the rose room—your old room seemed so small. Just wash your hands now, and then we’ll have tea.—Ransom,” she called over the banisters, “we’ll have tea at once.—Aunt Celia’s coming to dinner and staying the night, to welcome you both home. She was most anxious to. And after tea, dear, I expect you’d like to have a little lie-down. We’ll look after Lester; don’t you worry,” she said, warming to the notion of her son-in-law now that she had left him

downstairs. “And then you must tell us *all* about everything, and what you *saw*, and (yes, Lucy *has* brought your hot water—she’s a good girl, really, but not quite trained yet—but May is doing her best with her), and—*dear* child!” exclaimed Catherine, patting the girl’s shoulder, and feeling the oddness of Cressida, in this room. “I do hope you’ll be comfortable in here,” she said, glancing as naturally as she could at the gigantic mahogany bed.

“It’s just too lovely and comfortable,” murmured Cressida, vaguely smoothing her hair at the glass over the mantelpiece, and feeling the warmth of the fire creeping about her knees and melting up her body. “Too lovely and comfy,” she sighed, for there was a smell of lavender sachets in the room, and the red curtains shut out the brilliance and the draughts and the angles of the last six weeks, and here was the old dream, hung with red plush; and roses like crimson cabbages in the wallpaper; and Mother saying, “I’ve told them to send up your hot milk as usual at night”—but with a new note of deference: “Of course, I don’t know if you still care for it. . . .”

So that was what marriage could do for you—with Mother!

“No,” said Cressida gently. “As a matter of fact, I don’t take hot milk any more at night.”

Celia Osram raised her lorgnon while she talked across the table at Cressida.

“I saw the young de Freynes yesterday. They have a most delightful house in Curzon Street. Most delightful. They bought it from the Gerald Staverleys—and have hardly had to do it up at all. Such nice airy rooms—I hope you and Lester will find anything half as delightful.”

“We don’t intend to look for anything half as expensive, Miss Osram,” Lester said, meeting Cressida’s look of timid encouragement. “With our views and our income we should scarcely be so inartistic as to live in Curzon Street.”

“No,” said Celia Osram, “naturally not. One wouldn’t expect you to. I merely meant that I hoped Cressida would find anything half as healthy.”

“St. John’s Wood is very healthy,” said Lester.

Mrs. Stobart shifted in her chair and looked across the table at her husband. She had heard that couples who weren’t married lived together in St. John’s Wood.

“St. John’s Wood is out of the question,” said Miss Osram.

“Chelsea, then?” Lester asked gravely, and saw Cressida’s warning frown.

“Chelsea is altogether too damp.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Stobart. “I always think Chelsea is very damp. I’ve always wondered why the Faradays should have chosen Chelsea.”

“Hampstead is very healthy,” said Lester.

“There are too many Jews in Hampstead,” said Celia Osram, whose grandmother had been a Jewess; and Mrs. Stobart looked anxiously about her, for she was never quite sure whether Cressida had discovered that her great-grandmother had been a Jewess, (though Gwenda Faraday had said that it made people so clever—but then the Faradays thought nothing but cleverness mattered).

“Then what about South Kensington?” asked Lester. “Surely South Kensington is very Anglo-Saxon?”

“South Kensington is very bourgeois!”

“But who are the bourgeoisie, if we aren’t?” said Lester, and felt a spasm of denial shoot round the table. “Surely,” he said blandly, glancing over the encrusted table silver, the admirable napery, “surely we are the Great British middle class?”

“Of course we are,” said Cressida, seeing Aunt Celia draw up her nostrils, and aware that her mother was looking painfully at Lester.

“My notion of the bourgeoisie is of something quite distinct,” said Miss Osram. “I consider that refinement is what makes people’s class,” she said, looking at Lester and remembering his too dreadful sister at the wedding; who was like a lodging-house keeper, Celia Osram thought; and luckily a great many people must have supposed that she was an old servant or maid admitted to the occasion!

“Class distinctions,” said Floyd, “are always difficult to define in theory, but easily observed in fact.”

“Refinement of what?” Lester challenged Miss Osram, thinking that her high face and her rich, unremarkable clothes and her sterile emotions were the very epitome of her stupid class.

“Refinement of speech and dress—and taste,” said Celia Osram, munching a small bit of apple.

“I hate refinement,” said Cressida, flushing suddenly—for Aunt Celia was being rude to Lester on purpose.

Celia Osram looked pityingly at her sister.

“Now, shall we have coffee here or in the drawing-room?” Mrs. Stobart asked, flurried by Cressida’s manner, and Celia being in one of her disagreeable moods.

“Yes,” boomed Floyd abruptly, looking at his daughter. “So do I,” he said, cracking a nut savagely.

“So—do you what, Father?”

“Hate refinement,” he snapped. “Loathe it—sickens me. Sometimes I wish I was a navvy!”

“Oh—Floyd, dear!”

“My dear Floyd!” said Miss Osram.

Lester looked from his mother-in-law’s pink anxious face to Floyd cracking one nut after another like an infuriated ape. And Cressida looked as if she were going to cry, and Lester remembered her saying that in so many cases family life seemed like a lot of wretched animals caught in a net together—trapped, she said. But not in their case, she’d said, her arms closed round his neck, and her gaze piercing closely and sweetly into his consciousness. (Not in their case, he promised himself earnestly.)

Cheese in a trap! He still wondered, sipping his port in the dining room with Mr. Stobart, who paced about, helping himself vaguely to chocolates and salted almonds. A little lust sprinkled with a little glamour (and after all it was “the thing,” since all the world—who mattered—lived in traps together). Some scraps of prestige and a flavor of consequence—and in they went. Down went the trap. And then they started breeding. You could breed a trapful on a morsel of lust long after the glamour was licked off.

“What’s your opinion of Chamberlain’s South African mission?” Floyd asked.

In the drawing-room Miss Osram summoned Lester.

“Cressida tells me your new book is almost finished. What is it about?”

“A man’s Odyssey.”

“I see,” said Celia Osram. “Do you expect it to be a success?”

"You mean—how much money do I expect to make by it?"

"Cressida has been used to every comfort," Miss Osram remarked.

"So I see," said Lester. "But she doesn't, probably in consequence, rate it very highly."

"Do your publishers expect it to go well?"

"They haven't seen it yet."

"Was the last one considered to have a good sale?"

"It made six hundred and seventy-three pounds, ten shillings, and elevenpence-halfpenny."

What was Lester saying, Cressida wondered, to make Aunt Celia look so uncomfortable. "And this is another view of Switzerland," she said, handing her mother another postcard.

"Oh, Lester," said Mrs. Stobart, feeling that it was time to speak to him in an easy, cheerful way, "we went to such an *interesting* play the other night—I feel sure you and Cressida would enjoy it. 'Lady Dixon's Dilemma'—most interesting. All about a woman who knew her husband had forged a cheque, and whether she ought to stand by him, or—"

"A driveling play," said Floyd.

"I believe that's Robert Neilson's new play," said Cressida.

"I gather from what Lady Lang was telling me," said Celia Osram, "that Neilson is obliged to turn out as many popular plays as possible to pay his wife's dress bills."

"Why—Lester, isn't she that lovely woman who was at the Faradays' that night?" Cressida asked.

IV

"After all," Charles Faraday had said, "there are other things that matter more." And when Gwenda had asked him what,—what mattered more to them than Elsie's happiness,—he'd said . . .

But then that was the difference; however tenderhearted Charles might be, he could be fatalistic about Elsie marrying that bamboo stick of a young man because those other things mattered to him: tariffs and by-elections; and this eternal jig-saw puzzling with facts and conclusions, fitting and refitting the tortuous edges of ideas. Because men felt inside their bones that these things mattered. (Their bones being solid with marrow, not channels for a terrifying uncertain succession of intuitions, moods, inspirations.)

But, as Charles had said, trying to soothe her into silence, "What can we do anyway, my dear? Elsie must know her own mind"—which of course Elsie did, thought Gwenda, looking at her watch, for she didn't want to keep little Cressida waiting (and half-past eleven at Buszards', she'd said, and Cressida was always punctual). Elsie had always known her own mind—a mind like an enamel box with the lid fitting smoothly, and the answer always ready inside. So that Elsie really ought to have children (she would have been an admirable governess, darling handsome Elsie), and when they asked "Why?" "What does?" "What makes?" and "Do you know?" she would open the little box and show them the fact lying there like a polished pebble. Whereas one's own facts . . .

But what did two and two matter (four or five or six, for that matter), when what one tried to know, with one's whole mind aching, was whether Charles really minded Beverley's letter to the *Manchester Guardian*, or if that boy was really as hungry as his manners when he came to dinner, and whether (for it did matter desperately, Gwenda felt)—whether Elsie loved this perfectly appalling Stanhouse?

And yet you couldn't say to Elsie, Gwenda Faraday thought, hurrying in and out between the Oxford Street people—you couldn't say to your daughter, "You must only marry for love," for saying that kind of thing only doubled the disadvantages of being forty-three—and a mother at that. . . .

"Earnest and enlightened mothers like myself have no status," thought Gwenda, and smiled involuntarily to meet herself in a draughty moment hurrying down a strip of mirror, her skirt caved between her knees and her muff clasped against her waist like a rescued cat. Whereas "they," she reflected, thinking even now with awe of her parents, had had it; "status"—

like public sculpture: stone buttons and stone gloves and a brow that no phenomenon of man or nature could dismay. . . .

Or weren't they like that? Was it just that they had died so young, so very young (loved by those terrible nursery Gods?), and left nothing to her —for she'd been only nine—but stone buttons and stone gloves?

"And there she is," she said aloud, swinging through Buszards' door; for there, across the throng, among the wedding cake and christening cakes, waiting, thought Gwenda, among so many festive tombs, was Cressida in a fur hat.

"My darling Cressida, I'm so late."

"No, you aren't. I've only just come," said Cressida. "Lester brought me here, and now he's gone off to Fleet Street, and he asked me to say that he was so sorry not to see you."

"Oh, well, I'm glad I'm in his good books again. We weren't on speaking terms at your wedding," smiled Mrs. Faraday. "Not that you knew, of course."

"Oh, but he does like you," Cressida protested, wondering if Lester could have had one of his moods with Mrs. Faraday.

"Does he? Let's sit here. I do love Buszards', don't you? I suppose it's just sentiment. Coming here used to be my greatest treat—My godmother— You'll have—?—Two chocolates, then, please.—Does he like me? But then everyone does a little (except your mother). I suppose I care that they should."

"So do I," thought Cressida, "but that doesn't make them."

"It is *nice* of you to suggest this," said Cressida gratefully. For you could lie back into Mrs. Faraday's company. Lie back with a sigh after Mother's bothering about the size of the scullery in Edwardes Square, and Lester running one at such a pitch ("And how much I love him," she thought, suddenly filled and shaken with feeling).

"—it's always so much nicer," Mrs. Faraday was saying, "to choose for oneself. More than half the presents Charles and I had were only fit for the spare room. We had an ormolu clock under a glass case."

Under the froth of cream, the chocolate burned into one's tongue. Cressida's eyes watered. Mrs. Faraday, looking amused and careless, tasted at hers like a dog.

"Is Lester's book finished?"

"All but two chapters. He's going to show me the whole of the last third together—I don't suppose he'll get it quite done till we're settled in Edwardes Square. The atmosphere at home isn't very conducive . . ."

"Oh! Atmosphere!" smiled Gwenda Faraday, her nostrils scenting nonsense. "Artists create their own atmospheric conditions," she said. "Very often that's all they do create," she added, thinking again of that Hungarian boy (who Charles said was a mild impostor; but then, weren't we all?).

"Of course, he's very anxious to get it done by the New Year, as Driscolls want to publish it in the late spring," said Cressida with authority, for even Mrs. Faraday could be annoying at moments, when her thoughts wandered off and she held a teaspoon up in front of her face as though it were a hand glass.

"Do you think it's good?"

"As far as I've seen," said Cressida, hoping that she didn't sound too elated and significant.

"What do you think," asked Gwenda, her heart chilled again as she drained her chocolate, "of Elsie's engagement? Isn't it heartbreaking?" she continued, cutting short Cressida's embarrassed beginning—"that etiolated Apollo . . ."

"I expect they have artistic interests in common," Cressida proffered.

"I can't understand Elsie."

"It seems quite reasonable," said Cressida, remembering how her own engagement had been condemned over and over again as unreasonable.

"So awful," said Mrs. Faraday, "to be so reasonable—for oneself."

Out in Oxford Street, they turned toward Tottenham Court Road.

"I hope you'll like them," breathed Gwenda sideways, across a gust. "I thought they might just do for the dining room. . . . Queen Anne, Fiddle-back—with shell cresting. The little man's a treasure and never cheats me, because his wife used to be my cook. She had her first baby in my house, and then he married her. Charles was sorry, because she had a way of doing chicken with sour cream. . . ."

V

"And . . . Well," said Cathie, "I must be getting along."

"Oh, don't go yet!"

Cathie still eyed her sister-in-law with this new feeling of disappointment. She couldn't get over finding them living in such a small way (and not even a piano!).

"Won't you change your mind," asked Cressida, "and have another cup of tea?" Cups of tea seemed as appropriate to Cathie as buns to bears—her aura the steam of strong tea.

"No, thanks very much. I s'pose Lester's kept pretty busy these days?"

"Oh, yes, when he isn't away most of the day in Fleet Street, he's shut up in his study writing."

"Mm'm. Rather dull for you, I dare say?"

Cressida smiled, smoothing her skirt over her knees. She couldn't quite relax before Cathie's formidable gentility and the multiple upward stare of those button boots.

"I have my resources," she said. "I mean," she added, "I read a good deal, and I'm fond of sewing—and I walk about—go for walks—I think one never gets tired of looking at people in a big town."

"I dare say," said Cathie. She drew on her gloves. On the back of each glove lay three dark stripes like spare eyebrows.

"It's bitterly cold out," said Cathie Midge.

"Yes," said Cressida eagerly. "I'm afraid it is." She went to the window, and drew back a curtain. "It's rather foggy," she said, gazing at the sand-colored glow round the street lamp.

"A London fog," said Cathie, making a last appraisal of the room, and wondering where they had put the wrought-iron standard lamp that she'd given them. "Well," she said, "tell Lester I was sorry to miss him—but happening to be up in town on a small matter I just thought I'd drop in. . . ." She didn't mention her victorious interview with Messrs. Wetherby and Perks of Great Portland Street (though, "Take it from me," she'd said to the nervous man, "if I get another lot of them cheap-looking, good-for-nothing *so-called* 'ostrich feathers' from you, my business with you is finished—*see!*").

“I’m so glad you did,” said Cressida. “It was so very good of you to come all this way out—Mary shall call you a cab,” she said, pressing the bell.

Mary stood out on the pavement shrilling her whistle, the fog condensing on her inflated cheeks.

“Oh, Mary,” called Cressida from the hall, “you *must* put something on. You’ll catch a dreadful cold,” she said, hurrying out with a tweed cloak. And, cloppeting and jingling, a cab came suddenly out of the sand-colored night, and a voice from the box wheezed, “Where to, miss?” and Cathie’s “Paddington” slipped magically upward through the cold air to the box, which grunted a benison that might be “Verygoodmiss.”

“Bye-bye,” called out Cathie’s voice from inside her phantom coach, as a phantom whip cracked and cracked again when a last blanketed jingle signaled that she was leaving the shrouds of Edwardes Square for the High Street.

“And please ’m,” said cook, half emerged from the lower regions, “Wellby’s ’as sent *beef* sausages.”

Cressida hesitated (what was so reprehensible in beef sausages?).

“Excuse me, m’m, but did you mention pork sausages when you was givin’ the order?”

“I just said sausages.”

“Oh. I see, m’m. . . .”

“Are they so very different?”

“*Different*, m’m? Of course, beef sausages is *orlright*—”

“Well, we must have them this once,” said Cressida, going up the stairs—for it would be time to dress soon, and Lester would be back—and it was in these matters that one was as full of gaps as the kind of cheese that was all holes. There was probably a whole technology of sausages (beef or pork making so vital a difference), and if you came to think of those shop windows roseate and florescent with varieties of sausages . . .! What gusto in a professorship of Sausiology! (“. . . And of course clear soup every night, with eggs at twopence each,” cook said, “is bound to make the dairy bill mount up!” And yet what stretch of intuition could tell you that you *cleared* soup with egg—or was it eggshells?)

She sat down on the fender stool and took up the last number of the *Epoch*. Lester's second article on "The Future of the English Novel." Rereading it, her attention followed, a little breathlessly, the impetus of his style. Everything looked better in print. Handwriting left too bodily a warmth; print was a relegation of the live author—a small death (*partir, c'est mourir un peu*).

In the hall Lester shook himself like a cat and bounded up the little staircase.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, seeing him suddenly in the doorway.

He smiled at the upturned vivacity of her face and his page of the *Epoch* open on her lap, and bent and kissed her mouth.

His moustache was wet.

"Cathie came to tea," she said, wishing that she had what Lester called a passionate temperament. For he'd said she was "as delicious and unresponsive as a bowl of gardenias" (which was where she most failed him, she thought, getting up and slipping her arm through his). "She only left ten minutes ago."

He pressed the bell.

"How startling. I hope you were kind to her. Did she indulge in society gossip . . .?—The whiskey-and-soda, please, Mary."

"She was very disappointed in our quarters. She'd obviously expected something much more 'stylish.'"

"Cathie's a frustrated woman. She ought either to have been a duchess, or the lady's maid of a duchess."

Mary brought in a registered parcel on the tray.

"Just come for you, sir."

Lester looked at the label.

"Ah," he said, dropping Cressida's hand. "It's the proofs at last!"

He began to drag off the string. Cressida fetched her scissors.

"It's all right, I've done it," he said crossly, crackling layers of brown paper and throwing them on to the carpet. "Two lots they've sent. Rotten paper they use for these proofs. Mm'm, rather a nice title-page—I like their

printing, don't you? Don't you think that's a well-arranged page? . . . Very nice, I think."

Cressida stared at:—

MR. LEONARD'S CRUCIBLE
A Novel

BY
LESTER MIDGE

DRISCOLL & CO.
57 GREAT BOSTOCK STREET,
LONDON, 1903

beautifully set out in type. There was indeed a queer excitement in seeing the book so real, so forward as this. She glanced sideways at his intent profile. He was picking up pages at random and reading them sternly and yet tremulously through.

"You must feel like a woman seeing her baby for the first time after it's born," she said, half-laughing and yet as nervous as he.

He didn't hear her remark.

"Damn," he said, "damn!" scrabbling in his pocket for a pencil. "The fools have printed 'accidental' for 'occidental.'"

"'Western' would have been safer!" muttered Cressida, handing him a pencil from the writing table.

He made a mark in the margin and then looked up at her and laughed.

"An unerring printer would be against nature—but they're worst of all when they become constructive and suggest deletions and alterations of their own. . . ." His attention went back to the page in his hand.

Cressida sneezed.

"To-morrow I want you to read it," he said.

She sneezed again.

"It's so—queer to think you've written that, Lester, in *this* house, with me running up and down the stairs." She looked at his right hand. It was so

odd to think of his mind pulsing through his ugly small-fingered hand. “It is *odd*,” she repeated.

“I wonder how you’ll like it?”

“It’s so exciting—to have it all to read, to-morrow.” She colored. “I am *proud* to be your wife,” she said.

And as she dressed, with Lester humming and knocking round his dressing room next door, she was still surprised that the familiar self, with such “salt cellars,” fastening her bodice in the glass, should belong to sets of proofs, and title-pages and printers’ errors. And—

“Oh, *Lester*,” she called out.

He looked in, dangling his white tie. She was sitting small and luminous in her frothing petticoats.

“Yes?” he asked, marveling, for he had never seen her so alight.

“Oh, *come* and kiss me,” she laughed, holding out her arms in a rush of gratitude.

“What is it?” he whispered. “What is it, my dear?” he asked, feeling the strength of her childish embrace.

“Oh, I don’t know. You make me so happy . . . it’s all so exciting, being the wife of—of someone like you.”

“Foolish child,” he said, holding her close, dissatisfied by the extraordinary clearness of her gaze. “Don’t you *love* me?” he asked.

“But, my dear, I—oh, Lester—” For what was she trying to say to him—except that? That she loved him—that she was so enormously grateful . . .

“Isn’t it—exciting—to love me?—to *love* me?” he repeated. “Those damned proofs!” he said, pressing his lips against her shoulder.

She shifted in his arms.

“But my words are so *stupid*,” she said. “But you *know* that I love you and that I’m such a silly wife for you. Such an ordinary kind of a creature to go pattering in your wake. Oh—darling—”

“I don’t want to be hero-worshiped,” he said, getting up and slipping his tie round his neck.

Cressida hesitated.

“Yes, you do,” she said; for however much she loved him she couldn’t let him talk nonsense. “If I hadn’t hero-worshiped you from the beginning, you’d never have noticed me!” she remarked, smiling secretly to the Self in the glass (for “between ourselves,” she thought to that responsive Cressida —who was still, somehow, unmarried and likely to be Miss Stobart forever —“between ourselves, Lester has his very silly moments”).

He went back into his dressing room. “Is that true? Am I as vain as that?” he demanded of the little man with the round face tying his white tie badly. “But Cressida doesn’t understand,” he reflected, thinking tenderly of her, and remembering how Fay Neilson had laughed up at him from her black cushions on that hot afternoon in Curzon Street.

VI

“Is that you, Robin?” called Gloria Driscoll, from her pillows. “Come in, darling boy,” she called out, putting down her book on the white quilt. “Are you just off to your party, darling?” (“If I were a girl,” she thought, “I’d be crazy about Robin.”)

He stood by her bed, straightening down his waistcoat.

“I wish you hadn’t accepted for me, Mother.”

“But you must go *out*, Robin. You can’t just shut yourself up like a hermit, at your age.”

“But I don’t like Lady Lang. She’s a snob,” he said, bending to kiss his mother.

“Well. And so am *I* a snob,” said Gloria, resting her fingers against his cheek (for he’d looked badly these last two months, she thought with a little jolt of anxiety, and maybe the routine in the office didn’t suit him; and she must speak about it to George).

“Yes, Mum, I know. But differently. Lady Lang’s as hard as nails.”

“But you’re too soft, Robin. You’d like everybody to be practising Christians or Utopians or something. She’s a wise old lady in her way. . . .”

“What are you reading, Mum?” He picked up her book.

“It’s this new novel by a girl of eighteen that your father’s doing. I can’t see it’s so marvelous, but George thinks so, and I suppose he thinks he knows.”

“*The Wooden Wedding*—Rosamund Avon,” he read. “What’s it about?” he asked, putting it back on the quilt.

“Oh, I don’t know. What are all novels about? What was it that man’s article in the *Epoch* said about novels this week? Something about the modern novel being slices of life buttered with imagination—”

“Hot-buttered life? The Carpenter said nothing but—”

“You’d better be going, darling.”

He turned round at the door and smiled gravely at her. There was something so charming about Mother in her white room with her white carpets and her white immense cupboards and her mirrors and bottles and

flowers—lying in bed for no reason at all . . . and her bulldog asleep in front of the fire.

"Bless you, darling," she said, kissing her hand. "Enjoy yourself—and if your father's back and hasn't got lost in the fog, tell him I want a word with him."

VII

A parquet floor between them.

Robin hesitated.

The world between them was upside down and shallow; French brocades and cabriole legs dwindling blurrily down, and a chandelier drowning, flames downward and glass pendants bubbling up.

She sat by that red-haired woman. But the red-haired woman got up, leaving—Mrs.—Mrs. Midge free. Or at least alone. . . .

She sat there looking round the room, but not at him. But at dinner she'd smiled at him across the table, making him feel again that unbidden pain. . . . And yet he'd known, all these months. . . . And she looked different, but he didn't know how she looked different . . .; and if only he could talk to her, or simply sit over there by her ("And I must be a little mad," he thought); and without interest he saw Lester Midge speaking to the red-haired woman by that bust of, it must be, Voltaire (or Lady Lang?—Lady Lang herself?).

"—and now you must come and talk to Mrs. Midge," said Lady Lang, and tapping across they went.

"Mr. Driscoll is learning to be a publisher—in his father's firm," said Lady Lang.

"We've met before . . ." said Cressida.

"At Oxford," he said, sitting down too near the edge of the sofa.

"Before I was married," Cressida explained to Lady Lang, who nodded "Oh, really" and left them.

"Do you know," remarked Robin, "that this is the first opportunity I've had of meeting your husband?"

"Oh . . . is it?"

He looked at her hands: so lovely he thought them; and imagined their touch, uncertain and cool and throbbing.

"Do you remember we talked about him at Commem—that time?" he asked.

"Did we? I'd forgotten." She glanced toward Lester. If only he weren't so bow-fronted. It was he who looked as if he were going to have the baby.

"What a jolly evening that was—"

"Yes"—for it seemed another world; and the moon . . . there had been something unsatisfactory about the moon. Does marriage change one completely? she wondered. The Cressida at an Oxford Ball in a pink dress startled and eluded her so that she felt the pain of loss.

"I called on your family soon after that, but you were out."

"Yes," she said uncertainly. "I remember." (Out—in Richmond Park.) "But you must come and see us—in London."

Something happened in his face, darkened his eyes, hurt his lips.

"I should be delighted—"

"We live in Edwardes Square. Number 31," said Cressida.

Robin said: "I think that's a most charming part of London." ("And every word that comes out of my mouth is boring her!" he thought.)

"It's nice and quiet—and it isn't expensive."

"You prefer it to living at Wimbledon?"

"I think so. It's more convenient in many ways—but I miss the trees," she said.

"Do you?" he asked. He felt as if she had looked at him for the first time since he sat down by her. "I've always imagined . . ." He hesitated, looking at her seriously, intently.

"What?"

"I mean—I should imagine that you would be—right, among trees. I think one often feels that certain people need certain settings," he explained away. "For instance, Ruth de Freyne, a type of woman with a high polish, so to speak, obviously needs a drawing-room or a garden party to set her off. Her mother, our excellent hostess, is at her best driving in the Park. Mrs. Neilson, on the other hand, is a boudoir or restaurant type—"

"And I'm simply—rustic," Cressida laughed.

"You—" His expression changed. "I didn't mean that," he said, and flushed with the sense that she was laughing at his stop-gap talkativeness.

"I know you didn't. Only, you see, I'm bad at being talked to about myself," she appealed. "I suppose it's because I've had very little of it. When I was younger I used to dread being noticed. I thought people laughed at me. And I'm still 'gauche.'"

“And—I’m very gauche in the delivery of compliments.”

“Let’s talk about something else, then!”

He was real now. They were side by side as a matter of course, friendly, as she’d never felt friendliness before.

“What d’you like talking about?”

“You choose. Only not anything too special. I’m as ignorant as a refined young lady’s education can make me!”

“What about books—that should be your province, now—”

“Very well. You start—”

“That’s the woman’s prerogative.”

“Very well. Are you fond of *reading*, Mr. Driscoll?”

“*Passionately fond* of it. Are you, Mrs. Midge?”

“Oh, I love reading. *Good* books, of course. I don’t like trashy stuff. But if I have a good book and a nice fire, I’m perfectly contented to spend a whole afternoon.”

“So am I. I wouldn’t be without books for the world. Our ‘silent friends’ I always call them.”

“Yes, indeed they are. And it’s a great thing to have resources in yourself. Broadens the mind, too. Have you read *The Rosary*, Mr. Driscoll?”

“A very fine book.”

“A beautiful book. I cried my eyes out over it.”

“Is that your wife,” Fay Neilson asked, “laughing with that good-looking boy over there?”

“Yes.”

“How funny to think of you married!”

“Why?”

“I shouldn’t have thought you were a marrying type.” She smiled irrelevantly.

“On the contrary, I’m very uxorious.”

"You never told me you were going to get married. . . . She's a pretty little thing. Rather Quakerish, isn't she?"

Lester was amused to see Fay Neilson so deliberately stamp Cressida with the antithesis of her own quality.

"And are you—wonderfully happy?" she asked with a soft warm impertinence.

"Ah! If I asked myself that I should be mauling the butterfly's wings!" He felt pleased with his metaphor—and then doubtful.

"Why? Who's the butterfly?" Fay asked curiously, wondering if he meant that he and his wife never went to bed together.

"Who do you suppose?" said Lester. He decided that she was, as he suspected, a stupid woman.

By which dispensation, he decided, none of her vitality was deflected.

VIII

London had never seemed to Lester more enchanting than on the sudden spring day following Lady Lang's dinner party.

He parted from Brace in Fleet Street and began to walk along the Strand with a feeling of being, at last, free to savor the unexpected charm of a familiar creature.

It was as though London had abruptly quitted her long mourning for nineteen-two; as though, he thought, she'd dried her tears, torn the sodden shrouds from her body, and waited, pale and radiant, for the summer of nineteen hundred and three.

He breathed consciously in soft pleasurable gasps. The light dazzled, bringing tears to his eyes. And outside Simpson's a man who surely, surely wasn't there on any yesterday stood by a hamper of primroses.

Lester stopped to buy some for Cressida. "Keep the change," he said to the man (in the mood of such a day, who could want their change?—as the man knew, pocketing it hastily; though it was mostly ladies that told you to keep the change).

Lester turned away.

A spick little man was what the waitress saw, glancing out of Appenrodts; a spick little man in a bowler hat sniffing at a bunch of primroses. . . .

There was dew among the petals. You could smell lanes with the cart tracks rutting deep and the sky in the puddles. . . . And coming so innocently in the early year, they had the youngest scent, and were like a child's kiss against your lips. . . .

Nelson was lost above the gay streets. And an urchin sold Lester a paper under the very nose of a British lion; a murder, a society wedding. . . . He stuffed the paper in his pocket.

In the Mall the carriages rolled silently, the horses gleaming, high-stepping, hoofs varnished, bits glittering. There was Beauty, side by side in a victoria, smiles flashing—so pretty one might take them for actresses. And there a barouche drew up and the old lady leaned forward, holding the fur rug over her knees, to speak to the young couple; and Lester, passing, heard the girl saying, "Yes, *isn't* it lovely, Aunty Alice?"

The crocuses peeped and glowed, mauve and flame, in the grass under the bare trees. . . . Down there Queen Anne's Mansions was like a barrack, too tall if it hadn't been for Big Ben. (But in America, Brace said, they had only just begun to tackle the beauty and advantage of height, and the Flat Iron had a beauty of its own—"a towering chastity of design," Brace said.) "I must go to America," Lester thought, tripping along towards Buckingham Palace. A spare lady in purple inclined her head; he raised his hat. Lady Marion Creed. Her Skye terrier yapped towards him.

"Bobby, Bobby, be quiet! Down! Naughty dog! I've been meaning to call on your wife, but we've only just come back from Algiers," she said. She spoke of the weather, while the plumes nodded in her hat. "And my husband's cousin, George Driscoll, tells me that your wife is a delightful little person! You must both come and dine soon, before we go down to Clayton-Hatchetts for Easter. Of course, it'll be quite quiet. . . ."

He remembered that this was Lent and that she was a Roman Catholic. She smiled vaguely, the plumes nodding her farewell. As Lester walked on he pondered with mingled feelings of respect and superiority on Lady Marion's rank and religion. He would tell Cressida, casually, of the invitation. "I met old Marion Creed"? "I met old Lady Marion"? . . .

At Hyde Park Corner he climbed on to a bus. . . . If it was like this to-morrow it would do Cressida's cold good to go out. He remembered that she had been spending to-day reading *Mr. Leonard*; he felt a pleasurable anticipation and imagined how she would get up and come and take his hand and look at him with the day's pent-up excitement in her eyes. . . .

But the next book would be better still . . . still better, when he could get down to it. So few people could write a political novel that wasn't either specious or stodgy. Nobody had yet. "Dizzy," perhaps; but too irrelevant; a *sorbet* of a novel, for the palate, not the appetite—whereas a rougher canvas, a Socialist theme . . . He would talk to Cressida about it, to-night, at dinner.

Lester hummed to himself, hurrying across Edwardes Square. How dear and trim the house looked with its green door and green window boxes. How pleasant to get home early for once!

He fitted his key in the shining lock.

"Cressida!" he called. "Cressida!" he shouted up the staircase.

There was no answer.

"Cressida!"

The drawing-room door was shut. He flung it open, bounced in.

"Cressida!"

She was seated at the writing bureau, and didn't turn her head.

He went up behind her. What was her absurd game? He put his hands on her shoulders.

"Darling, what—"

She dropped her pen, starting round to face him. Her eyelids were swollen.

"How *could* you?" she broke out.

He stared at her.

She pointed to the proof sheets of *Mr. Leonard* flung on sofa and carpet.

"How *could* you, Lester?"

"I don't understand—" Was this a frenzy incident to her condition?

She paused stiffly, then came out with a pent-up "How could you *write* all that? All the end part? How could you *want* to?"

"My dear . . .?"

"That honeymoon—making a peep show of our—love. Using it, like that, in a book, for everyone to see—how could you *want* to . . .?"

"But—Cressida—"

She rubbed her nose with a sodden handkerchief and backed further away from him, knocking the bureau so that the ornaments rattled.

"Is nothing sacred to you?"

"My dear child—darling, don't be dramatic—"

"You can't deny that you've used our love as an episode—*used* it—"

"But, darling—"

She hesitated, staring at him, pressing her handkerchief to her nose. Her thoughts were blurred.

"Is nothing sacred to you? Is nothing sacred—and beautiful, and personal—too personal to *parade*?"

"Cressida—"

“How could you be so—*vulgar*?” she asked. “How could I imagine that you’d be so horribly insensitive?”

He felt angry now and began to walk about the room.

“What source d’you suppose I draw on? What kind of inspiration d’you suppose is at the back of my novel—any work of art that’s worth anything—except life, the stuff of life as one sees and feels it?”

“But not *our* life!” she cried out, her mind shrinking from his words.

“Our life is my life, as far as this matter goes. Where’s the wrong in expressing it? What could be more—valuable than its reality? Your whole point of view’s perverse, narrow—bourgeois,” he remarked, remembering in a gasp of resentment that she’d said “vulgar.” “Just because a human relation can be sacred, and beautiful, and intensely personal,” he added, and softened to the tones of his own plea, “doesn’t that make it all the more worth while to express—in art? Doesn’t that make the work of art itself more poignant and more real and more—valuable?”

She sat down on her chair, trembling.

“Then is novel writing simply the art of Exposure?” she asked. “D’you mean to say that *all* your work, all *Mr. Leonard*, and all those episodes dealing with the—the young man’s life in *Marion Dewar*—that all that’s real? That all that—is part of your life, Lester?”

“You’re being rather too literal.”

She had a paroxysm of sneezing. Then:—

“But surely there’s some sort of—transmutation.”

“That’s simply talk. You can invent and you can adapt from life—there’s bound to be both. But the more vital the book is, the closer it’s got to be to the heart of reality.”

“*Was* all that real?”

“All what?”

“In *Marion Dewar* too? The two German women. The love affair in London with—with the actress. . . . All those—” She stopped, fascinated by her familiarity with a strange Lester. She stared at him. She felt the shock of an impulse to laugh. “Was all that true, Lester?”

“My dear, now we’re not discussing art,” he said tenderly.

There was nothing laughable, she told herself; but a new dread fulness, a coherence in the whole matter. "You exposed everything those women must have felt for you—and that you felt for them . . .?"

She began to cry.

"Oh, my darling little goose!" he said, taking her in his arms. "And confess," he urged, "darling, dear one, you're jealous, and that's what's troubling you—isn't it, my dear?" For he had a misgiving that perhaps she wasn't jealous—that again he was up against a baffling purity in her devotion.

She shifted in his arms.

"I'm so tired, Lester, and my cold's so beastly. I expect I'm being stupid," she sniffed, looking into his face.

He smoothed the strands of hair back from her hot forehead.

"You mustn't mind," he said. "They were nothing but episodes, darling."

Then—was that his confession, she wondered. That everything for him was nothing but episodes, for a novel. And his art nothing but killing warm life to preserve in print.

(Seizing the pulsation of life to keep like a frog's heart in a bottle!)

"But you accepted him completely, and then you want to reject him completely," said Gwenda Faraday.

"It's inconceivable to me," Cressida said. "I can't even begin to understand. . . ." She pressed her hands together, looking down at Mrs. Faraday, who gazed back at her gravely.

"Cressida, dear." Gwenda held out her hand and drew the girl down beside her on the sofa, and felt her cold and shaking. "This is the first time you've done Lester the justice of really looking at him at all. . . . I've often wondered, darling, whom you thought you were marrying. . . ."

"But I can't understand how he *could*—"

"Child, you haven't tried to understand. You're simply trying to put Humpty Dumpty together again!"

"He says that I'm jealous. It isn't that. I know that he loves me, now, more than anyone—naturally, now he's married me. I wish it *was* that; it would be simpler. And it seems to me quite—natural, when I think it over,

that he should have loved other women, before he married me. One always reads that artists are like that, and only people like Mother pretend anything else. Only what seems so—unnatural, is that he should *use* his emotional experiences—"

"But, my dear, that's true of a great many writers," said Mrs. Faraday, wondering if her tone carried conviction. Somehow one must help the child; help her to hoist Lester up again off the crawling earth—to some sort of pedestal. (Since what Cressida's kind, a sensitive girlhood fostered in blinkers, demanded was the husband always a little off Mother Earth; the pedestal suitably inscribed.)

"*Is* it?" Cressida asked. "Is it . . .?" she groped out—for, of course, Mrs. Faraday, who knew so many artists, must know. "But it seems so—brutal."

"My dear, that kind of—brutality in your Lester is mixed up with his imaginative driving power. One can't judge an artist by—conventional standards," said Mrs. Faraday, thinking that even this laborious bathos (so irritatingly false) might help.

"No—of course not—" Of course—Mrs. Faraday must know.

"You must try and understand him," said Mrs. Faraday. "You ought to be able to—if you really do love him," she added, watching Cressida closely.

"But of course I love him," Cressida said with a startling sense of religious conviction. "I adore him. That's why . . ."

"Cressida, if you follow up that theme, the phrase 'feet of clay' will soon escape your lips!"

Cressida hesitated.

"Are you laughing at me?" she asked.

Mrs. Faraday's hand closed on hers.

"If I'm laughing at anyone, it's at your poor husband," she said, wondering, in a moment of irresistible malice, what little Midge was making of this spiritual daintiness. "You must go back now, at once, Cressida; it's getting late—it's nearly ten."

Cressida got up. She remembered that last night at this time they'd been at Lady Lang's. She felt that she'd grown old since then.

"Yes. I'd better go back. Thank you very much," she said slowly.

Gwenda Faraday kissed her.

"Bless you," she whispered; and then, as Cressida went out, she thought, "Am I wrong—have I been horribly mistaken—to send her back to him?" And she had an impulse to run after her and call her back.

"That horrid little cad!" thought Mrs. Faraday, bending to put some coal on the fire.

IX

Lester admired Cressida's conduct of their guests. Every time they entertained he had this feeling of pleasure in her manner. She was at the same time gentle and efficient, and spontaneously intelligent in her management of the talk. And yet he knew that she was shy.

He made a remark about her charm as a hostess to Robin Driscoll during the at-home they gave in May, to celebrate the publication of *Mr. Leonard*.

"It's because she finds everybody and everything so interesting," Robin said.

Cressida was listening to Sir George Driscoll. Robin could see that his father was delighted by her. He looked round to where his mother was conversing with Mr. Faraday, and wondered what she made of this gathering packed into Cressida's box of a drawing-room. For Mother had a simple and undisguised passion for large parties in large rooms. On the other hand, she might be finding this "quaint." Midge was saying:—

"But as a matter of fact, Cressida's more fastidious in bestowing her interest than you'd imagine."

"I didn't mean she lacked judgment," said Robin. He was disconcerted at finding himself discussing her with her husband, and turned with relief to Elsie Stanhouse.

"Well, Robin," she said with her handsome smile, "I haven't seen you since your mother's party last summer."

She made him sit down by her, and told him with an air of suave privacy that her husband expected to go to Madrid in September.

Robin was amused to see that Elsie had already become the "diplomatist's wife." Her clothes had shed their Burne-Jones quality. She wore black satin, and her speech was measured.

Lester made his way among his guests to where Lady Marion Creed was talking to Mrs. de Freyne.

He wondered whether young Driscoll was shy of him. Robin always seemed constrained in his presence, and got on much better with Cressida. The notion of so impressing a younger man was curious, and gave one an unpleasant yet flattering sense of being what Miss Osram would call *rangé*.

Both Lady Marion and Ruth de Freyne turned to him.

“We’ve been discussing your book,” said Mrs. de Freyne.

He felt in her manner a new intensity towards him. Her black eyes, which were too close together, were fixed on his face with what he felt was some indefinable purpose. It struck him that recent maternity had thinned her, giving her a spiritual and distinguished air.

“We must have some talk later,” she said as he sat down by Lady Marion.

“I liked your book,” said Lady Marion. “Thank you for sending me a copy. I’m sorry you made the hero throw over the girl in the end, though. He’d much better have married her, even if they were going to be badly off.”

“Ah, but he saw that would have been impossible from her point of view. In her circle marriage is as much a question of upkeep as carriage horses.”

“I’m afraid your ideas are very revolutionary, Mr. Midge. After all, it’s not usual, though one *has* heard of it, for a girl of your heroine’s class to have a liaison, under any circumstances. A married woman is a different matter. . . .”

“You mean that a married woman’s liaison is respectable, Lady Marion?”

“Not respectable—no. But at any rate traditional, Mr. Midge.”

Mrs. de Freyne took the cup of coffee Lester proffered.

“I think you’re so wonderful,” she said in her flat intent voice. “I’ve read most of *Mr. Leonard* through twice. Your grip of the human soul is so—wonderful. It’s curious, you know, how in several places you seemed to reveal one to oneself.”

Her eyelids were prominent and seemed to drop from her black eyebrows straight down over her black eyes. Lester had a hint of some fanatical potentiality in her nature. He was pleased by her praise; but as a woman, he felt, she was unattractive.

“You must come and see me sometime.”

“We should be delighted to,” said Lester, amused at obstructing her intention of a tête-à-tête.

“Yes, yes, of course,” said Ruth de Freyne, glancing negligently towards Cressida, “you must *both* come.”

X

Cressida opened her eyes.

There was Lester, coming in through the door. Lester in his dressing gown. He seemed extraordinarily far off. (And there was that sound again! Of course—the baby crying. . . .)

This was Lester, coming towards her bed. (And they'd shown her the baby—a girl—just now; or sometime ago.) And this was Lester, suddenly near, in his dressing gown, his face looking so round and stiff.

"What time is it?" she whispered to him. She wanted so much to know the time and get things straight (fixed in the angle between the big and little hands).

"Darling," he kept saying, "darling . . . darling . . ." and bending over her.

"Sh—ssh!" she whispered, and raised her hand and stroked the back of his neck. "Ssh!"—as though he were the baby. She heard the jingling of a milk cart outside in the Square. (So that it must be about six—six o'clock in the morning.)

"Darling—my sweetheart." One of his tears dropped, making a small hot print on her cheek. "It looks just like you," he muttered.

She shook her head. She wanted to laugh a little. She had thought, she remembered now, that it was so funnily like him.

He held her hand hard. She felt his gaze raking over her features, as though he were seeing her for the first time.

"Darling," she whispered.

Nurse came in and went to the window and drew back one of the curtains, so that the room jumped and then stood still in the crystal summer light.

Cressida shut her eyes. She became aware now that she smelt of chloroform.

"My dear—I'm so glad it's all over," he said.

She opened her eyes again. His words meant nothing really; but she would smile, to calm him. . . . She took a breath and smiled. And now she saw that his poor round face was smudgy with crying.

XI

First the flowers came.

It was delicious to think that there were so many flowers to be bought; and so many kind fervent people to buy them. One had never thought of a baby as a magnet for flowers.

The little bedroom bloomed out and became hidden in roses and carnations and magnolias—carnations tied up with white satin ribands. (To think that a baby, puckering and grasping, could so ravish the glory of plate-glass windows in Piccadilly and Bond Street!) And on the dressing table Mother's dahlias blazing—and mignonette, from the garden too. ("But marigolds smell," Mother said, "and will give you a headache.") And dear old Mrs. Lefèvre had sent white heather, "to bring luck to the darling little girl," and Lady Lang had sent, and Elsie, and Cathie, and fifty others lurked in the pasteboard beneath the leaves and petals, so that the problem was to thank—

But Aunt Celia had sent "bootikins" for the baby. "You will have too many flowers anyway," she wrote. And Lady Marion sent grapes, "for these will not upset the baby," she underlined. "I hope you *are* nursing it yourself," she wrote in a big bracket.

And the baby (Stella, they'd called it—Lester wanted Stella) slept below the white muslin canopy with the blue bows, and cried sleepily and slept again. And the sun shone all day out in the Square. For London was quiet in August, and the leaves on the tree outside the window were dark green and sleepy, and in the room the smell of flowers made one drowse. . . .

The sun shone all day out in the Square. And life was sifted and sifted until only a dream remained. It was like being preserved in an immense bubble. One day the bubble would be pricked and the dream would run out, and life would rush in on one again. . . . One day . . .

In the evenings Lester came in and sat on the bed, talked of himself and the world again, and of the *Epoch's* extraordinary boom, and how Page and Brinton had bought the American rights of *Mr. Leonard*, and of plans for a series of essays on industrial methods in England and abroad, to be published in the *Epoch*, and then in book form; which would mean going abroad in the autumn for a few weeks, he said. Every day Lester brought some little present; every day for more than a week. He brought her a reproduction of the "Madonna of the Rocks," and a breakfast tray in

unstained oak from the “Craft Workshops” in Church Street, and a pale blue poplin dressing jacket trimmed with lace and rosebuds, and a tooled-leather double-frame for the photographs of himself and Stella.

One day he brought her a novel called *The Wooden Wedding*—said that it was having a success, and that the girl, Rosamund Avon, who wrote it, was only eighteen.

“Driscoll says she’s got a future,” Lester said.

“Have you met her?”

“No. I should like to. Brace—who hates women—admits she’s very interesting.”

Cressida fingered the cover.

“I wonder if it’s better to write a book or produce a baby?”

“Between us,” he smiled, “we manage to do both.” His hand slid over her bare shoulder.

“Yes, but any half-witted woman can produce a baby.”

“From my experience of lady novelists, a great many half-witted women produce books.”

She leaned her head against his shoulder. She felt suddenly melancholy: perhaps it was because the glow was fading so quickly from the sky outside. She sighed, wishing she didn’t want to cry. This baby business left one shaky.

“What’s the matter, darling?” he asked.

She didn’t answer, but sat silent in his embrace, staring through unshed tears.

“Would you rather it had been a boy?” she asked, throwing up the question from her tangled thoughts.

“I’m too ardent a feminist to care in the least—no, in some ways I prefer a girl.”

Cressida drew her bed jacket across her chest. The last dappled edges of the clouds were chilled now (like cold sea shells).

“How queer to be parents!” she said.

Then people came.

(But, "Not more than one visitor at a time," Dr. Chinnock said. And, "The first trial of motherhood," thought Cressida, "is being treated like a baby.")

Mrs. Faraday came on Wednesday afternoon.

She was the first visitor who didn't ask for obstetrical details. She was in high spirits, her skin brown and her eyes blue and dark, from sun and sea. She stood by the cot shedding her lovely smile over Stella.

"Oh, my dear!" she said. "Cressida, dear, there's nothing in the world so uncanny and poignant as realizing that one's got a baby."

"I can't realize it."

"Elsie was so ugly when she was born that I thought she must be bewitched."

"Stella's fluffy hair is nice."

"She's so like Lester," Gwenda Faraday said. "But Lester would be a rather attractive woman—unreliable, but blooming and vital."

"How horrid you are."

"You hate to be teased about your precious Lester." Gwenda Faraday leaned against the end of the bed, feeling a pang of affection for the girl who was Floyd's daughter.

"Elsie's going to be godmother. Did she tell you?"

"Yes. I wish they'd have a baby. But I don't suppose Everard's capable of begetting anything so *terre à terre* as a child. . . ."

There was a knock at the door. Floyd Stobart came in on tiptoe (for his mind was impressed by his daughter's state).

"Cressida, dear, I just—" He stopped short. "I beg your pardon; I didn't realize—visitor . . ." He blinked, for the visitor stood against the light.

"Floyd." She came to him, holding out her hands. "Gwenda—I—you—I didn't perceive—"

Laughing, she swung him round so that the light showed him her eyes and the dancing charm of her features.

"Aren't you pleased to find me here, Floyd?"

"Indeed, it *is* a—"

"Don't say it's a pleasure, Floyd! Say something much less banal. Say something—" she dropped his hands and stood back still looking at him, still laughing—"say something expressive that will please me."

"Gwenda—" he said, as ever baffled, exasperated, enchanted. "My dear Mrs. Faraday," he said, conscious of his daughter sitting there in bed—for what must Cressida be thinking; and how unchanged Gwenda was, how unchangeable; and what were those lines of Shakespeare: "Age cannot . . ."

"How grey your beard's getting, Floyd!" said Gwenda. "And now you're a grandfather! You've beaten me there. I was just saying so to Cressida. I congratulate you on the baby!"

"You think it's a creditable child?" he asked, feeling awkwardly facetious; feeling, as he sat down pulling out his coat tails, how her look rippled over him.

"Oh, *very* creditable."

Mrs. Faraday moved again to the white furbelowed cot in the corner. "Its ears," she said, "are exactly like yours, Floyd—"

Robin hadn't realized that she would have her hair down. Those two brown plaits, and so many pillows.

"The roses were *so* lovely, Robin."

"I'm glad you liked them." She looked like a little girl.

"What are you so surprised about?" she asked, leaning back, smiling at him, for a sense of well-being had come in with him.

He sat down on the visitors' armchair, crossing his long legs.

"I'd no idea you had such long hair."

She surveyed him in return—his grey suit, the brown pallor of his skin, the shapeliness of his brow and chin.

"And you've just had *your* hair cut!" she said, watching its bronze sheen.

"That was in your honor—" He hesitated. "You look—better than I expected," he said.

"It isn't an illness, Robin."

She saw his lips pressed together in some obscure revulsion.

"No. I know. Worse."

"No. Illness is waste, and this isn't."

He got up suddenly and walked to the window, and stood, his hands in his pockets.

"All pain is waste," he said.

"Robin . . .?" How queer of him, and yet how like him, to mind like this. "Robin . . .?"

He turned round sharply. And she was half-laughing at him, he thought. Found him hysterical. . . .

"You make too much of it, Robin. What's the use of resenting what's natural?"

"Nature's brutal, odious."

"Nature's not chivalrous; but useful."

He was silent. He couldn't tell her that the idea of her pain made him feel sick. He wondered how Lester, in dreadful proximity, had got sanely through the whole business. To have been able to do nothing! "And is it only because I love her that I mind?" he asked himself. . . . And hadn't it always seemed horrible, unfair? ("But *why* must it hurt?" he'd asked his mother, years ago. "I don't know, honey: it's just the way it happens." "But *why*, Mummie?" "Don't you worry your head about it, honey." But why? But why? . . .)

"Don't you want to see the baby?" Cressida asked. She rang the bell and then held out her hand gently. "Robin," she said, for she was twice his age now, "you mustn't be so jumpy about facts."

He seized her hand and then let it go gently.

"Will you bring Baby up from the garden?" she asked the nurse.

He stared at the baby as it lay in her arms.

"May I hold it?"

She handed it over. He sat on the edge of the bed, holding it in his arms. It puckered its face, opened its eyes. "Shsh," he said softly, bending over it. "Sh . . ."

"How plain she is," he said, looking up and smiling.

"In twenty years you'll have a middle-aged passion for her, Robin!" Cressida laughed.

The leaves fluttered in the tree outside the window.

XII

"I expect," said Elsie, holding out a gloved arm to Lester, "that this is farewell for a time. We go to Madrid on Thursday."

He left her sitting with Cressida in the little garden, the tea table between them, and Stella asleep in her perambulator under a white sun canopy.

"You'll enjoy that, won't you?" asked Cressida, admiring the buckles on Elsie's shoes.

"I think it'll be extremely interesting. I'm not at all sure, of course, how I shall like the climate. I haven't Mother's passion for the sun. And Everard doesn't stand heat very well. However . . ."

"I rather envy you."

"You and Lester will have to come out and pay us a visit sometime, if you can bring yourselves to leave my godchild. There's a great deal to see there, of course."

Elsie began to talk about bullfighting.

"Ideas of cruelty vary so much from one country to another and from one epoch to another," she remarked.

Cressida felt a disloyal suspicion that Elsie was becoming conventional. Elsie, who had been so bold in her thoughts, so free in her activities!

Did women so easily find their husband's level? But her feeling of surprise at Elsie was mixed with a curiosity, a hope, as to whether one might, oneself, be finding a new level. Stobart drowned, inch by inch, in Midge . . .?

"And I understand the servant question is a little—*difficile*," Elsie said.

Fay Neilson came out and jumped into the hansom.

"You're late, Mr. Midge," she said, sinking back beside him.

Lester surveyed the curves of her profile, bloomy under the mesh of her veil. The veil held a black velvet patch against the corner of her mouth.

"A friend of my wife's, a Mrs. Stanhouse, called just as I was leaving."

"Oh, *Elsie* Stanhouse! She's awfully artistic, isn't she? I remember her mother showed me some embroidery she'd done! I wish I could do things

like that. But I've never made anything since my governess made me do penwipers for Christmas presents years ago. At least—as a matter of fact, I'm fibbing." She laughed. "I started to knit Robert a pair of golf stockings when we were first married (romantic, wasn't it?), and I did a whole leg; blue and grey it was, big enough for an elephant's hind leg to play golf in; and then, when I got to the heel I made such a muddle of turning it that at last I gave it up and one of the housemaids took it for cleaning something or other. Oh, goodness," she exclaimed, craning round to look back up St. James's Street, "did you see that woman in art green? I never saw anyone so fat. . . . I hope I shan't be as fat as that at her age! Fat and forty, Mr. Midge! Can you imagine me?"

"No, I can't. I can't imagine you anything but—as you are now."

"Well—what am I now?"

"Perfect—of your kind."

"I don't think that's very nice. Why do you say 'of my kind'?" she asked, widening her tawny eyes.

"Well, clearly, I couldn't say you were a perfect brunette."

"Oh, I *see*. Where are you taking me for tea?"

"The Savoy."

"Splendid! I love it there. They've got a lovely band. Were you pleased when I rang you up the other day? I felt we hadn't seen each other for such a long time! Not since that dull dinner party at Lady Lang's."

"You didn't seem to be finding it dull."

He imagined her warm vitality as immune from dullness.

"Oh, well," she murmured, smiling, half her attention registering the glances she garnered from passersby on the pavements. "Oh, well, it wasn't too exciting, with that old Judge on the one side of me talking about nothing but his cellar, and a boy on the other side who had eyes for no one but your wife!"

"My wife?" said Lester indulgently, Cressida a wraith in his consciousness and Mrs. Neilson's scent filling him with slow pleasure.

"You *are* unobservant," she said. "Not like Robert, who's jealous of every male creature who looks at me—even down to the footmen."

The hansom drew up.

“Perhaps he has reason to be.” Lester jumped out and stood waiting to help her down.

She stood for a moment gathering her skirts: Lester was aware of a swirl of petticoats, a flash of ankles: her hand slipped into his. She jumped, landing clumsily.

“Of course he has reason to be!” she said, withdrawing herself slowly from Lester’s support.

He turned away, fumbled with his coins, and paid the driver.

They went into the lounge of the hotel and sat down in a corner next to a palm in a brass pot.

“But didn’t you notice that young Mr. Driscoll is mashed on your wife?”

“No, I’m afraid I didn’t,” he said vaguely, trying to play up to her subject and wondering what his companion’s next “move” would be. “He often comes to see us. He’s very fond of Cressida. And he likes the baby. He’s rather a maternal young man,” Lester said.

“You *are* odd, Mr. Midge.”

“Why?” Her naïveté of perception was amusing in contrast with the sophistication of her senses. “Yes, China tea,” he said to the waitress (and, “*That* stuff!” Cathie’s tone echoed across his attention. “*China!* I’d rather drink cabbage water!”). “Why am I odd, Mrs. Neilson?”

“About your wife.”

“I don’t look upon her as my property, if that’s what you mean,” Lester said gravely. He was pleased by the thought that his attitude towards Cressida was creditable.

Fay Neilson gave a sigh of pleasure as the band lilted softly into the swing of the “Chorister’s Waltz.” Her thoughts waltzed away down a delicious retrospect and were lost in the memory of hair oil scented with heliotrope, and a hotel bedroom overlooking the Thames.

“I beg your pardon,” she said to Lester, noticing that his glance of admiration had changed to annoyance. “What did you say?” she asked, alert to her own lapse.

Lester shrugged his shoulders.

“You seemed to lose interest in what I said.”

“Indeed I didn’t. I was wondering . . .”

"What about?"

"I was wondering if your wife knew you were having tea with me here."

"Yes, of course. I told her when you rang me up." He saw Mrs. Neilson's surprise and felt complacent. She needn't suppose that he took her so seriously.

She didn't answer. He watched her pull back her glove and take up the teapot, the joint of each finger ivory hard under the white skin. Her lashes covered the expression of her eyes.

She put down the teapot and then looked suddenly at him, her teeth showing between her lips.

"You didn't tell her about the first time you had tea with me—at Curzon Street?"

"No . . . I didn't."

She smiled.

"I thought not. Sugar?"

"Yes, please—two." The lumps fell from the glinting tips of her fingers. That ruby must have cost an unbelievable sum.

"Are you admiring my ring?" she asked.

"Yes, very much." He took his cup.

"It is wonderful, isn't it? I adore rubies. Bernhard Schön gave it me as a wedding present."

"You mean Schön of Plimmer-Schön?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"I used to work under him."

"How odd! How small the world is!"

Of course, thought Lester, annoyed, yet irresistibly amused, Bernhard Schön would have the instinct as to where, and when, to bestow a ruby. (As a reward? A pledge?)

The band stopped playing. Mrs. Neilson clapped. "They must encore that!" she cried.

The violinist caught her eye, bowed, wiped his face, and raised his bow.

“The week after next,” said Fay, “Robert’s got to go up to Manchester to see about the production of one of his plays there. You might come and see me then again.” She helped herself to an éclair.

“I’m afraid I’m going off to Germany—to get material for some articles on Industry, on Monday week.”

“Oh—what a pity!”

He heard the note of suspicion.

“I wish—I hadn’t arranged to go just then.”

“Do you?”

“Of course I do.”

“Is your wife going too?”

“No. She doesn’t want to leave the baby.”

“Where are you going?”

“To Cologne for a week—taking that as my headquarters, and then a tour ending up at Hamburg.”

“How busy you’ll be. . . . Try one of these éclairs, Mr. Midge.”

XIII

“Good-bye, my sweetheart.”

“Good-bye, Lester, darling.”

“I wish you were coming too,” he said.

“So do I. . . .”

“My darling!”

Cressida tried to smile away her sensation of forlornness.

“After all, it’s only for three weeks,” she said, holding the lapels of his coat. “Stella will have grown when you come back.”

“Dear”—he kissed her again. He was moved by the intensity of his own feelings at leaving her.

“Your luggage is all in the cab, sir,” said Mary.

Cressida went slowly up to the nursery. It would have been such fun to go. Lester was so good to travel with.

Stella was being dressed in her pelisse to go out in the Gardens. A smile puckered her face and her shining grey eyes twinkled at her mother. She held out two hands in white woolen cases and drummed her heels against her nurse’s knee.

Cressida went to the window.

“Eight ounces this week,” said the nurse, surprised by Mrs. Midge’s absent manner.

“Oh, good—that is splendid.” She wished she’d gone to the station with Lester after all. Perhaps he was hurt that she hadn’t gone.

Or (she knew him so well, she thought tenderly) three months hence he would be hurt, in retrospect.

Lester planked his penny for the *Manchester Guardian* on the array of magazines.

“Well,” said a voice behind him. “Well—Mr. Midge?”

He started round, and there she was, close to him, a little taller than he, challenging the attention of the bustling crowd. He thought that she seemed

to challenge him with her smiling, impudent beauty.

"Mrs. Neilson!"

"I s'pose you're off to Germany?" she said.

"Yes."

"I've just been seeing a friend off to Brighton, and lo and behold, I saw you here, buying a paper."

Lester looked at her curiously as she walked beside him to his train.

"How nice of you to be here," he said, and wondered. . . .

He felt renewed pleasure at being seen in her company. She had an extreme, almost vulgar, elegance. Powder was perceptible on the tints of her skin.

"This is my carriage."

She peered in.

"You'd better come in and sit down," he said. "There's ten minutes before the train goes."

She sat down in the empty corner opposite his.

"Didn't your wife come to see you off?"

"She doesn't like seeing off." He felt again Cressida's last impulsive caress. It seemed to cling on him like ivy marks on a stripped wall.

"Well, anyway, you've got me to see you off. . . ."

She did her trick of shutting her eyes and opening them again suddenly. Lester felt her words before she spoke.

"What a pity I'm not coming with you," Fay Neilson said.

Lester said lightly, "Yes, isn't it?" and felt his heartbeats change to double time.

She looked at her watch and then at Lester and waited, half-smiling.

She was playing her game, he thought, with an irresistible assurance (or wasn't she playing any game, and was it merely—chance?). He imagined the kaleidoscope of her intimacy. . . . If she was stupid, she was, at any rate, adventurous. (Was that the origin of her glamour? That, and her glowing impudence?)

He looked at his watch. He pitched his voice between humor and a recklessness:—

"Will you come—Fay?"

"I've got no luggage," she said. Her teeth caught her lower lip for a second.

A porter banged the carriage door. She half rose from her seat. Then she was merely coquetting, after all?

"No," said Lester, "that *is* a drawback"—and realized that she had sat down again.

"On the other hand, there are always shops," she said.

He leaned forward and laid his hand on her knee.

"Fay?" . . .

The train started. Her fingers slipped over his wrist. Her face came so close to his that he couldn't see her expression.

XIV

Cressida stepped into the library by the French window. The house was quiet. Quiet and replete—like someone having an afternoon nap.

Father's writing table was in perfect order, the penholders laid side by side on the brass pen tray, the inkstand gleaming bulbously on its ebony pedestal. The paper weight (she had always imagined it was a "neat's foot") surmounted a sheaf of papers clipped in one corner, and *Who's Who* stood uniform in dark green leather with *Bradshaw* and *Whitaker's Almanack*.

Cressida shut the French window behind her. Impossible to analyze the individual smell of people's houses!

She went through to the drawing-room. There was a fire in the grate and a bowl of late roses on the grand piano. The oil portrait of herself as a child faced the afternoon light and looked less wooden than usual. She could see no likeness to Stella.

She moved towards her mother's bureau and picked up a minute silver-framed photograph from among the orderly clutter of little boxes, trays, pots, small leather notebooks, and memorandum tablets. The snapshot of herself at Stella's age didn't resemble Stella either, except in a common air of astonishment.

"I suppose Mother's resting," Cressida thought. She sat down in one of the frilly chairs and reflected with fresh interest on her parents' lack of taste. The luxuriant manifestations of this lack woke in her a kind of affection. The walls, the lamp shades, the multiplicity of little tables covered with mats. . . . She felt so comfortable that she amused herself by experiencing an imaginary nostalgia for her past, and then thinking complacently of the fumed oak and plain pastel colorings in her own house.

But it would be lovely, as Lester suggested, to move to the country. . . . And that house that Lady Marion suggested letting to them sounded lovely. Of course anyone would like to have Lester living near them. . . . A man of Lester's stamp. Probably, Lady Marion imagined herself a kind of patroness. . . . And there was a big garden, she'd told Lester, and the water was pumped up by hand! There was something romantic in the idea of water being pumped. . . . And an orchard—so lovely for Stella to grow up in the country. Environment was so important. Robin had been brought up in the country. Perhaps that had helped to make him so—unusual. Unusual, when

you knew him. There was very little shop window about him. (Some people were like Whiteley's.)

Perhaps that was one of the pleasant things about being a married woman, that friendship with men came easily; whereas before you were married there was always a possible alternative, and therefore an awkwardness. . . .

"Well, Cressida—darling child!"

"Mother, dear!"

"Your father's still out playing golf, so I shall have you to myself for a time. How's that darling baby?"

"Very well."

"And Nurse proving satisfactory?"

"Oh, yes—very."

"Well, keep an eye on her: they all need watching. And how is dear Lester getting on in Germany?"

"He writes that it's all very interesting and there's a great deal to see. He may stay an extra week. He sent me some lovely artificial flowers. He says the Germans are going to break us, industrially, in another twenty years."

"I don't think that's a very patriotic view to take, I must say, Cressida. But I dare say there's something in all this talk about the Germans being so *unfair* in their competition, and that's why I'm sure that Floyd's right when he says that Mr. Chamberlain knows what he's talking about. Why—" Mrs. Stobart knit her pink brows—"why, as Sir Edmund Cartwright was saying to me at dinner the other night, these foreigners are so cunning that they come and dump things here and sell them for half the price that our English manufacturers can afford to. And Sir Edmund said that they're jealous of our Empire, and live on black bread—just imagine! As I said to Sir Edmund, one is glad to think our English workmen haven't come to that. I like your hat, dear."

"So does Lester. Adèle made it, and I had the feathers Aunt Celia gave me as a wedding present put on."

"I saw Celia yesterday. I didn't think she looked at all well. Her latest idea is to have an egg beaten up with sherry before every meal. She says it

stimulates her system, but both Floyd and I thought she looked very bilious."

When Floyd came in he thought that Cressida was "in looks." Wonderful how marriage improved women.

"Well," he asked, "and what news of Lester?" He sat down heavily and stretched his brogues toward the fire.

"Cressida says that he's just as much worried by the way they're threatening English trade as Sir Edmund—"

"Who are 'they,' Catherine?"

"I didn't say 'worried,' Mother."

"Well, dear, that was what you meant."

Cressida made no comment, remembering that she'd had to read Lester's letter twice to conform her mind to his on this matter. It was so difficult not to be what Lester called "apoplectically British."

"Cressida knows that Lester's views are not mine, Catherine," said Floyd. "How's the baby, Cressida?"

"She's gained eight ounces this week," said Cressida.

"I hear from Lady Lang that poor Ruth's baby—Roger, they call him, don't they?—isn't doing at all well," said Mrs. Stobart complacently. "I've always heard the de Freynes were rather delicate," she added, "and Celia tells me that—well, young de Freyne's grandfather, old Lord Silchester, was very gay in his time."

"You take rather a lot for granted, Mother!" (Mother, who before one's marriage cut "The Cenci" out of Shelley with the embroidery scissors!)

"Yes," said Floyd, taking his pipe out of his mouth. "After all, Catherine, my grandfather and one of my uncles drank themselves to death."

"Nonsense, Floyd. You know that isn't true. And anyway," said Catherine Stobart, distressed, "that isn't the kind of thing one likes to think about, Floyd!"

XV

In their red dark room at the hotel in Hamburg, Fay Neilson felt depressed.

She had felt like this as a child when a party was coming to an end.

Lester ought to be back; and this was their last evening; and to-morrow they would sail—by separate boats.

What a pity it was over. And Robert wrote that he hoped that she was amusing herself with the Schenkendorfs and that Berlin society wasn't too "turgid."

Such odd words Robert always used! And so did Lester, if it came to that. But except for that they weren't a bit alike, although they were both literary.

"Odd," she thought, "how I seem to attract clever men!"

The idea pleased her, and she ruminated on its cause until she was struck by a new thought—that probably all men were very much alike as far as women were concerned.

She took up a nail polisher.

The difference was, perhaps, that the literary ones liked to talk a lot about love, while the ordinary kind of man—she thought of Ronnie—was content just to make love to you.

"Still, I expect talking about it helps them to write about it," she reflected, thinking of Robert's new play. She tried to remember the things Lester had said yesterday at dinner about people being "pagan"—and about himself and herself being naturally primitive. She had imagined herself in a leopard skin, like that picture in the Academy last summer; but one couldn't imagine him or Robert looking nice in skins. Polishing her nails, she hoped Lester would put her in his next book.

He came in and threw his bowler hat down on the canopied bed. There was a smut on his nose.

"I'm sorry if I'm late. I see you're dressed already. There was so much to talk about. What that fellow doesn't know about coal mines isn't worth knowing. I picked his brains bone-white." He kissed her mouth with facility.

"You look ravishing," he said.

“Do you realize it’s our last evening?” she asked.

“Yes.” He’d forgotten. (But the man had been so astoundingly interesting. Material enough in his talk alone for a series of articles.)

“Are you sorry?” she asked.

“My *dear*! . . .” He realized with relief that her question was only a gambit in the simple course of their relationship. She had no idea that her question had conjured up Cressida’s image. He felt elated. He was conscious of wanting, intensely, to be with Cressida again. He was filled with a sense of life’s abundance, and held Fay in his arms as though he were embracing, in her, its richness and variety.

Fay was moved by this fervor.

“Has it been wonderful?” she asked, her lashes brushing his cheek.

“My dear—my beautiful darling! . . .” He felt grateful for her beauty and vitality, and relieved at the instinctive adroitness with which she was playing out the adventure.

“Our last night, Lester.” “For to-morrow night,” she thought, “I shall be with Robert,” and she felt an anticipatory thrill for the scene—Robert suspicious; jealous; adoring; humiliated. . . . “To-morrow,” she whispered experimentally, “I shall be back with my husband. And you . . .”

XVI

Lester was so busy after his return from Germany that Cressida wondered if he really didn't care any more about the plan of going to see the house in the country. She didn't want to bother him, because the *Epoch* was going through a bad time. The circulation was decreasing—Brace had let himself go too much about Home Rule, Lester said; since the Parnell case Home Rule wasn't a subject to popularize a paper with a radical-minded but rather strait-laced public, such as the *Epoch* catered for. Brace had published those three articles on Home Rule by Charles Faraday while Lester was in Germany; and shown a lack of tact in doing so, Lester said.

Cressida realized that Lester and Mr. Brace were getting on each other's nerves. It was a pity, she thought, that Sir George Driscoll didn't simply hand over the editorship to Lester.

She said this to Bernhard Schön when he came to dine with them. A small dinner, prescribed by Lester: Bernhard Schön; Mrs. Schön, a fair woman with quick cold glances, a set smile, and a beautiful figure; Mr. and Mrs. Faraday.

"I think that Lester would run the *Epoch* better by himself," Cressida said.

"No!" boomed Bernard Schön. "No, no! You are talking 'tommy-rot,' Mrs. Mitch," he said, his brown eyes surveying her appreciatively from behind gold-rimmed pince-nez. "Your husband has none of the qualities of an editor. He is a cleffer chemist, a good journalist, a remarkable novelist, and," he joked bulkily, "a satisfactory lover—*hein?* But an editor—*no*. He has not that flair."

Cressida wondered why she disliked Bernhard Schön. He was very ugly. He was like a big Jewish bull, and his moustaches grew soggy over his lips as he ate. She was relieved to be able to turn to Mr. Faraday and ask him for Elsie's latest news from Madrid.

When Cressida had taken the ladies upstairs, Lester involved Schön and Faraday in a discussion on the prospects of parties.

"I should not be surprised if your friends, de Socialists, gain forty to fifty seats next time," Schön said. He launched off on his theory that industrial England wasn't awake. He bent to lap at his glass of port. "It is Cherman trade, *not* de Cherman army, that will invade us," he said.

“Yes,” said Lester. “I wonder if you read the first of my articles on that subject in the *Epoch* this week?” He got up and fetched the paper from his study next door.

“I shouldn’t call Midge a Socialist any more,” Charles Faraday said while Lester was out of the room. “The civilizing in-influences of s-success are at work,” he said, glancing round the little dining room (which Gwenda had said was so “absurdly spick and sparrowish”).

“I will take it to read,” said Schön, taking the paper from Lester. “And where did you get this port?” he asked, ruminating its flavor.

They began to talk about wines. Charles Faraday had inherited a cellar from his father. “The only f-form of investment,” said Charles Faraday, “that my father believed in.”

Lester, smoking a cigar, thought of his own father. “Drink Is the Devil’s Advocate” (embellished with pink and green squirls), framed and hanging in the lavatory.

When they rose to go upstairs Lester said to Schön, “By the way, I met a lady the other day who said she was a friend of yours. A—Mrs. Neilson.”

“Oh—Fay Neilson,” said Schön reflectively, wiping his moist moustache and meeting Lester’s look with slow pleasure. “A very beautiful woman!” said Bernhard Schön.

XVII

At the end of February they went down to look at Starr House. "The village," wrote Lady Marion, "is five miles from Banbury. I will meet you at Banbury and drive you back to luncheon with us, and afterwards you can investigate the house."

She met them at Banbury Station, sitting upright in a phaëton next to a small groom in a purple livery, herself wrapped in a cloak of the same cloth and color. Cressida wondered if Lady Marion always dressed in harmony with her servants.

Lady Marion stretched down two gloved hands to meet them.

"Now climb up. I brought some extra wraps because it's so frosty. *Isn't* it cold? But the sun's lovely. That's right, Mr. Midge, take that rug, but wrap some of it round your wife's knees too. You'll find a foot warmer there, under the seat, Mrs. Midge. . . ."

Cressida hugged the extra cloak round herself. They were speeding up the narrow High Street, the sun flashing down into their eyes between the roofs of the houses. In a baker's window a placard advertised "Banbury Cakes."

"That is Banbury Cross," said Lady Marion, pointing to what looked to Cressida like a large stone cruet containing the effigies of four persons, including Queen Victoria. Lester said, "I suppose the original cross was replaced some time ago . . ."

But Lady Marion was pointing out the lie of the land. "Oxford is southwest, that way; that's the way to Warwick; Clayton-Hatchetts is northwest of Banbury."

"I'm sure you'll love Starr House," she said. "And a writer ought to live in the country, Mr. Midge. He gets more leisure to think. My husband never will go to London at all. But that's because of the hunting, of course. And in the summer he occupies himself with carpentry. . . ."

Cressida glanced at Lester. His half-smile echoed hers. She envisaged Lester and Mr. Creed sawing together, the summer through, like the two men on a wooden toy that an uncle had once brought her from Switzerland.

Clayton-Hatchetts seemed to be two lanes converging on a duck pond; lanes flanked by low mossy-roofed cottages blocked together out of golden-grey stone. A confederation of towering elms sheltered a small church. The church had a reddish tinge and a graceful but neglected appearance. The stones in the graveyard leaned at queer angles, and the notice board at the wicket gate had yielded some of its gilded lettering to the climate. Cressida wondered whether the influence of Lady Marion's presiding popery had somehow cast this romantic blight over the small Anglican stronghold.

The muddy water splashed up from the puddles on either side of the phaëton. The hooves of the horses made a soft klop-klop.

"This is our drive," said Lady Marion as they veered between two stone gateposts. "Starr House is over there, about half a mile off, behind those trees."

"Why is it called Starr House?" Lester asked.

"I really don't know," said Lady Marion vaguely; "the question never occurred to me."

Mr. Creed talked to Cressida about dogs while his wife showed Lester the library. "But for companionship," he said, "there's nothing can beat a spaniel."

He told Cressida about his hunting on the previous day. He asked her if she and her husband hunted, and said that she'd have to take it up if they settled in the country. He took her out and showed her the stables and the cowsheds and the new pigsties, and then he took her up into a loft littered with shavings, where was a large table and tools and scraps and lengths of wood.

"This is what I call my workroom," he said, and his square red cheeks grew a shade more rosy and his eyes took on a graver, intenser blue, and his solid tall figure in its shooting jacket seemed to swell out.

"How lovely!" Cressida said, sniffing the aroma of sawdust, and marveling that the same world and the same week should contain Bernhard Schön and Mr. Creed.

He took her to the further end of his worktable.

"This is a contraption of me own I've been working at lately." He showed her what appeared to be a miniature table with legs a few inches high, the top punctuated by twelve evenly spaced round holes, each about an inch and a half in diameter.

“Now what d’ you think that’s for?” he asked.

Cressida shook her head.

“Have one guess.”

“I can’t.”

“No,” he chuckled, “it’s quite true. You might guess for a year,” he admitted, holding up the contrivance to the full glare of the skylight. “Well,” he said, “it’s a patent holder for boiled eggs.”

“Oh . . .?”

“Yes. Begin to see now? Marion boils the eggs at breakfast, and instead of shoving ’em into the egg cups where no one can see their size properly, she’ll put each in a separate hole in here and then each guest can pick out just the egg he wants. And look,” he added, a little breathlessly, “d’you see I’ve carved ‘S. B.’ by the bottom row and ‘H. B.’ by the top row? Soft Boiled and Hard Boiled!”

“But what a *good* idea!” said Cressida, and Mr. Creed blushed at the intensity of her tone.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” he said. “Just a hobby, you know—keeps me amused,” he added with a suddenly mature detachment.

Lady Marion showed Lester the bathroom, lately installed next to the library.

“Of course, there’s no bathroom at Starr House,” she said. “But you *could* always put one in. I’ve told Mrs. Begbie to meet you there with the keys at three o’clock. That’ll give you time to go over the place before the daylight goes. I want you to like it,” she said.

“I can hear your wife and Richard coming in. I expect he’s been showing her his workroom.”

Lester smiled at the sight of Cressida being escorted into the hall, her feet in a high tide of dogs.

“We’ve had *such* an interesting time, Lester,” she called out, and pulled a bunch of skirt out of a spaniel’s jaws.

“And *what* a mouth he’s got!” Mr. Creed couldn’t help murmuring, seeing that the skirt was untouched by the dog’s saliva.

“Interested in politics?” Richard Creed asked Lester at luncheon.

"Very."

"They want me to stand down here," said Mr. Creed. "Our present member's giving up—old Rockton, you know. But I shan't. Shouldn't like the life well enough. Besides, I don't care about it. Politics is getting too complicated—such a lot of business goes on in the House these days. You've got to be a lawyer to understand half the bills, and a doctor or a schoolmaster to understand the other half. It's a game for younger men. . . ."

Lester was wondering how a man as stupid as Richard Creed could give him a sense of some vague deficiency in himself.

"There's a young nephew of ours—or, rather, he's really a cousin; his father is Richard's first cousin—who we've just heard is going to stand, for the Brayton Division. That's only fifteen miles away."

"Yes. And as a Radical, too!" said Mr. Creed, nodding to the butler to fill up Lester's glass.

"A very charming young man," said Lady Marion. "You probably know him, Mr. Midge—Robin Driscoll."

"Yes," said Lester. "We know the whole family very well. I think Robin was at our party that you came to last summer."

"So he was," said Lady Marion. "I'd quite forgotten. I do remember. Gloria was there too, and wore the most lovely dress from Worth. American women have *such* good looks."

"I'd no idea he was going to stand," said Cressida. Robin had never even bothered to come and tell her *this*. As if they'd never been friends at all, she thought, staring resentfully at Lady Marion's too awful hat. And he'd been so sweet to her while she was alone—coming in at tea time, helping her bathe Stella when Nurse was out. . . .

"Yes," Lady Marion was saying, "we heard that he made up his mind about a fortnight ago."

"Of course, the boy's father's an out and out Radical," said Richard Creed. "But there isn't a nicer chap living," he added. "George and I were at Eton at the same time, and we went up to Oxford the same year—and I'm not sure, Marion, that George didn't get engaged to Gloria the same summer that you managed to accept me!"

"No, Richard. Nine years later than we did! Gloria was in the schoolroom when we got engaged," said Marion Creed generously,

remembering how she had been tempted to envy Gloria Driscoll her beauty and her son.

Richard Creed took a handful of salted almonds from the dish before him, and then, leaning down sideways in his chair, sighed amorously to his couchant dogs.

"Come here, old boy, Carlo; come here, Mike; come on, old Bob."

Lady Marion's Pekingese woke on her lap and bounced from under her table napkin and began to bark.

XVIII

Lester took her hand as they crossed the field, later, toward Starr House.

“Not tired, darling?” he asked.

She was surprised and pleased. When he noticed if she was tired it meant that he felt affectionate, or found her hat becoming.

She shook her head.

They walked on in silence over the frost-hard grass. He looked at her secretly, sideways. Her profile was tilted up above her fur collar. He remembered again that he’d meant to tell her about Fay. The thing troubled him. He’d meant to tell her, quite casually. He’d meant to say, “You know we always agreed that these things don’t matter . . . people are mediæval in their conventions . . . friendship is the test of a civilized relation. . . .”

But it was difficult, face to face with her sensitive, complicated admiration.

“What a darling Mr. Creed is!” she said.

“Richard Creed is a type,” said Lester, helping her over the stile.

“I suppose Lady Marion wants us to live near them so as to have a tame author on her estate?”

“She’d do anything to be mildly amused. She’s clever in a way. And she’s got no children; and her husband is no more than an extra spaniel about the place. . . .”

“I think you underrate him, Lester. Oh, darling!” she broke off as they rounded the copse. “Darling, that must be—the house!” She pointed, jerking to a standstill and gripping his arm.

An untidily terraced garden sloped upward to the façade of a golden-grey tall-windowed house—built apparently of the same stone as the huddled cottages in the village, but in the compact, spacious style of a late-seventeenth-century gentleman’s residence. Battered green shutters flanked the windows, and the door in the centre of the façade was surmounted by a fanlight. The roof was stone slated, but overgrown with moss. On the parapet pigeons strutted, bubbling in their throats, spreading their tails in the high sunshine.

“Oh, Lester . . .!”

He held her arm close to his side. The beauty of the house moved him. He had expected a lattice-windowed affair, a sentimental kind of “manor” with oak rafters and dark rooms.

They approached the house slowly up the terraces, which had apparently been half rockery and half rose garden.

“This side faces south,” Lester said, and the windows seemed to blink back at him in acquiescence.

They paused opposite the front door; it was ajar. They heard the approach of quick, heavy footsteps.

“I expect it’s Mrs. Begbie,” he whispered. “Not a ghost,” he added, seeing Cressida’s eyes grow round.

It was Mrs. Begbie. Mrs. Begbie was ample in an apron and black wool mittens. She had an attentive, shrewd manner. She led them into a paneled hall that had been painted cream and had chipped to show dark red paint underneath. The last tenants, she said, had been an old artist and his wife.

“They lived here very nearly fifty years. He made one of the attics into a studio,” she said, investigating Lester. “Is the gentleman an artist too?” she asked Cressida.

Cressida hesitated.

“No, he’s a writer.”

“Then I dare say this would suit him nicely,” said Mrs. Begbie, standing calm and reflective, her hands crossed over her big waist. “It’s quiet,” she added, “except for the pigeons”—and turned to lead them upstairs.

Lester and Cressida went over to the windows and looked out on the far undulating view of green fields and brown-red ploughland and clumps of bare trees.

“How lovely!” said Cressida, kneeling on the window seat.

Lester turned to look round the room.

“She died in this room,” said Mrs. Begbie.

“And he? Is he still alive?” Cressida asked, feeling how gentle the house was.

“No,” said Mrs. Begbie. “He went to some forrin place after she died. In Itily we heard it was. He died there.”

Cressida looked at her husband. Was he wondering too if the house would rather stay asleep? "She died in this room." She was happy—in this room, in this house. . . .

"Did they have any children?" Cressida asked.

"Yes, madam, three. But they married young and went away. And these was the nurseries," said Mrs. Begbie, leading them down an echoing corridor.

The white bars were still across the windows. The sunshine lay like pale chequered rugs across the boards. "These was the nurseries." They married—and went away. . . .

"Yes," Lester said to Mrs. Begbie, "we have a little girl aged six months."

"Fancy that!"

Lester glanced at Cressida. He could imagine her living in this house; he could imagine himself coming back and back to this house.

"I expect the lady would like to see the kitchens now," said Mrs. Begbie, "before I take you over the garden."

Cressida agreed absently. As they went downstairs she felt Lester touch her shoulder.

"D'you want it—my dear?"

She nodded.

"Don't you?"

When Mrs. Begbie stumped off to lock up the back door, Lester said, "It's ours, then."

"Oh—darling!"

He kissed her. He would have liked to ask her to forgive him. He had an impulse, standing here with her in the empty hall, to make her some sort of promise, for the future.

"I want to give you this house," he said.

Cressida insisted that they must stop on their way back to the station and buy some Banbury cakes. "Just as a sort of thank offering," she said. "And

you needn't eat them, Lester, if they'll upset your digestion. Cook will eat them, and Mary."

They found a shop in the High Street. Cressida went in, sniffing its warm, sticky smell.

"I want six Banbury cakes," said Cressida to the stout woman with jolly creases round her eyes.

"Very good, madam." Then, as Lester came in, the stout woman's expression gaped astonishment. "Why—if it isn't—" She broke off, glanced at Cressida, and back at Lester. Her big face blushed. "Why—if it isn't Les—"

"Why, *Ada*!" Lester exclaimed. "Why—Ada! How surprising to find you here!" He shook her hand across the marble counter. "Cressida, this is Miss Fancy—my wife," he said, and Cressida detected in his manner those inflexions of resentment and pride that had spoiled their visit to old Midge. "Miss Fancy is a friend of my sister's," he said, and saw how Cressida was warmed by Ada's, "Well, this *is* a pleasure to see *you*, Mrs. Midge. I read all about your wedding, and I saw your picture in the paper."

What a nice porpoise, thought Cressida; and how absurd of Lester to be ashamed of her.

"We've just been deciding to take a house near here," said Lester, detaching his impression of the two women.

"You haven't? Well, I never! What a coincidence. Didn't you know I was livin' at Banbury?" Miss Fancy asked Lester. "I'd 'ave thought perhaps Cathie would have mentioned it."

"No, I had no idea," he said, and had a prevision of social awkwardnesses. Just how would Ada expect to be treated?

"And whereabouts is the house, Mrs. Midge?"

"Clayton-Hatchetts. It belongs to the Creeds," said Cressida. "It's called Starr House."

"Oh, *I* know the place you mean. I was out that way on me bicycle only last Sunday."

Lester imagined Ada on her bicycle. "Well," he said, "I'm afraid our train is due in a few minutes."

"I expect we shall see more of you, Miss Fancy," said Cressida, and held out her hand.

“I’m sure I hope so,” Ada answered, pleased, admiring, but a little confused. “Good-bye. . . .” She hesitated what to call Lester now, the Lester who was married to this young lady.

“Good-bye, Ada,” he said genially and yet distantly, reassured by her confusion. “This has been a pleasant surprise.”

“Your cakes, Mrs. Midge,” said Ada, and beamed a last farewell, nodding an acknowledgment of Lester’s shilling slipped quietly on to the counter.

“What a dear kind thing,” said Cressida, when they were out of the shop.

“Yes, she’s a good sort,” Lester agreed, wondering how there could ever have been a moment when he thought of marrying her.

XIX

Robin reread Cressida's letter. "Why haven't you been to see us for so long? Or are you too wrapped up in your new political career to think of anything else? And there's so much to tell you. We've bought a *house*!!!"

His mother came down the stairs, humming to herself, pulling on her gloves.

"You going out, Robin?"

"Yes . . . I don't know." He looked at her absently.

"Anything the matter?" she asked, trying to read his expression.

"No, of course not."

Lady Driscoll hesitated.

"Robin, honey, I'd do anything in the world to see you happier."

"Honestly," he said—"honestly, Mother, there isn't anything."

She didn't kiss him, for fear of disarranging her hat; but she rested her hand for a moment on his chest, and smiled deliberately.

"All right, darling. I'm glad to know, that's all," she said.

She went out, feeling angry and unhappy.

"He hasn't been to see her for three weeks," Gloria Driscoll thought.

Robin telephoned to Cressida and suggested that they should go to the National Gallery.

"Why not come to tea here?" her voice asked. "Then you'll have a glimpse of Stella too. She's fatter than ever."

"I think I'd like to see some pictures with you," he insisted. For he couldn't, he felt that he couldn't face Lester yet; endure Lester's casual, warm friendliness; watch Lester smiling over Cressida's remarks, publicly owning her by all his small implications of marital affection; and know that Lester and Mrs. Neilson . . .

For it was clear that Cressida didn't know.

It wasn't likely that Midge meant to tell her. Better not—it would break her heart, Robin thought. Ted Renshaw was a gossip, but he didn't invent.

Seen them together in Cologne. Ted, relishing the subject, had been explicit enough about Mrs. Neilson's reputation.

From the porch of the National Gallery he watched her coming across Trafalgar Square; one hand holding up her skirts, the other clasping a red book. He saw her stop to watch a party of sparrows pecking seed round a horse's nose bag. He thought he saw her smile at the sight.

An immense policeman stopped the traffic for her. She laughed, nodded, said something to the policeman as she passed him, so that he beamed after her.

She ran up the steps at the sight of him.

"Oh," she panted, "I suppose I'm late. Oh, Robin, I'm *so* glad to see you. My *dear* Robin."

She slipped her arm through his in her elation and felt that he was stiff, and looked up, feeling puzzled, into his face.

"Robin?"—and saw his features break up oddly into a smile.

"Cressida? It's so good to see you again," he said.

"But you could have been often, lately."

"I've been fearfully busy. I was away in my constituency last week," he said, embarrassed, following her through the turnstile.

"Yes; and we only happened to hear from your aunt and uncle that you'd even got such a thing."

He realized that her protests were neither conventional nor coquettish, but that she was really hurt by what she conceived to be his defection in their friendship.

"Cressida—d'you imagine I couldn't want to see you?" For his squeamishness seemed no better than self-indulgence now. And just because he knew, just because she was so unconsciously betrayed, didn't she, perhaps, need his friendship? Or shouldn't he, anyway, act as though she needed it?

"What else could I imagine?" Cressida asked, pausing with a sense of new pleasure among the bright, perfect simplicities of the Florentines. "Oh, Robin, look at that angel's hands! And the way her dress flutes out!" she exclaimed. (After all, hadn't one been rather absurd minding his three

weeks' absence? As if there were questions of rights and obligations between them. For it was the very freedom and freshness of their relation, unlike any she had ever known, which made it, she felt, so precious to her. And if she were to begin to exact—to take for granted . . .)

"I'm very silly, Robin," she said. "It was really because I'm so excited about our country house, and because I wanted to tell you all about it."

He laughed off her appeal uncertainly, ignoring the dreadfully facile touch of her fingers on his arm.

"This correspondence must now cease," he said, and smiled without meeting her look.

"Even Robin has moods," she thought.

"Tell me about your constituency, Robin," she demanded, wondering whether, perhaps, he were annoyed by her assumption that he owed her a regular attendance (as if she were an aunt, or a chapel).

"You tell me about your house—first."

"*Well* . . ." she said.

"*Well?*" he echoed, for this was how she so absurdly was apt to begin her narrations. "*Well*, 'once upon a time'?" he asked (and how absurdly it enchanted him to see, when she smiled, how her chin pointed and her nostrils lifted suddenly).

"*Well*," she said, "once upon a time there was a house asleep in a big garden. It was an old house, and so it was apt to fall asleep when there was no one there to keep it awake. The pigeons which sat on the roof and fluttered on the terrace couldn't keep it awake, because so many generations of pigeons had grown up in the pigeon house in the rose garden that their fluttering sounds had become part of the house's dreams. And there were no other sounds about the house to disturb its sleep.

"The house was beautiful, in its way. It had big sash windows, and a fanlight over the front door, inspired by the famous tail of the great-great-great-great-great-grandfather of the present pigeons. It was built of stone, a greyish color, but with a sort of golden dusty light in the stone (rather like your eyes, Robin). And the shutters had once been green, but were all faded and cracked. . . ."

"What was it called?" Robin asked.

"Starr House—but no one seemed to know why."

"*Well?*"

"*Well*, one day the pigeons were strutting on the roof, when they were very surprised to see two little figures coming up the terraced garden. One of them was a thin little lady in a big hat, and the other was a round little man in a small hat, and the pigeons thought they were a very queer little couple indeed."

"Were they?"

"Oh, yes, *very* quaint! And *who* do you think they were?"

"I can't imagine."

"They were Mr. and Mrs. Lester Midge."

"You *don't* say so!"

"Yes. And what do you think they did?"

"I can't conceive."

"Well, they made so much noise between them, like a pair of sparrows over a piece of bacon fat, that they woke the house! The poor house! It was quite startled, and its shutters grew wide with astonishment when it saw this quaint little couple twittering on the terrace, and realized that they were deciding to come and live there and put an end to its peaceful dozing!"

"So they bought it?"

"Yes, with all the savings in their old stocking."

XX

They left the Creeds late, after tea. Mr. Creed stood in the doorway.

"Good night," Cressida said. (In silhouette he was like Stella's Teddy bear.)

"Thank you for that tip about the electric light," said Lester.

"Not at all. Glad to be of any use to you both."

Mr. Creed's tones were caught up and shrouded in the dusk. He shut the door after them.

Lester felt the fresh dark drench his spirits. The shapes of the trees were silent; the turf was quiet; in the borders pale stars and bells burned.

"All their color's changed into scent," he said.

She didn't speak. She felt as if the impact of her voice might tap and send a crack across the arching stillness.

They crossed the lawns and she followed Lester through the Japanese Garden, his ears and neck luminous, and the willow stems twisted in silver, and the clumps of grasses soft and breathing to one's ankles, and the lily pond black glass.

When they got to the field path his hand crept to hers, and the scent of jasmine followed him, drying his throat, moistening his lips. The fragrance of the sleeping fields assailed him.

Cressida saw three lighted windows. The nursery, the library . . . she imagined Stella sleeping, Nurse moving to and fro, tidying, tidying up; Stella sleeping inside her white bars, her mouth bunched, her lashes spread in small silk fans on her cheeks, her fist clenched in creases.

"I'm happy," she felt blissfully, uneasily, drawing closer to Lester as they walked; for it was queer, knowing it suddenly, feeling it acutely, like this—like a pain, satisfying and yet frightening, like the beginning of having a baby. . . .

They crossed the ditch and into the orchard.

"Your summerhouse looks like a stray little temple," she said to him, smiling to herself, for it was such a dreadful little place, she thought, and he was so proud of it, with its revolving base and the pitch-pine frill across the front.

“I’m going to have electric light put into it,” he said; and she felt his mood change with characteristic enthusiasm to the practical. “A really good reading lamp with a green glass shade. Then I can work late on warm nights.”

“You’ll be beset by moths and insects.”

“Not if I have a wire mosquito frame made to fix across the front. A very fine mesh,” he said ruminatively.

“But Lester, darling, that’ll spoil the whole romantic conception. Then you might as well hang a meat safe from a tree and work in that!”

He laughed absently, thinking out the details of the wire frame. A meat safe—that was just the kind of mesh, he reflected.

XXI

"You know the de Freynes have taken Stilford Manor?" said Lady Marion. "Ruth de Freyne tells me it's because little Roger needs country air."

Robin Driscoll waited for his aunt to complete her insinuation.

"What other motive do you impute?" he asked, amused (remembering how his mother said, "Marion Creed is a perfect old sleuth for people's motives; she wouldn't believe that a mouse ate cheese just because it liked it").

"The woman's running after Lester Midge," said Lady Marion. "She ran after him in London, and now she's followed him down here. Ruth has her mother's purpose, but none of her mother's good sense."

"I should say the main difference is that Lady Lang isn't an intellectual snob and Ruth is."

"Which demonstrates her good sense. Not that I haven't a weakness for artists and writers myself," said Lady Marion. "I expect that's what you're thinking. I like them because they amuse me, and only in so far as they amuse me. Midge amuses me. I'd rather talk to him than his wife, though anyone can see that he is a bit of a bad hat and she is an angel. Luckily, dear old Richard gets on with Cressida Midge. . . ."

"I think that Cressida has twice Lester's amount of character," said Robin politely, resenting his aunt in her jangling necklaces. (Was there any truth in Aunt Marion's "canard" about Ruth de Freyne?)

"Do Lester and Cressida see a lot of the de Freynes?" he asked, trying to seem mild, to seem casual.

"Oh, Ruth's always driving over there, or getting Lester to go to Stilford."

"What a shame!"

Lady Marion looked at her nephew's expression, and it occurred to her that his championship of little Mrs. Midge might have an interesting origin.

"Oh, I don't see why a 'shame,'" she said. "After all, there's probably no harm in it. And Cressida Midge is quite attractive, and she could retaliate by having a flirt of her own."

"She isn't that sort of woman," said Robin.

“Perhaps. Clearly you know her better than I do. I never think it’s safe to say that about any young woman—unless you have reason for knowing it,” said Lady Marion.

She paused, but Robin made no comment. She smiled and couldn’t forbear capering after the imp of her curiosity.

“My father used to say, ‘Married women are like mushrooms: you can’t tell till you’ve tried ’em which’ll turn out to be a toadstool.’ He ought to have known!”

Robin glanced out of the window at the blown October gardens. (Was there really anything in this de Freyne business?)

“There’s Uncle Richard—with Cressida,” he said, and felt his aunt look at him. “It’s a pity she dresses so badly,” he remarked.

Cressida took Lady Marion’s bony kiss, smiling at Robin.

“Mr. Creed told me you were coming for the week-end, Robin, and so I came over to say good morning.”

“Yes,” said Lady Marion. “Robin and I have just been enjoying a little quiet scandalmongering.”

“Oh,” Cressida said, looking from one to the other and realizing quite lucidly what they must have been talking about (for Lady Marion would be the first to talk about it). “I hope,” Cressida said with a deliberative irony, “that you haven’t been too—unkind.”

She half smiled, but Robin saw her color change. (Did she really think that he would voluntarily discuss her?)

“How’s the darling little girl?” Lady Marion asked. “Do sit down, Mrs. Midge.”

“Stella’s very well.” (And how dared they imagine that there was anything—anything to scandalmonger about. For Ruth de Freyne sought his friendship, Lester said. And where was the harm? he’d demanded fairly, kissing Cressida’s forehead. And indeed, Cressida told herself, fidgeting with her gloves, where was the harm, except in what Lester called the “fogged and distorting mirrors of public opinion”?) “She’s talking such a lot now,” Cressida said, turning to Robin. “She loves those books you sent her.”

“How old is she now?” asked Lady Marion.

“Two and a quarter.”

“Well, Robin,” Richard Creed was asking, “and what d’you think of your election prospects by now? I was talking to Egsmith; he came over for our Meet yesterday, and he seems pretty confident he’s going to keep the seat. . . .”

Cressida called, “Lester! Lester!”

He wasn’t in the library; and he wasn’t in his study. And she wanted to ask him about those roses; for Begbie was waiting. She went back to the doorstep.

“I’m afraid Mr. Midge doesn’t seem to be in, Begbie,” she said. “You’d better come up after luncheon and see him.”

“Very good, madam.”

Begbie stumped off coughing. Cressida shut the front door and went upstairs to her bedroom and took her hat off. She stood for some time gazing out of the window, and then sat down and bent to unlace her boots.

There were mud marks on the carpet. She wished she could remember to take her boots off downstairs. Mud annoyed Lester.

The laces whipped back, stinging her fingers clammily. She could tell—she had seen from Robin’s expression—that he had been taking Lady Marion’s gossip seriously. When he’d said “Good-bye” he’d been moody and angry about something. Perhaps he’d come over to-morrow, he’d conceded—but he was busy, he said, and had a committee meeting early Monday morning.

Bother! Had she—hadn’t she—left her house shoes down in the coat cupboard under the staircase?

She padded across the landing in her stockinged feet. The front door was open, the damp air blowing up the staircase, a dogcart waiting outside—Mrs. de Freyne’s groom.

Cressida tripped down the stairs. She’d been silly, morose, last time Ruth de Freyne came. She would go in now and be sensible, natural, friendly—to please Lester.

She hurried across the hall and went into Lester’s study. She stopped short.

Neither Lester nor Ruth de Freyne saw her.

She stood still.

She became conscious that her mind was shocked at the absurdity of Lester standing on tiptoe to kiss Mrs. de Freyne’s mouth.

“My dear, dear friend!” Mrs. de Freyne said to him at last.

As Cressida ran out, as fast as possible, as fast, as quickly as possible, saying nothing, and not looking back, not stopping until she could get up the stairs, up to her room, she was aware that Lester had turned and seen her.

XXII

“I can’t go on,” Cressida said, “I can’t go on arguing any more. Perhaps you’re right—of course, I always knew you had theories, Lester. . . .”

“But, my dear, only try and see the whole situation in its proper perspective.”

“I am trying,” she said. “If only you realized, I am trying,” she thought; and seeing him sitting hunched there at his desk, leaning his chin in his hands, staring miserably, she felt a sharp unreasoning pity for him and went over to him and, “Dear—Lester, dear,” she said, and put her arms round him.

“I wish I could make you feel as clearly as I do about these matters,” he said. “Don’t you see the ugliness, the pettiness, of the whole monopoly view of marriage? Don’t you see how its beauty can only be in a complete freedom combined with a complete mutual understanding?”

“Yes,” she whispered, “yes . . . I do.”

“Then why,” he asked, feeling the beats of her heart against his shoulder, “why do you make yourself unhappy?”

“Just—” Well, why, Cressida asked herself, why couldn’t she quite easily accept it all—since she accepted his beliefs, since she could see how free from pettiness and blind convention his conduct was? “Just that I’m only half educated—by you,” she said.

He looked up into her face and thought how childish she somehow seemed. He was disconcerted by a sense that his pain at her unhappiness edged on pleasure.

He wondered if he should tell her about Fay. . . . But what was the use, when that was, in all probability, over? Ruth was sufficient—as an example. In a flash of recollection he determined that Cressida must accept Ruth—and realized how near he was, with Cressida silent like this in his arms, to making a gesture of renunciation. A little absurd to argue half a day to make Cressida see the thing in a clear light, and then befog the issue with the breath of his own sentimentality! (There was something mysterious about the fund of cool sensuality that Ruth blindly drew on in the name of friendship. . . . It was impossible to know her own estimate of the affair; he doubted if she’d made one. Very likely her complexities of mind were assumed with her romantic intentions. . . .)

“You won’t let yourself be biased or foolish any more, my darling?” he said.

“No,” said Cressida. “No, of course not.” She released herself from his embrace and smoothed her hair and blouse. “I shall have an extra bed for Mrs. de Freyne put up in our room,” she said in a gentle and matter-of-fact voice, and went out of the room feeling suddenly elated.

The telephone rang.

“Yes,” said Lester, “yes, yes. Oh, Ruth,” he said.

“*Well?*” her voice demanded. “*Well?*”

“I think I’ve made Cressida see reason.”

“Reason?”

“I mean, accept the whole thing in its proper perspective.”

“You mean she *sees*—you’ve *made* her see, Lester—how important our friendship is, and that she has no right—I mean ethically no right at all—to interfere? After all, there are some things which are really intrinsically important; and after all, marriage is only—”

“Yes, yes. She sees all that.”

“Poor little thing, Lester! Poor little—”

“Yes,” he said, and put down the receiver.

While she was walking through the orchard she still believed that she felt elated. She smiled tightly to herself as the yellow leaves darted vaguely against her face and body and fell off on to the decaying drifts under her feet. She noticed that leaves from the big apple tree had stuck in a pattern all over the tarred roof of the summerhouse.

She was certainly going to be reasonable, she told herself. (And Robin had said he’d try and come over this afternoon, and he’d be certain to come this way, to come by the field path from the Creeds—unless Lady Marion had decided to drive him over. . . . But he must come—he couldn’t *not* come, she thought, and quickened her pace.)

For if she were only with Robin she would feel better.

If she were with Robin it couldn’t all muddle and hurt her so.

Just being with him—

She saw him coming across the fields. She stopped at the stile and waited for him; waited, holding the wooden bar tightly—for when he got to her she'd feel better, less stiff, less hurt.

She stopped herself from calling out to him, crying out to him.

He saw her when he was quite close.

He said as naturally as possible (since something must have happened for her to look like this), "How nice of you to come and meet me."

"I wanted a walk," she said, and stupidly watched his movements as he stepped over the stile.

They began to walk back in the direction of Starr House.

"You go back to your constituency to-morrow?" she asked. But she mustn't cry, she mustn't horribly, helplessly break up, she thought, her head bent so that she saw both their pairs of feet moving forward in a funny relentless way like clockwork animals.

"Yes. The dissolution's in ten days, and then I shall be in the grand rush of the election."

"I do hope you'll get in."

"The Liberals have a pretty good chance—Cressida—Cressida, *dear* . . ."

She stopped, rubbing her handkerchief to her eyes and cheeks. She mustn't, she mustn't cry like this!

"Oh, Robin . . ."

"My dear . . ." He put his hands in his pockets and stood beside her, waiting.

"I can't bear you to be unhappy," he said.

"You knew, Robin—didn't you? About Ruth de Freyne?"

"Yes—my dear."

"I suppose everyone but me—would. . . . I found them."

They walked on slowly.

"He doesn't really care for Ruth de Freyne," Robin said. What could he say? What could he do? Easier, he thought, if he didn't love Cressida.

"I know. And I know it doesn't matter. But it seems to me a sort of dreadful disloyalty."

Robin was silent.

"Everyone must live by their own standards," he said.

"I know. He doesn't think it disloyal. He calls it freedom. And he calls my part in it 'understanding,'" she said, and pushed her handkerchief back into her pocket.

"Lester finds expression easy."

"I know that. I suppose that's what muddles me—because I'm slow and literal—oh, and I suppose really, awfully conventional; like Mother. And so he's seized on a bit of life and lived it, and tasted it, and theorized about it, and written about it in a book, all in the time that I take to learn anything at all from the same bit of life. . . . It sounds muddled, Robin, but d'you see . . . I mean my mental inadequacy is a handicap—all the time. And he's ready for more and more life (I can see it in so many ways); and more *lives*—while I'm simply ready to be content with one. He's ceaselessly active. Look at the work he's got through in the last year—books, articles, journalism, W. E. A. lecturing! And look at all his interests! He misses nothing. Bernhard Schön said to me there was a scientist lost in Lester; Mr. Brace says his political journalism is first-rate; and he reads every new book worth reading; and when he is up in London he sees every play and picture exhibition, and rushes to concerts in between a public luncheon and some other engagement. . . . He's got such an insatiable appetite that one feels sickly, half alive beside him."

Robin listened to her sentences, choking to a stop. So that was how she saw him! A being of incredible versatility, of titanic energy. . . . And yet she could laugh, he'd heard her laugh,—gently, though,—at Midge's foibles, his egotisms. . . .

"Am I being unfair?" Robin asked himself, conscious that Cressida, walking beside him, was suddenly wrapped in her own thoughts. "Is he, in spite of everything, like that—inexplicably versatile—titanic, even? Am I really biased, unable to judge?" Robin reflected, thinking of his father's estimate of Midge.

"You see, Robin—I'm unhappy now, and hurt—and ridiculously shocked. But comparatively that doesn't matter; just as I don't matter, comparatively—nor even Stella—nor you—Robin."

"I see. The battle is to the giants. . . ."

"And when you're dead, Robin, and I'm dead, he'll only be inessentially dead. There'll be so much of him still living, and working. . . ."

"You choose to take a mystical view of Lester's survival. . . . And we're not dead, Cressida, yet. We're only too alive," Robin said, looking away from her, looking through the orchard trees at the grey glimpses of Starr House.

PART THREE
“THE POT OF HONEY”

By Stella Midge

An Autobiographical Sketch
(Intended as the Basis of a Novel)

“THE POT OF HONEY”

By Stella Midge

I

Father used to sit in the revolving summerhouse at the far end of the orchard.

The summerhouse was square, bright brown (sticky to touch in hot weather—sticky varnish); one side was open, the other side had a window with little green curtains. He sat in the summerhouse in a wicker chair at a wicker table, and wrote.

I knew he wrote books. But it was years before I understood the direct connection between all those sheets of foolscap, covered with his thick little writing, and the red volumes with gold printing on the back, in his study.

When he was away I used to have dolls’ tea parties in the summerhouse —lay a cloth (a dishcloth borrowed from Mrs. Begbie), arrange the little tea set given me by Great-aunt Celia. (I still have three cups and four saucers left; the minute bright flowers have scarcely rubbed at all; the teapot still has a gold lip to its elegant spout.) The dolls sat on their chairs round the wicker footstool, while I dispensed tea from the height of the table. Rosamund, in pink silk, a parasol hooked to her jointed wrist; Chloe, with her brown hair well brushed, and tied, like my own, on one side with a bow; Juliet, in the knitted jersey and skirt and cap presented to her by Aunt Cathie. The twin baby dolls slept outside the summerhouse in their pram I used to dispense what purported to be “the Pobbles’ favorite dish” on the little plate—“eggs and buttercups fried with fish.” (The buttercups were the only concession to realism).

When Father was at home the summerhouse was forbidden territory. If Mother wasn’t about and Nurse was indoors I crept towards it through the orchard, every now and then falling on my stomach in the long grass and listening to the ground for footsteps. Sometimes I managed to get right up and climb to the window and see Father bent over the table, his hand moving steadily, or leaning back and scratching behind his ear with his pen.

Once he heard me and called me in.

“What d’ you think I’m doing, Stella?” he smiled, his eyes crinkled up. I was five then.

"I know. Mummie told me."

"What?"

"Writing a book."

"D'you think I can write with somebody making mouse noises at the back of the summerhouse?"

"*Was* it like a mouse?"

"Yes."

"Did you think it *was* a mouse?"

"Yes."

"*Draw* the mouse."

He drew it. It was like this:—

He wrote "The Author's Scourge" underneath. I dared not ask what "scourge" meant. I used to wonder. Mrs. Begbie told me in the end, while I was watching her bake one afternoon. "A scourge is what God sent to the Egyptians, Miss Stella."

"Same as a plague, Mrs. Begbie?"

"Yes." The scones went in on the black tray: squdgy dollops veiled in flour. (Mr. Creed was coming to tea.)

Another time Father heard me and shouted, "Damn you, Stella, can't you run away and play somewhere else? You've got the whole garden, haven't you?"

I went to the hammock and brooded. Robin found me there. He sat down in the hammock beside me and put his arm round my shoulders. He didn't bother me with questions. We sat in silence for a long time. The hard lump

in my feelings began to dissolve. I cried, and he lent me his handkerchief and kissed the top of my head. He was in white flannels, so I supposed he had come over to the tennis party from his "constituency."

"Cock Robin?"

"Yes, Stella?"

"Is Father—ek—eccentric?"

"I don't think so."

"Nurse said to Alice that authors are bound to be a bit eccentric."

He didn't answer. I looked up and was puzzled by his expression.

"Cock Robin?"

"Yes . . ." He was gazing across the lawn. Mummie and her guests looked like marionettes under the cedar tree.

"Are you angry about something?"

"No, Stella." Then he looked down into my face and took his handkerchief from me and wiped my eyes and nose.

"You mustn't cry, my sweetheart. . . . When the tennis party's over you and Mummie and I will have a cricket match."

I can't remember when I first began to love Robin. But sometimes I think it was on that afternoon.

II

I was afraid of Lady Marion, though she was kind and used to take me up to her cold vast bedroom and give me ginger biscuits out of a glass box interlined with lace. I thought her bedroom was like church; the Gothic windows were latticed and always shut, the ceiling was vaulted and skeletoned with rafters, and there was a big crucifix above the bed, and a statue of the Virgin Mary in a niche by the fireplace. I realized that, although Lady Marion talked to me and questioned me, she wasn't really interested. What she liked was laughing at my father's jokes or talking about people at a great pace. When she smiled the high bone of her nose showed quite white. I commented on this to Mummie. I asked, "Is Lady Marion's skin too tight?"

Mummie said, "Why should you think so?" and began to laugh and ran into Father's dressing room, and I heard her repeating my remark, and then they both laughed.

But Mr. Creed was a friend. From the time I was six until I was twelve and went to boarding school we used to carpenter together. I remember his suggesting to Mummie that it would be amusing for me, and promising to see that I didn't "chop" my fingers off. I think to begin with he was sorry for me, as an only child, and that soon he came to enjoy my companionship.

The first thing he taught me was sawing. He gave me a little saw and showed me how to clamp the length of wood under one knee on the bench.

"More hurry, less speed," he said. "Don't fuss."

Little soft heaps of sawdust accumulated on the floor.

I made a footstool as a Christmas present for Mummie. It was made of deal. I spent hours smoothing the edges with sandpaper. Mr. Creed cut out a heart in the centre with his fretwork saw. I painted it white, three coats. (Nurse said the paint would never come off my boots. She was cross.) Mr. Creed said it was "jolly good—for a first effort." He helped me to wrap it up in paper and string, and Father let me hide it in his coat cupboard in the hall until Christmas Day.

I remember that Christmas, of 1909, because we had a party, and I was allowed to stay up for the early part of it. Father said, "Isn't six rather young to stay up, Cressida?" But Mummie said, "Just for once, Lester."

She was sitting at the round table in the drawing-room window addressing a heap of Christmas cards. She was wearing a red dress with little white flowers all over it and white frills round the neck and wrists. She smiled at me, so that her eyes darkened and sparkled.

"It's Stella's coming-out party."

Father got up from the sofa and went over and kissed her.

She looked up into his face and stopped smiling. It was as if he had put out a light. I had a feeling that she was going to cry. I asked hurriedly, "Will Robin come?"

"Come . . .?" She was still looking at Father.

"Come to the party?"

"I hope so—I expect so."

"And Mr. Creed?"

"Oh, yes."

Father said, "Richard Creed and Stella are about the same age."

Mummie looked at me. I was sitting astride the fender stool, but I felt she didn't see me.

"Don't you value the simple qualities at all, Lester?"

"Creed is almost dramatically simple."

"I wish—" She broke off, watching Father as he went back to the sofa. "Richard Creed has integrity." She took up her pen again and reached out for another envelope.

"A nice domestic animal."

"Oh, Lester!" she pleaded, apologetically.

Father put down his book and went out of the room. Mummie stared after him. She seemed to have forgotten me. Then she bent her head on to her hands and covered her eyes. The frills fell back from her wrists, trembling. I heard her whisper, "I can't bear it—I can't bear it."

I was frightened, and got up and tiptoed out of the room. I ran upstairs to the nursery.

Nurse was ironing one of my tussore smocks.

"Whatever's the matter, Stella?"

"Nothing."

She turned back a cuff and passed the iron over it. Her face, under its starched cap, was rosy and familiar and reassuring. She looked at me again. She said placidly:—

"You can fetch me some water to damp that towel over."

"What's—integrity?" I asked Mr. Creed.

"What? Eh?" He was going through the weekly process of tidying his workshop.

"Int-eg-rerty."

"Sort of—upright, sense of honor—that sort of thing, I believe."

"Mummie said you've got it."

"Glad to hear it. Hope I have. World wouldn't get on without it very far."

Grannie and Grandpa (Stobart) came to stay on Christmas Eve. Grannie hugged me and looked me over.

"I do believe she's grown again, Cressida! How these chickabiddies shoot up."

Grandpa's face came down from a great height. I hated being kissed by his beard. Nurse had told me that he had a beard because he was a professor. I asked her if he slept with his beard in or out of the bedclothes, and she said, "Don't be foolish, Stella." I never dared to ask him. And last year at his funeral the question occurred to me again while we were all standing by the grave in that windy cemetery.

Mummie was different in her manner when Grannie and Grandpa were staying. She ran about the house and fussed the servants. She is still a little afraid of Grannie.

I don't know whether the fact that I've always felt so "equal" with Mummie is a question of generation, or of her individuality. Ever since I was about fourteen I've felt, if anything, older than she. Perhaps the war was a forcing house. Perhaps, in my case, it was Robin and the war together. One seemed to grow too quickly in those years, at the ultimate expense of spiritual stamina.

Father says the post-war generations have a vitiated palate; his new book is going to be a study of us all. To me, the breezy agnostic idealism of Father's lot seems more trite than the religious practical conventions of a generation before him. His creed, which seems to him so brave and liberal, is only an extension of full-blooded egotism; whereas our egotism, too expert in doubts to proclaim any doctrine, is haunted by its own shadows.

He asked me yesterday, "But do you believe in nothing?"

I said, "What did you teach one to believe? You handed on all the greyness of agnosticism and none of its pioneer zest. You didn't even give one anything to react from."

"But social ideals—ideals of citizenship?"

"You could hardly expect those to be convincing at a time when practical citizenship seemed to consist in men shattering each other into pieces of flesh and bone. One has one's inevitable reactions."

But he sat there at his writing table, looking healthy and profound, as he does in his press photographs, and said that he felt a new and better world was shaping round us. And Mummie came in carrying a vase of chrysanthemums for his desk, and said that Bernhard Schön's secretary had rung up to say that Sir B. would be late motoring down, as he had been kept at a Cabinet meeting.

When she had gone out, I asked, "Do you realize that Mummie's hair is quite grey now?"

He said, "I suppose it is. Well, Cressida must be—what? She was twenty when we married, and that was twenty-six years ago." He got up and went close to the mirror over the mantelpiece. "And I've hardly got a grey hair. Wonderful, really, considering I'm approaching sixty. Youth is more a matter of vitality than of years."

The footstool gained the admiration I'd hoped for. Mummie was enchanted and astonished. Father said the paint was beautifully put on, like a professional. Grannie said she thought the "heart" was such a pretty idea. I confessed that Mr. Creed had made the heart; but Grannie kissed and patted me and said, "But it's the thought behind which is so pretty—don't you think so, Floyd?"

And Grandpa remarked, "She seems very young to be doing such difficult manual work." (I hadn't heard carpentering called "emanuel" work, though I knew the word from "Hark, the Herald Angels," which Alice, the

housemaid, had taught me, and which, to my excitement, we sang in church that morning.)

After tea I was sent to rest on my bed in the night nursery, because I was staying up for the party. I lay watching the firelight dance on the white walls and ceiling. I was too excited to sleep. I kept thinking about the presents I had had that afternoon and what the party would be like. I could discern my dress and clean petticoat and shoes and socks laid out ready on Nurse's bed, and I would wear the locket set with little pearls that Auntie Elsie, who was my godmother, had sent me for a Christmas present. (I had only seen Auntie Elsie once, because she lived in Spain. I remembered her as a very tall lady in a black dress and brown furs.) And the big doll from Grandpa Midge was next door in the day nursery; Nurse said I shouldn't rest properly if I had it in bed with me. The workbasket from Aunt Cathie was lined with red satin, and little straps holding scissors and thimble and needle case.

The night nursery was so quiet that I could hear the rain whispering against the windows. "Rain, rain, go to Spain"—where Aunt Elsie was. . . . The locket was a heart too. And pearls were "precious stones." Mummie had seed pearls, ten rows fastening with a sapphire clasp—sapphires were "precious stones." The lady called Mrs. Neilson, who came to lunch once, had a ring with a big ruby, a square ruby, and such white hands and pink shiny nails, astonishingly long and pointed. "You'll know me again," she'd said, laughing at me. But she was nice, and smelled so lovely. Father showed her the garden, and they kept making jokes, taking no notice of me; and Mummie jumped up suddenly at tea, when I was asking Father what was the adventure in Germany he had with Mrs. Neilson that she talked about; and Mummie's chair fell against the table and knocked over the teapot, and the tea sank into the carpet, so that there was still a stain.

I heard Nurse moving about next door, and then going out, and down the passage. (Mr. Creed was coming. And what dress would Mummie wear?) Suddenly I realized that the door, which was in a shadowy corner of the room, had been opened, and that someone was looking in. I sat straight up in bed.

A whisper: "Stella!"

"Oh!" I peered. "Cock Robin!"

He came across the room on tiptoes. He was still wearing his overcoat. He stood at the end of the bed. A leap of firelight showed that he was smiling.

"I suppose it's very wicked of me to disturb your rest. I expect Nurse will spank me."

"How did you know I was resting?"

We spoke in whispers.

"Mary told me." (Mary was the parlormaid.) "She said, 'Mr. and Mrs. Midge are dressing,' and I said, 'Where's Stella?' and she told me."

"Oh!"

"What?"

"*Well*, you ought to say 'A Merry Christmas.'"

"A Merry Christmas, then."

"Same to you. Did you forget it was Christmas?"

"No, of course not." He sat down on the bed. It creaked. "As a matter of fact, I even remembered to bring you a present."

"Oh, *Robin*!"

"What d'you think it is?"

"A—book?"

"No. More lively than that. I've got it here." He undid his overcoat. I realized he had been clasping something under it. "Look!"

I saw something dark and alive.

"Oh, Robin! A puppy! Oh, give it me!"

"It's a cocker spaniel." He deposited the soft, warm, black creature in my arms. Its eyes shone in the firelight.

I couldn't speak for pleasure.

"I thought you'd like it. Especially since Simpkin disappeared." (Simpkin was a cat, who didn't repay my affection.)

"Oh, Robin! Oh, thank you!"

"What are you going to christen it?"

I pondered.

"Robin—after you!"

"But it's a lady, I'm afraid."

I thought again. I had an inspiration.

“I know!”

“What?”

“Robinetta. And I know it’s a girl’s name because of the picture in the blue spare room.”

“It’s rather a funny name for a dog.”

“Not any funnier than Robin is for a man!”

III

At the party Mr. Creed let me eat two ices, one strawberry and one vanilla. Lady Marion, who came into the dining room accompanied by Grandpapa Stobart, said, “Richard, don’t make the child ill.”

And Grandpapa said, “Champagne or hock cup, Lady Marion? We shall doubtless experience the effects of Stella’s excesses to-morrow.”

The ugliness of that phrase, “the effects of Stella’s excesses,” stuck in my mind and used to prick at me for weeks afterwards.

Our neighbors for miles round were at the party. The drawing-room was cleared, and I thought the Christmas decorations, which I’d helped Mummie and old Begbie to put up, looked very gay and festive. Old Begbie had hung the big bunch of mistletoe from the chandelier in the hall, and people made jokes about this, and a man in a pink coat swung me up and kissed me so that the lady he was with laughed and said, “It’s a sign of middle age to like ’em young, Hugo.”

I felt humiliated, and angry with the man in the pink coat. I writhed out of his clasp and ran upstairs and across the landing into Mummie’s bedroom. The big double bed and the sofa were piled with cloaks and wraps, and the light was on over the dressing table. I caught sight of myself in the glass. That reflection is still clear to me: a little girl with long dark hair tied on one side with a pale blue riband; a white dress with a pale blue riband slotted round its yoke; bronze silk stockings (my first pair of silk stockings, given me by Mrs. Faraday for my previous sixth birthday) and bronze dancing sandals. My anger subsided as I became absorbed in the vision of my own finery. I smoothed my waist under the folds of *broderie-anglaise*. “Stick it in,” I murmured automatically, echoing Father’s frequent injunction.

There was a rustling on the landing outside, and I heard Mrs. de Freyne’s brittle voice, “We might sit out here,” and Father saying, “That’s Cressida’s bedroom. I’m afraid it’ll be full of coats. There are two chairs along by the nursery.”

They passed on. I took up one of Mummie’s brushes with the Reynolds angels embossed on the silver backs. The band began to play downstairs. It was a string band hired from Birmingham. I thought I had never heard more delicious music. But if I went down, I should have to dance with Captain de Freyne, because Mrs. de Freyne had said, “You must dance with Stella,” and he had looked at me and stroked his moustache and said, “Yes, by Jove!

What about number fifteen?" But I knew he didn't want to dance with me, because Roger de Freyne had told me that his father didn't like children.

Mummie had asked if Roger could come to our dance to keep me company (Roger was seven that Christmas), but Mrs. de Freyne wouldn't let him come.

I wished he had come. I began to wish there were someone of my own age there. I wished that I were dancing with Robin again soon. I liked Roger de Freyne. We had just started having lessons together that winter with Miss Brewer, a stolid young lady from Banbury, who came three days a week—one week to our house at Clayton-Hatchetts, and the next week to the de Freynes' house at Stilford.

I felt that it was just like Mrs. de Freyne to stop Roger coming; it was part of her lack of understanding. Even then I thought her dull and, in appearance, faintly repulsive. I disliked her way of poking her sleek black head forward while she listened. She never laughed; and the smile which occasionally stretched her lips showed her small white teeth and pale gums, but left her black eyes still staring.

I had no certainty of her relation to Father until Roger referred to it last year, when we became engaged. He said the "old affair" between our parents "made the idea of our marriage seem almost incestuous." He was surprised by my ignorance of the whole matter. He said:—

"One can only suppose that they founded their alliance on the fact that your father preached what he practised, while my mother practised what he preached."

But it seemed queer, Roger said, to think of my round father making love to his angular mother.

I suppose Father always knew Ruth de Freyne was stupid. But he is as luxuriously responsive as a high-powered car; the silliest woman can put her foot on the self-starter of his vanity, and he purrs, and is off with her at any speed she likes.

While I stood fingering Mummie's brushes and bottles the door was opened by Ada Fancy—"Miss Fancy," as I called her. She was dressed in the tartan silk that she had worn at the Flower Show in the summer. I was surprised, as I hadn't noticed her dancing downstairs. She said:—

"Hello, Stella! What are you doing with yourself, hiding up here?"

"Oh, I just came up."

She bent to give me one of her big bolstery hugs.

“You do look a duck!” she said. Her red face beamed down to mine. “I’ll bet your Pa’s proud of you to-night!” She tweaked the bow on my hair, but I didn’t mind what Miss Fancy did, because she was so jolly, and always gave me a sponge cake or a piece of butterscotch when Mummie took me in the shop. I pondered, though, over her suggestion that Father was proud of me. The idea pleased me.

“I didn’t see you downstairs dancing, Miss Fancy.”

She shrugged her shoulders, and her earrings danced against her neck.

“I’m acting cloakroom attendant for the evening. Your Ma asked me if I wouldn’t come to the dance—sweet duck! She’d ask the whole of Christendom if she was allowed to. But I didn’t see myself dancing with all the toffs, and I asked if I couldn’t come and give a hand instead.”

“But why don’t you dance?”

She chuckled, “My dancing days are over,” and swirled, her tartan skirts flying out, and made an elephantine but competent curtsey to the mirror. “Not that I wasn’t a one for dancing once upon a time.” She prinked at her reflection. “Why, I can remember an evenin’ when your Pa and me danced the polka like a pair of mad things at the church social and—” She stopped; she looked at me mistily. I saw that she had forgotten my presence. “Oh, Lor’!” she said, and patted her pompadour. “There’s the mewsick stopped.”

I heard Robin’s voice on the stairs—“Stella!” And Mummie saying, “Where can she have got to?”

I ran out.

“Where have you been?” Mummie asked.

“Talking to Miss Fancy.” I slipped my hand into Robin’s.

Mummie smiled at Robin and then at me. She said, “Dear old Ada! She’s the best friend I have.”

And Robin asked, “Don’t you value my friendship as highly, Cressida?” in a voice that sounded stiff. His grasp tightened on mine.

Mummie looked at him, smiling differently now, as if she were going to cry. She said, “Robin, my dear”—and opened and shut her small lace fan. “You are an odd person, Robin. One never knows what your next mood will be.”

“I think I’m very phlegmatic.”

Mummie said nothing, and looked down over the banisters into the hall. I wondered what she was thinking; she seemed abruptly to have forgotten Robin. Then she turned her head again in the quick way she has, and said to Robin:—

“I wish you wouldn’t bother our friendship by talking about it. Life is—complicated enough—without spoiling the simple things.”

I wondered what she meant. Robin said sulkily, “I’m sorry,” and Father and Mrs. de Freyne came along the nursery corridor. The latter said:—

“*Such* a successful party, Cressida!”

And Robin stood back to let her pass, and I squeezed his hand and whispered “Lizard!” to him. This was one of our private jokes. We had dubbed Mrs. de Freyne “the Lizard” because she resembled the drawing in my book called *Little Creatures of Many Lands*.

IV

Miss Brewer used to say, "Roger, pay attention. Stella, sit up straight, dear."

We organized an impenetrable resistance to her teaching. She began by taking us through a series of Readers, although both Roger and I had been able to read since we were five. There was a picture of "the bad nag" with its mane flying. Roger effected the banishment of that particular Reader by applying an epithet learned from his father, or his father's groom, to this illustration.

For two years Miss Brewer taught us reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, history, and French. We had *French without Tears* in a pink linen binding. (*Où est le canif de Charles? Dans la poche de Robert. Charles pleure—*) Roger said, "Charles was a crybaby and Robert was a cad." Roger was always intolerant and trenchant.

There must have been times when, for poor Miss Brewer, French wasn't quite "tearless." She must have been glad when Mummie took over our French teaching.

Mummie taught by her own method. Our French lessons became a riot. She used to lay a large dictionary on the hall table and give us each a supply of blank tickets, pins, and a pencil. We were then let loose to see who could label the most things in the house correctly in French within half an hour (referring to the dictionary when we wanted to). When time was up, Mummie blew a whistle. On one occasion Roger and I met, under a simultaneous inspiration, trying to pin a ticket on to Mary's apron strings while she was cleaning the silver in the pantry. We quarreled. Mary was bewildered and then angry, and Mummie had to come in and calm her. Another time Roger had ventured into the larder in Mrs. Begbie's absence, and at luncheon the remains of the cold joint appeared labeled *Ceci est un taureau*.

On the alternate weeks when I went to Stilford for lessons (old Begbie used to drive me over in the tubby pony cart behind Tommy, the tubby grey pony), Nurse used to put me on clean underclothes every day. "You never know if you mightn't have an accident or a bad fall, and I shouldn't like Mrs. de Freyne's nurse to think you weren't kept nice."

Mrs. de Freyne's nurse had shining white hair and was truculent. She had been with Roger's father as a small boy, and spoiled Roger under a

show of irony. I soon lost my fear of her, and doubted whether, if Roger's Nanna found my prostrate body under a tree or pitched from the apple loft, she would bother herself over Nurse's careful goffering and the new linen buttons on my "Liberty" bodice. I had seen her bandage Roger's fox terrier after it broke its leg in a gin, and I had a stimulating picture of myself stretched on a sofa and Nanna very big and deft, and breathing sniffle-snuffle, bending over me.

I thought Stilford Manor much lovelier than our own house. I liked the lattice windows and the oak beam in Roger's nursery. Roger's Grandmamma (Lady Lang, a frightening old lady of extraordinary thin prettiness, who pecked one's forehead and said "Well, child?") gave him a trapeze on his eighth birthday. This was hung from the oak beam and caused frequent diversions from our lessons.

Once, soon after Father had given us a dissertation on the origin of species, Roger asked Miss Brewer if we could act the history of man, beginning on the trapeze. Her cheeks got redder than usual, and she said:—

"Nobody has proved that men are descended from monkeys, Roger."

"Not monkeys—apes."

Miss Brewer was uncomfortably silent. She had been forbidden by our enlightened parents to teach us theology.

"Not everybody believes that, Roger."

"Mr. Midge says so. He showed us the hairs on the back of his hands and he said that showed he was a sew-per-ape! And because he has to shave, too!"

I stared at Miss Brewer's hands, which were plump, emerging from voile sleeves. She wore a gold chain bracelet with a padlock. I felt it was more likely that Father had been descended from an ape than Miss Brewer. I hadn't dared to tell Father that I preferred the story of the Creation in the Bible; and in *Paradise Lost*, which Mummie had been reading to me.

Miss Brewer changed the subject.

I still pondered. If Father was descended from an ape, then I must be. What about Mummie, though? I couldn't associate Mummie, who had little white hands, and muslin dressing jackets with lace sewed round and round them, and a fresh "violety" smell in her bedroom—I couldn't associate her with the pictures of apes that Father showed to Roger and me.

But what about Roger? What about Captain de Freyne? What about Robin? There was no doubt that they all had to shave. And Mr. Creed, who was always cutting himself shaving.

I came to the conclusion that men were descended from apes, and women from Eve—so that Adam, of course, was a monkey.

V

I was having luncheon with Roger in his nursery after lessons, and his Nanna was in one of her rare talkative moods. She was telling us about the circus that used to come to her village once a year when she was a little girl.

We listened, enthralled, to her description: how they used to unload their carts and caravans on the green by the pond; how all the children used to stand round and watch the big tent being put up; and the cage with the performing bears in it; and how one year there was an Indian elephant with a real Indian ("The color of that chest his face was, and his eyes rollin' in his head, and a great turbin on his head!"); and there was a pony that could spell out words with letters; and the clowns—

Mrs. de Freyne came in. Nanna stopped talking and looked surly. Roger's face lost its liveliness. Mrs. de Freyne was wearing a yellow dress and an enormous blue hat with buttercups on it. She said:—

"Stella, your mother has just telephoned to say you're to be ready early to go back—your father is coming for you here in the car on his way to meet a train at Banbury."

Roger and I looked at each other in chagrin. We had planned to play "outlaws" in the woods that afternoon.

I said, "Yes, Mrs. de Freyne."

Roger asked, "Why can't she stay and go back later?"

"I told you, Roger. Her father's coming to fetch her."

Roger folded his arms; his nostrils stretched. "Hell," he said. I thought he looked very heroic.

"Oh, Roger, dear! Why need you use such ugly words?"

He was silent.

"When there are so many beautiful words," protested Mrs. de Freyne.

"I'll say 'Hades' if you like," Roger remarked, and got up from his chair and kicked it over.

Nanna didn't speak. She scarcely ever did speak to Mrs. de Freyne. Her manner implied that her mistress was morganatic.

"You make Mother very sad, Roger," said Mrs. de Freyne helplessly. She looked at me.

"You'll be ready, won't you, Stella?"

Father came in our new Ford. While I climbed in beside him, Mrs. de Freyne leaned her elbows on the side of the car and talked to him, looking up at him intently from under her big hat.

I had the impression that he was impatient. I saw his toes wriggle inside his white canvas tennis shoes. (I imagine that Ruth de Freyne must have been a difficult woman to "break off with," and that, whatever Father had once felt about her, he was now bored. Mummie told me lately that he used to come to her and implore her to fend off Ruth de Freyne's visits or to invent a new excuse for his absence.)

Mrs. de Freyne said, "I don't understand you, Lester."

"Must we go over that again, Ruth? Can't you accept life as it comes?"

She looked swimmy-eyed, and poked her head.

"I haven't the kind of nature that accepts things—"

Father looked at his watch.

"My dear . . . Another time . . . I really must . . ."

She stood back. Father accelerated. The car bounced, and we rattled off down the drive.

It must have been soon after this that Ruth de Freyne found herself forced to a diplomatic change of front. Anyway, for seventeen years her relation with Father has been a suave but innocuous assumption of intimacy with his soul. (Roger says his mother's hobby is "spiritual petting parties with the great.")

As we passed Broughton Castle, I asked Father, "Who are we going to meet at the station?"

"A lady called Miss Rosamund Avon. She writes books."

"Oh. Like you?"

"Yes. But her books aren't like mine."

"How aren't they like?"

"She tells a different kind of story."

"Is she a nice lady?"

"Delightful!"

I watched his foot go up and down on the pedal and wished I could drive. Father loved that first Ford as Mr. Creed cared for his favorite hunter. He used to drive it for hours about the countryside. When we had visitors he would take them out and drive them over bits of ploughed land, to show how dauntless were its powers.

I was astonished by the appearance of our visitor. She was waiting for us outside the station, beside a suitcase and a rucksack. A flopping brown hat; a slim figure in a red dress which had neither collar nor waist, but hung from a yoke straight to her ankles, revealing brown sandals like my own.

"Hello!" she called out. I saw that under her hat her straight soft yellow hair was cut short—like the picture of the Princes in the Tower in my *Lamb's Tales*. She smiled. She had white teeth, and a square chin with a dent in the middle, shining blue eyes under straight thick brown eyebrows, and a buttony nose with freckles on it.

"Hello, Rosamund!" Father said, and jumped out.

I thought I had never seen such a pretty and surprising grown-up lady.

She spoke to me in a deep voice.

"I s'pose this is Stella?"

We shook hands.

Father asked her if she had any more luggage. She wrinkled her nose scornfully.

"Afraid I can't oblige with the usual female quantity of paraphernalia. The suitcase has got my sketching things in, and the satchel just holds one change and my pyjamas."

I climbed over to the back seat and Miss Avon sat beside Father.

When we started, the brim of her hat blew up from her face and made a waggling halo. She laughed and took it off, and her hair was blown back from her ears and forehead in a yellow fan.

She said to Father in her deep incisive tones, "I saw our mutual 'Pub' yesterday."

"Well, what does he think of your new departure?"

"He says he likes my countrified books better, but he thinks this'll sell."

"George Driscoll's usually accurate in his judgments."

So it was Robin's father—"Pub"?

Father asked, “Did you make the husband go back to his wife in the end?”

“Yes. But, like Peter Pan, only to find ‘another little boy sleeping in his bed.’”

“I don’t think that’s compatible with the wife’s character.”

“Why not? Her husband had lovers, and the sensible thing was for her to have one.”

“Not in her case. You made her a woman of intense feeling and high principle.”

“Surely your view is rather Philistine, Lester. The husband was high-principled, too. Surely you, who are a pioneer of sex equality, must admit the wife’s equal right to take a lover if she wants one?”

Father was silent. I tried to fathom the sense of this argument.

“It’s curious,” Father said, “how easy it is to hold conflicting beliefs. Intellectually, I admit the woman’s equal freedom in marriage; instinctively, and by experience, I hold an opposing view.”

They became involved in a discussion—sex, marriage, freedom, tradition. I suppose they felt adventurous, though it seems curiously naïve to me now.

The Ford bumped along at a high speed. When we came back from the seaside the corn was pale, with green light among the stalks. Now it was dark gold. And there were poppies in Tiverton’s field.

Miss Avon was asking, “What does your wife believe? It’s so important when people marry that they should hold the same views.”

“Cressida is very practical. What she really likes is spoiling me and making my house and garden as perfect as possible.”

“Ah!” said Miss Avon, and she sounded shocked. “But that isn’t the genuine equal companionship we’ve been talking of. Now supposing that *she* were to want a lover?”

Father said, “You don’t know Cressida.”

I reflected that grown-up conversation seemed to be always about other people, or health.

“That’s where the Creeds live,” Father remarked.

“Really! They must rattle in it. I should have thought the house in Eaton Square was enough for them. I hope you won’t have a lot of your ‘county’ friends to meet me. They’ll think me very outrageous.” She tossed back her head and chuckled.

We saw Mummie waiting for us at the door, with Robinetta tucked under her arm.

Rosamund Avon must have been about twenty-six at this time; hardly older than I am now. And Mummie only twenty-eight!

I wonder if they liked each other at once, as Rosamund jumped down from the Ford, bareheaded in her red dress, and Mummie came forward saying, “Miss Avon, I *have* so wanted to meet you.” Or whether, at first, they mistrusted one another. Mummie so unconsciously neat and pretty; Rosamund so pretty and deliberately queer and untidy. Mummie was always shy—but competent socially (the competence due, I suppose, to Grandmamma Stobart’s training), whereas Rosamund Avon was at ease, but had no manners. (She had been brought up in a family of clever faddists, and still conformed at this time to their lack of social grace.)

It would have been difficult to foresee the complicated and tortured friendship that was to grow up between them.

And Father, jovially hoisting the rucksack and suitcase out of the car, can scarcely have contemplated any relation except a necessary acquaintance between the two young women.

VI

I was fascinated by Miss Avon.

I followed her up to her bedroom; it was the little green paneled bedroom that Robin always had when he came to stay.

She had brushes, like a man, with no handles. I asked her, “Do you really wear pyjamas, Miss Avon?”

Her reflection in the mirror laughed at me. Her eyebrows jumped up under her fringe.

“Yes. Pull them out of the satchel if you like.”

I extracted two books, a bottle of ginger beer, a woolen scarf, and a bundle of black and white striped flannel.

“There they are.”

I undid them. They were wrapped round a pair of Turkish slippers. I laid them out on the bed.

“They’re just like the kind Father wears.”

“I wear them because they’re practical.”

“Are they in mourning because of King Edward?”

“No. Because I happened to get the stuff cheap.”

She strolled over to the window.

“What a view!”

“I wore a black band round my arm when King Edward died, first of all. But Robinetta ate it, and Mummie made me another and Robinetta ate it, too, and Mummie said she couldn’t bother to make me another.”

“I suppose this faces west?”

“Yes.” My glance returned to her pyjamas.

“Robin has blue silk ones.”

“Who’s Robin? Your brother?”

“No. I haven’t got any brothers. I’m an only child.” I paused, but I was discovering that this statement only caused sympathy in the servants’ hall and among the people in the village. “Robin is called Mr. Driscoll. He gave me Robinetta, you know, last Christmas—because if you’re an only child,

Mrs. Begbie says, you need the companionship. I expect he'll come on Sunday—he usually does. He's a Member of Parliament, you know, and he has a constituency—"

I heard Father's voice:—

"Rosamund?"

"You'd better go quick. Father's calling you."

She put her hands on my shoulders, and looked down into my face.

"Is he a tyrant, Stella?"

I thought of Nero, and shook my head.

"Oh, no. But he doesn't like it if you don't come at once when he calls."

Father looked in.

"Your daughter gives you a bad character, Lester."

He looked at her intently, but I could see that he hadn't bothered to listen to her words.

"After tea we must have a long walk," he said. "And I shall show you our domain."

When I got down to the drawing-room after my tea, Father and Miss Avon had gone for their walk. Mummie was talking to Miss Fancy about the catering for a village children's party we gave every year.

"There's something for a little girl in that parcel, dear," Miss Fancy beamed.

I undid it. A white marzipan pig with red sugar eyes and a string tail. I thanked her, feeling uncomfortable. I was afraid she would expect me to eat it at once, and I hated marzipan. But Mummie said, quickly, "Don't eat any now, Stella. You had chocolate after lunch. You'd better keep it."

Our glances met. I blushed. But Miss Fancy didn't notice.

"The Vicar was quite surprised that we were going to give our party this year," Mummie smiled. "Because of Court mourning. Now, about the quantities."

They talked of Bath buns and "jumbles" and shrimp-paste sandwiches and congress tarts. "And doughnuts," said Ada, "with plenty of jam in!"

"And Lester's going to organize the games afterwards, as he did last year, because he's so good at it."

I sat on the footstool, swinging my pig by its string tail.

"Who did you say the young lady was?" Miss Fancy was asking.

"She's a writer. A friend of Lester's."

"Clever, eh?" demanded Miss Fancy.

"Oh, very."

"She wears pyjamas," I said.

"I'll bet she does. Artists are a queer lot," remarked Miss Fancy. Her glance turned to the door and she addressed Mummie in a conspiratorial but good-natured manner:—

"Don't you sometimes find it a bit queer? Living with Les—and artistic people coming round and all that?"

Mummie seemed as if she were choosing between several answers. Then she gave a little gaspy laugh, and said, "I don't think about it much."

Why was it queer for Mummie? Was it queer for me, too, living with Father? It certainly seemed different for Roger—and the other children I knew. People didn't say to them, "Of course, with a father like that she *ought* to be clever!"

I didn't think that Father was particularly clever. I don't think so now. But Roger says I'm wrong.

Miss Fancy said to me, "I saw your little friend Roger yesterday, Stella!"

"Did you? He didn't tell me he'd been to Banbury."

"Yes. He came in with his mother and he bought himself some milk chocolate." (Pig, Roger, I thought; he might have given me some this morning!)

"Mrs. de Freyne was saying he's getting on wonderful with his piano lessons."

Mother said, "Yes. He's very musical, I believe."

"And can this young lady play the piano?" asked Miss Fancy, and tweaked my hair riband.

"Oh, Stella won't learn. She had two lessons, but they weren't a great success."

"I hate music," I said.

VII

We went to help Robin in the November election of 1910. We had blue ribands tied all over the Ford, "Vote for Driscoll" placarded across the wind screen, and "Liberalism Wins" fixed at the back above the number plate.

Father spoke at big meetings. Mummie spoke at several smaller meetings, and she and I did a lot of canvassing. I thought this immense fun. We used to stand on doorsteps, and Mother said, "I wonder if I might speak to your husband. It's about the election."

Occasionally the people slammed their doors. One old lady said, "We don't hold with politics, we're religious folk." But often we were invited in —into dank, small parlors with glass-fronted cupboards full of china, or into kitchens thickly furnished and hung about with pots and pans and clocks and bunches of vegetables and photographs and oleographs. We were offered a cup of tea, and Mummie and any available man in the household would talk about politics. I got used to hearing Mummie say, "Ah, but you *should* be interested, because the powers of the House of Lords affect your influence as a voter."

There was perpetual reference at meetings to the "House of Lords," which I imagined as an assembly of men ranged in a choir, all looking like Holbein's Henry VIII—flat hats and ermine collars and red legs, and dwelling in a kind of cathedralized attic above the building where M.P.'s like Robin sat. Robin said at several meetings, "The whole condition of democratic government is at stake," in a voice so intense that I supposed that there really must be something wrong. However, I felt sure that Robin would put it right. I knew it was important to be a Liberal, and how dastardly the Tories were, especially Sir Harold Egsmith, who was fighting against Robin and whose election color was red.

We all stayed at the White Hart in the market square. Robin had a private sitting room there. Mummie and Father and I had rooms overlooking a courtyard where horses and carts and motors came in and out, and servant girls ran to and fro, and men in gaiters and shirt sleeves whistled and made jokes and spilled buckets over the cobblestones. The windows over the courtyard had green window boxes, and odors of beer, cooked cabbage, and varnish floated up to one's bedroom. The atmosphere at the White Hart reminded me of the illustrations in my *John Gilpin*.

On the morning of Polling Day we went down, as usual, to have breakfast with Robin in his sitting room.

Robin was pale and out of temper. Father read one newspaper after another, and Mummie poured out and handed them their coffee in careful silence.

I sat eating cold ham and gazing alternately at a print of Frith's "Derby Day" hung on the wall and out of the window at a grey swollen sky. I felt infected by the general nervousness, and wriggled my toes inside my boots.

Father looked up from his paper and said:—

"I should say you've got as good a chance as anyone in the country, Driscoll."

"Egsmith's got a hell of a lot of cars at his disposal. I hear Lady Egsmith's brother sent down three more yesterday."

Mummie said, "I shouldn't let that worry you, Robin. I expect our voters will go in his cars."

Robin got up impatiently and lit a cigarette.

"I always wish they wouldn't do that."

"Robin, you haven't got you blue rosette on!" I remarked, shrilly.

He ignored me, and walked to the window.

"There's a crowd of Egsmith's people outside the Town Hall already," he said.

I felt desolate, and sat gazing at Robin's back.

Father got up.

"I'm going to start out now on my rounds in the faithful Ford. I can get in ten people with a certain amount of good will and ingenuity. I think that's called 'playing to capacity,' isn't it?"

He went out whistling, without waiting for an answer. Mummie sat still, leaning her elbows on the breakfast table.

"Dear Robin—"

She smiled and held out her hand when he turned round, and repeated, "Dear Robin," looking up into his face as he came back and stood by the table.

"Cressida—what a *game*!"

"It isn't—it's only a game for people who merely play at it. I wish for once I had a vote and could vote for you, Robin. So would Stella, wouldn't you, darling?"

I muttered, "I don't know." Robin hadn't spoken to me.

"But really at heart you're a Socialist, Cressida. You might be standing against me—putting up a third corner to this fight." He picked up his overcoat from the sofa.

Mummie half laughed, and said:—

"It'll be a dreadful day for women when they find that political power brings their affections and their consciences into conflict. Though as a matter of fact, I believe that most women's consciences are safely inside their hearts."

While she was speaking, I was struck by the expression on Robin's face. He was looking at her, but not as if he were listening to her words. He was looking at her in a way which bewildered and frightened me and obscurely touched me to pity. A shining pale print of his expression remains in my memory.

What puzzles me now is that Mummie can have been so unconscious that he was in love with her.

Modesty? Conventionality? Lack of imagination? Or did she blind her own sensibility because Robin's friendship was dear to her?

I remember being woken up that night out of a fitful sleep. Mummie was standing by my bed. She said, "Robin has won, Stella."

I sat bolt upright, and began to cry from excitement and because I was only half awake. Down in the courtyard, I heard men's voices shouting and singing and muttering, and the names "Driscoll" and "Egsmith" popping like fireworks.

A stampede of footsteps on the cobbles; more shuffling; a swell of voices. Mummie ran to the window. Then a chorus, broken, raucous, boiling up into a roar of excitement: "For he's a jolly good fellow, for he's a jolly good fellow—"

"They're carrying Robin in on their shoulders," Mummie gasped.

I bounced out of bed and ran to the window and stood beside her on a chair.

VIII

I had chicken pox over the New Year. Roger had it, and I caught it from him.

I was very miserable and scratchy and impatient. I disliked Dr. Lethbridge, who used to stand at the end of my bed swinging his pince-nez from a black cord, and say, “Well, well—and how’s the young lady to-day?”

Father’s company was a consolation. He spent hours every day reading to me, and telling me stories which he illustrated by pen-and-ink sketches on sheets of foolscap. He read me quantities of fairy stories, and *David Copperfield*, which laid a hold on my imagination, although Mummie argued that “eight and a half was too young for Dickens.” As for Father’s own stories, we filled three exercise books with the illustrated “Peculiar Adventures of Sarsaparilla and her Balloon,” in which a young lady of my own age toured from one country to another in an aërial conveyance fitted up with every conceivable luxury, from a slot machine containing hot bacon sandwiches to a breakfast table which laid and cleared itself, and a canary which could sing all the songs of three languages.

Mummie used to come in and read each new installment, and laugh at the pictures. Then she and Father would laugh at each other and make absurd jokes. I remember them as being happy and high-spirited that winter. Perhaps they were both relieved because Ruth de Freyne had gone to California for a time.

When I was convalescing, Ada Fancy sent me meringues, and Auntie Cathie sent me, to my joy, a glass paper weight containing a view of Cheltenham. By shaking the paper weight, one could blind the view with a snowstorm.

I showed this to Roger when his father brought him over to see me. Roger admired it too, and wanted to exchange it for a musical box that he had been given for Christmas—on the ground that, as I wasn’t musical, I shouldn’t mind the noises it made.

We quarreled about this. I was hysterically angry, because I have always felt my lack of musical understanding as a mental deformity. I threw the paper weight into the fireplace and smashed it. Roger was shocked and sobered by this. He went and knelt down by the pieces, and then looked at me rather shakily.

“And it was so pretty, Stella!”

“I wasn’t going to give it to you, anyway.”

He said reasonably and kindly, “I was silly to ask you for it when it was a present from your Aunt Cathie.”

I felt humiliated, but impressed by a new grown-up quality in Roger.

He told me that same afternoon while we were having tea that he was going to a prep school at Folkestone in the summer.

“I’m jolly glad,” he said. “I’m too old to learn at home with Miss Brewer, Father says. He cabled to Mother about it, and she says it’s all right.”

I wondered what would happen to my lessons. And the idea of losing Roger’s companionship made me melancholy.

I asked Mummie whether I should have to go on learning with Miss Brewer.

She looked abstracted, and then said that she had a new plan, and that Father and she had written a letter about it, and were waiting for an answer.

Soon after this they told me that when Roger went to school, Miss Avon, the pretty lady who had come for a week-end the previous summer, was going to come and live with us, and give me lessons.

Mummie asked, “Will you like that, Stella?”

“Oo-oo—*yes*.”

Mummie and Father looked at each other, and he said, “I hope the scheme will be a success from everyone’s point of view,” and put his arm round me.

Mummie said, “I shall love having her in the house. I only hope she won’t get bored. But as she suggested it herself—”

Father seemed annoyed.

“I don’t see why she should be bored.”

Mummie looked up from her needlework.

“Well, my dear, you’re writing most of the day, and Stella and I mayn’t be very exciting company, after her life in London.”

Father was agreeable again.

“But her idea is to have a quiet year. She says she’s quite worn out after finishing this last book and doing suffrage work both at the same time, and with her characteristic energy.”

Mummie sighed.

“Oh, dear, how I admire energy!” She stretched her square of embroidery out on her knee and tilted up her chin, and smiled vaguely at the ceiling.

IX

Rosamund Avon came in June, just after the Coronation.

I was shy and pleased to see her. As she came into the hall she greeted me in her deep, clear voice:—

"Hello, Stella! How d' you like the idea of me for your governess?"

I said, "Very much indeed, thank you."

I climbed up on to the rail of the banisters, and sat astride, swinging my feet and feeling self-conscious.

Mummie came down the stairs, and Father said:—

"Here's Jane Eyre at last, Cressida."

I wondered why he called my new preceptress that, and at tea she called him Mr. Rochester, and he and Mummie and Miss Avon laughed.

"But, seriously," she said, "I think you're very rash parents to try this experiment."

Mummie said:—

"So far, Stella has had the most bread-and-butter young lady from Banbury to instruct her."

"Miss Brewer is full of simple virtues," said Father.

Miss Avon turned and looked at me with her bright azure eyes.

"Do you want to learn?" she asked. "Do you care about learning?"

I hesitated. I felt shy.

"Some things I do."

"What do you want to learn?"

"I want to learn to write books."

They all three laughed at this, and Mummie said something about "hereditary taint." But Father asked:—

"Why do you want to write books, Stella?"

I tried to think. My remark had been prompted by a vague desire to flatter.

"To get rich."

“All hope abandon, then,” said Miss Avon. “But, as a matter of fact, you do, don’t you, Lester? You’re becoming a Crœsus of fiction.”

Mummie remarked, “They’ve offered him an enormous sum to go and lecture in America next spring.”

“Shall you go?”

“Probably.”

They strolled out on to the terrace. I followed them, taking in the details of Miss Avon’s appearance. She wore sandals, as before, but a green dress this time, and green cotton stockings to match.

Their talk returned to the subject I had stumbled on at tea. Miss Avon said:—

“Just why does one write novels?”

Father and Miss Avon made a series of complicated remarks, while Mummie walked between them in silence.

In a pause, Mummie said:—

“But I don’t agree that what you call the power of ‘fashioning’ experience always makes art. There might be cases where personal experience made art bad instead of good. What about imagination?”

“Imagination is the tool, and experience, so to speak, the material, Mrs. Midge.”

“As long as the tool dominates the medium—” Mummie qualified.

They all three stopped by the sundial at the end of the herbaceous border.

“I mean,” said Mummie, her expression partly thoughtful, partly defiant, “I don’t believe really great writers are limited by their own actual experience.”

Father lit a cigar, and the smoke wavered up in the quiet air. Mummie ran her forefinger round the disc of the sundial.

Miss Avon turned to Mummie, and said seriously:—

“I agree with you that one has to make the distinction between writing of Life with a big *L*, and about one’s own life—with a little *l*. The latter course may be cathartic, but not necessarily artistic.”

Father said, “On the other hand, it may be.”

I looked from one to the other, awed by the obscurity of their argument.

“It seems to me the difference in the two methods,” Mummie said, “is the difference between nakedness and indecency.”

Up in the day nursery I showed Miss Avon my Coronation mug and my album containing postcards of King George and Queen Mary and groups of the Royal Family.

“Did you see the Coronation, Miss Avon?”

“Yes, I saw the procession.”

“We climbed up on the roof at Lady Marion’s house, over there, you know,”—I pointed out of the window,—“and we saw six bonfires, and Mr. Creed lifted me up on his shoulders, and I had champagne to drink the King’s health. It tasted just like Eno’s, only it gave me hiccups. Do you know how to stop hiccups, Miss Avon? You look up at the ceiling and count a hundred!”

Great-aunt Celia came for a visit soon after Miss Avon was installed.

The visit must have been trying for Mummie as a housekeeper, for Aunt Celia was going through a phase of eating grated cheese at every meal.

Miss Avon and I were always going into Banbury in the pony cart to buy more cheese.

I had meals in the dining room now, and on several occasions Aunt Celia made comments on my diet.

“There is more protein in an ounce of Parmesan, Cressida, than in a whole beefsteak.” She glanced at my cutlet. “A meat diet fosters unwholesome passions in the child.”

Once she said to me, at breakfast:—

“Aren’t you ashamed, child, to think of the poor little pigs being killed?”

Father interrupted:—

“But you aren’t consistent, Miss Osram.” He looked at her egg with the expression that meant he was joking. “Think of the poor little chicken. Dairy produce covers a multitude of sins, including abortion.”

“Lester!” Mummie protested.

“What’s a bortion, Father?”

“My *dear* Lester!” said Aunt Celia, with cold dislike, and held a finger of toast halfway to her lips.

“Some more coffee, Aunt Celia?”

“No, thank you, Cressida.”

After breakfast Miss Avon explained to me conscientiously what “abortion” meant.

I found Miss Avon’s explicitness and sincerity a relief after two years of intercourse with Miss Brewer’s muddled intellect. Looking back, I am grateful not only for the amount of history and Latin and mathematics that Rosamund Avon taught me during the year she stayed, but also for her intolerance of sloppy thinking, and for a frankness which blew the cobwebs out of my mind.

I could ask her questions which Mummie found disconcerting (even though she pretended to herself that she didn’t). I could propound problems to Miss Avon, moral and social, which she would answer very clearly and thoughtfully, whereas Father was inclined to begin explaining and then get carried away on his own hobby-horse, and leave my nine-year-old mind blinking after his flights.

Father was spasmodically stimulating. Suddenly, apropos of some remark of mine, he would exclaim, “She must know, she must understand, the effect of geography on civilizations,” and rush me into his study and pull out maps and books. Mummie was an enchanting companion, and could invent legends to account for the fact that the holly tree by the stables was shaped like an ostrich, and that one of the young pigeons had a purple back. But I discovered that she was unreliable in giving accurate information.

Miss Avon was restful in her manner of teaching. We would sit at the table in the nursery while she talked in measured sentences, never taking her eyes off my face. And she never showed impatience or doubt at any question.

I didn’t know at the time that our satisfying relation was helping her to produce her small book on child psychology, called *The Post-Kindergarten Child*. Glancing through it lately, I came on the following sentence: “A sin against the developing individual is the facile habit of assuming that ‘childishness’ persists until physical adolescence sets in. The child of nine and ten years old is hungry in mind and sensitive in soul, and its questions should never be treated casually or lightly.”

She certainly practised this belief, to the lasting profit of her only actual pupil.

Great-aunt Celia always referred to Miss Avon as “that young woman.” She had never seen (nor had I) any female with hair cut short to her neck and no waistline. Grandmamma Stobart, who read *Punch* regularly, said that Miss Avon was a Garden City type; and hoped that Mummie wasn’t letting her “put too many ideas into my head.” She said, on the occasion of one of her Sunday-luncheon visits (Grannie and Grandpapa Stobart had a Daimler now), “After all, Cressida, you wouldn’t like the child to become a Socialist or an art student.”

Mummie looked obstinate.

“Yes, I should.”

“Nonsense, dear.”

“I’m a Socialist myself, Mother.”

“My dear Cressida, don’t be absurd. How can you be? Why, even Lester is only a Liberal!”

“I know. My sympathies are becoming more and more proletarian, while prosperity’s making Lester into something too respectable for words—politically, I mean.”

Grandmamma Stobart overrode Mummie’s remark by ignoring it.

“All the same, Cressida dear, Floyd and I don’t think Miss Avon is very suitable. Celia tells me she is a Suffragette!”

“I’m very fond of her, Mother.”

Mummie got up and went out of the room and banged the door after her. At that moment, Grandpapa Stobart came in from the garden through the terrace door.

“What is the matter with Cressida, Catherine?”

I said, “She’s cross because Grannie doesn’t like Miss Avon. And anyway, *I* do.”

My grandparents looked at me, and then at each other, and Grandmamma said:—

“Exactly, Floyd! What did Celia write to us! The child is getting thoroughly spoiled.”

The day before Aunt Celia left, she called me into her room. Her maid was packing, putting tissue paper in the folds of the mulberry satin evening dress that Aunt Celia had worn when the Creeds came to dinner.

Aunt Celia pushed back the hair from my forehead with her long, hard fingers.

"Well, child?" she said, but the interrogation seemed general rather than addressed to me, and I stood fidgeting, counting the freckles on her high-bridged nose.

"Well, well," she sighed.

I wondered if she ate so much cucumber because of her freckles. (But it was the cucumber *skin* that Alice, the housemaid, rubbed on.)

The mulberry satin dress was laid rustling on to the tray of the trunk.

"When you come to London you must come and see me, child. I dare say we might go to a matinée together."

She gave me a half-sovereign.

X

My godmother, Elsie Stanhouse, came to stay during my Christmas holidays, while Miss Avon was away in London.

Mr. Stanhouse came too. He had a blonde moustache and a habit of beginning sentences "One has always—" For instance:—

	felt . . .
	supposed . . .
One has always	imagined . . .
	liked . . .
	been accustomed . . .

I used to count how many sentences he began thus at each mealtime.

I hadn't seen my godmother since I was quite small. I was impressed by her elegance and the superb rounded significance that she gave to small talk. She always breakfasted in bed and came downstairs about eleven, to sit in the drawing-room and read the papers and smoke a cigarette. She was nice to me, treating my remarks to her slow handsome smile. She was conscientiously nice to Father, who obviously found her presence irritating; and maternal and warm-hearted to Mummie. I had a feeling that she showed up all sorts of deficiencies and inconsequences in my parents, and that she was too polite to allow herself to observe this fact. She had a way of addressing me as *cara mia* which made me feel embarrassed. The servants talked of the diamonds which she wore at dinner, and on the one or two occasions when I ventured into her bedroom I was astonished by the elaboration of her personal appointments. Even her tooth paste was in a little glass box with a crested gilt lid, and on the writing table there were photographs of men covered with orders, and of tight-lipped women with regally jeweled bosoms standing beside little tables, or with their trains arranged before a maritime back cloth. Alice had it from my godmother's German maid that nearly all these people were kings and queens.

Robin came to luncheon while the Stanhouses were staying, and I was amazed and then secretly elated to realize that he was teasing my godmother as if she were no older or more important than myself.

After luncheon, while they were having coffee in the library, he gave one of his sudden irradiating laughs and appealed to Mummie:—

"Hasn't Elsie become too inconceivably white kid?"

My godmother colored, but smiled with perfect good temper.

"What do you mean, Robin?" She was sitting in a corner of the sofa, her smoothly dressed head upright, her ankles crossed on a footstool. Robin looked down at her and smoothed his hand back over his cedar-colored hair with a gesture of puzzled humor.

"To think what you were like as a girl, Elsie!"

"Was I so very different, Robin?"

"Well—wasn't she, Cressida? Wasn't she, Lester? Isn't your wife metamorphosed, Stanhouse?"

Mr. Stanhouse gave a papery laugh.

"Good heavens," said Robin, "but you must see it! Why, she used to be perfectly Walter Crane, and now she's very nearly pure Sargent."

"One has always supposed that all change is only natural," deprecated Mr. Stanhouse.

My godmother said, "Dear Robin, you really are too absurd!" and proffered him her empty coffee cup.

My godmother remarked to Mummie:—

"I hear from Mother that Stella"—she bent her head kindly towards me—"is being taught by Rosamund Avon just now."

"Yes. It's a great success."

"I'm so glad. I believe she's a most interesting person. I thought her last book quite delightful. Better even than *The Wooden Wedding*. That was her first, wasn't it?"

"Yes. She finished another just before she came here in the summer."

"Really! How delightful to look forward to! Has she any experience in teaching?"

"Oh, yes. She was at Oxford—with the idea of teaching later on—when her first book came out."

My godmother signaled to me to fetch her an ash tray. She said:—

"Of course: that makes all the difference, doesn't it? . . . I must say it's a most interesting plan of yours and Lester's, having her here."

Mummie uncurled her feet from under her dress and asked:—

"Why don't you say you think it's a bad plan, Elsie?"

"But, Cressida, darling, why should I?"

"An unwise plan, then?"

"My dear Cressida, why should you imagine . . .? I haven't even met her."

"But your mother said that—"

"Well, Cressida, you know how absurdly impulsive Mother *is*!"

"Yes. But she's not conventional in her views. What was her objection?" Mummie's toe tapped up and down on the rug.

"Well. She seemed to think that the—the young woman might be a little —indiscreet."

"With whom? With Stella?"

"My dear—"

"As regards Lester, then?" Mummie paused and then spoke quickly: "What she really said was that Lester might be—"

My godmother cut her short.

"My dear—*All* men—one knows what men are! A little *affaire*. Perhaps a *petite amie*—that's the world!"

"That may be your world, Elsie."

"And all she meant was, I suppose, that it was a pity perhaps to encourage—"

"Rosamund is my friend."

"But, my dear Cressida," protested my godmother, "one has heard of so many cases—for instance, the Count Meotti and his wife's very best friend, Bianca de Palo; Bernhard Schön and Helen Crowborough, who's been Lady Schön's dearest friend for years—"

My godmother recollected my presence, and the rest of the conversation was carried on in French.

XI

My godmother gave me a manicure set as a parting present, a blue morocco case with ivory fittings, and my initials, "S. M.," on the corner of the lid.

When she had gone Father's temper improved, and I had a feeling that Mummie was relieved too.

Miss Avon came back the week after the Stanhouses left. She looked very tired, but seemed pleased to see us all. We had tea by the fire in the drawing-room. She described a party she had been to at the Driscolls'.

"Lady Driscoll was very sorry you and Cressida couldn't manage to come up for it," she said to Father. "What a beautiful woman she is—in a sophisticated style! I suppose that the son gets his looks from her."

"Was Robin at the party?" I asked.

"Yes. He sent you his love, Stella, and said he was coming next week to take you for a drive in his new car."

My heart beat quickly. I felt warm all over.

"What a pity Robin doesn't marry," said Father. "He always strikes one as having a highly strung and introspective temperament which needs companionship."

"If it's the right kind," Mummie remarked.

"I should think he's absorbed in his career—in his politics." Miss Avon curled herself up into a characteristic position in the armchair, her feet tucked under her, her arms crossed on her chest.

Father handed his cup for some more tea.

"Lady Marion was saying the other day that she thought one of the Rashleigh girls would do well for Robin. She was, in fact, scheming to have the younger one to stay next time Robin goes there for a week-end."

Mummie sat upright and said:—

"Lady Marion isn't very perspicuous. Robin would go mad in a week in Evelyn Rashleigh's society."

Father smiled and said to Miss Avon:—

“Cressida ought to know. I believe she’s the only person who does really know Robin Driscoll. As you may have noticed, he’s inclined to be what our late guest, Mrs. Stanhouse, would call Cressida’s *cicisbeo*.”

“Nonsense, Lester!” Mummie was annoyed. She seemed to be about to say something more, and then checked herself.

Miss Avon pronounced seriously, “Yes. You can see that Cressida’s friendship means a great deal to Robin.” She turned her gold page-boy’s head toward Mummie. “Cressida has the gift of friendship.”

I sat on the fender stool, hugging my knees and brooding on the idea of Robin marrying. I reckoned the years until I should be grown up. I was “getting on” for ten, and girls didn’t marry till they were seventeen, anyway—so that was seven years.

When Robin came the following week I spoke to him while we went for our drive.

“You aren’t *really* going to get married, Robin?”

“Good heavens, Stella—why should you think so?”

I explained what Father had said. Robin looked furious and the car went very fast.

“Hell! What’s it got to do with my Aunt Marion?”

We swerved round a corner.

“Then you won’t marry that girl?”

Robin looked so cross that his eyes seemed tilted up at the outer corners under his eyebrows.

“Blasted—Interfering—” he was muttering.

I tried to calm him.

“Mummie didn’t think you would.”

The car slowed suddenly.

“Didn’t she? Didn’t she, Stella?”

“No.”

He became silent. I stared at his profile in adoration, blinking back my tears. The car was going uphill between frosty hedges. The air nipped my nose. Robin’s nostrils and eyelids were pinkish.

We passed through Sibford, nearly running into a pony cart at the crossroads.

"Will you marry me, Robin, when I'm grown up?"

He didn't answer. Then he said absently, "What did you say, Stella?"

I repeated my question.

"Bless you, Stella, darling!" He laid his hand in its leather gauntlet across mine. "I shall be rather old for you, Stella."

"You won't. You won't ever be old!" I couldn't think of Robin with grizzled hair like Mr. Creed, or pockets under his eyes like Grandpapa.

"I won't marry anyone if I don't marry you, Robin."

He turned to look down at me with a half-teasing, half-puzzled expression:—

"Of course I'll marry you, Funny-face!"

"Oh—Cock Robin!"

Peace possessed my mind and body. For the rest of our drive I sat beside him feeling utterly happy.

I can remember that feeling of happiness now. It had a quality of fulfillment that I have never known since.

XII

All I knew at the time was that Miss Avon went away suddenly.

I was dressing when she came into the night nursery, with her hat on and her blue cloak. She took me by the shoulders and then bent and kissed me.

She had never kissed me before. And I saw that she had been crying.

It was last year that Mummie spoke of that whole episode.

We were sitting on the terrace of our Swiss hotel, looking across a lake which made one think of pale blue sequins and suburbia in festival.

Rosamund Avon's name came up apropos of an article in an American magazine on "English Women Writers." I was turning over the pages, scanning the print between columns of advertisement—of mouth washes, electric cleaners, silk stockings, courses in culture, courses in success, silver plate, and so on. The articles enumerated some successful female writers of fiction. There was a photograph of Rosamund Avon, looking intense and a little battered, with Eton-cropped hair, and earrings, and a scarf knotted round her throat.

Mummie caught sight of the photograph. She said:—

"Do you know, Stella, I've only seen her once since she went away, that spring."

"Why did she go away? I used to wonder."

Mummie looked at me with that sudden pointing of her chin and flicker of her nostrils which means she is going to smile. She remarked:—

"I used to think it was all a tragedy—very nearly a tragic theme." She didn't smile. She looked sharply unhappy. "Then Lester put the tragic theme into a book, and it seemed to—to lose rather."

"Then *The Companions* was . . .?"

"Was about Rosamund Avon and himself. Yes. Almost in every detail."

I said, "I wondered. Did she mind?"

"Who? Rosamund?"

"Yes."

“No. I think she felt—Lester showed me her letter thanking him for the copy—that it was the only result which justified the whole thing. She thought that even if she and I had been made—unhappy, it was worth while, because it had made Lester produce the book.”

I said, “It’s one of his best books.”

“Yes.” Mummie spoke in the tolerant tone in which she always refers to Father’s work.

“*Was* Rosamund Avon very unhappy?”

Mummie nodded towards the spangling lake.

“Dreadfully. Poor dear. She was in love with Lester. She worshiped him, and she worshiped his work. For months I didn’t realize. She was very reserved personally, though her conversation was outspoken. She had been Lester’s mistress for more than a year, before she came down to stay with us. She was justified by her theories, and apparently—she told me later—she’d expected me to know all about it.”

“You didn’t?”

“Lester knew how ‘Philistine’ I was. He wouldn’t tell me, or let her. So she stayed in the house teaching you, and trying to reconcile her love for Lester with her feeling that they ought to tell me. . . . She grew very fond of me, as I did of her. Finally she couldn’t reconcile her theories and her scruples, and she came and told me, in spite of Lester. She told me she was very fond of me—and then all about the whole affair. She was terribly unhappy. And she went away the next day. . . . I shall never forget that night. I was so dreadfully sorry for her. . . . She was very gallant about it.”

I looked at Mummie’s quiet, nervous profile.

“Were you very upset?”

“More for her than myself.”

“You mean you didn’t mind?”

Mummie hesitated.

“I suppose I’d come to accept that sort of thing.”

“Was Father very much in love with her?”

“At the time, yes. As much as he’s capable of being in love with anyone. He was extremely angry at Rosamund’s going.”

“That comes out clearly in the book.”

“But the queer thing is,” Mummie said to me as if I were an abstract audience of her thoughts, “that, really, what he says is true: he *does* care for me more than anyone; and in a special way.” She shifted the angle of her sunshade. “Poor Lester . . .”

This was the only time she ever spoke of Father to me. Her remarks don’t seem to fit in with her devotion to him. Why should she pity him? How can she, mentally, seem so detached, when her whole existence is bounded by his?

“Did he ever see Rosamund Avon again?” I asked.

“No. She wouldn’t see him. She went abroad until the war. Then she became a WAAC. The only time I saw her, we met in Oxford Street when she was home on leave, from France.”

“Was she changed?”

“I don’t think so. She looked tremendously efficient. I believe we both felt embarrassed.”

XIII

Soon after Miss Avon went away, Father sailed for New York.

He was away for two months.

Starr House was left in charge of Mrs. Begbie; Mummie and I went to stay at "Sans-Souci."

I was excited at the change, and full of anticipation as to what I should see in London. I had only been there twice in my life—once to see *Peter Pan*, and once to the Zoo and to tea at Aunt Celia's flat in Queen Anne's Mansions afterwards. On the former occasion we had stayed the night with my grandparents, and I remembered a small bedroom with a handsome red wallpaper and very crisp frilled muslin curtains and a glazed tile on the dressing table inscribed mysteriously with the words "Use me."

I was elated to find that I had been given the same room, next to Mummie's. The tile was still on the dressing table.

Mummie had the big room next door that she and Father had shared. Grannie said, "This used to be your Mummie's room before she was married."

I thought it a beautiful room, with roses all over the walls. I couldn't imagine Mummie before she was married, when she was called "Miss Stobart." It was like hearing about a stranger.

Grannie's maid, Milward, brought up my milk and biscuits when I was in bed. She was kind and talkative. She told me she had been with Grannie when Mummie was a girl; and that she had left and got married and her husband had died, and Grannie had taken her back again and still called her Milward, although her name was now Mrs. Widgery. I asked:—

"What did your husband die of?"

"He died of consumption."

I thought how sad Milward must be. She said:—

"It's nice to have a young lady like you in the house, Miss Stella. It makes a change. You don't take after Miss Cressida, though. She was never so robust-looking."

Milward and I became great friends, and it was through her intercession with Grannie that I was allowed to have Robinetta to stay. Milward and I used to take Robinetta for walks on the Common in the afternoon, and

Milward used to talk about illness, and human idiosyncrasies, and love. Sometimes, when we sat down to rest on a bench and there was no one about, I could persuade her to sing to me. She had a fine contralto voice. She would sing "Love's Garden of Memories" and "It's only a beautiful picture, in a beautiful golden frame," and a song with the refrain,—

> "Oh, Father, come down, in your mercy behold
> Your daughter, a nobleman's toy,"

which invariably conjured up for me a converse vision of Gulliver on the palm of the Giant's daughter.

Mummie and I went to the House of Commons to see Robin.

I had expected the House of Commons to look like the Casino at Monte Carlo, as depicted on a postcard sent to Roger de Freyne by one of his aunts. I couldn't restrain my disappointment. I said:—

"It looks like a church!"

Robin asked, "What did you expect?"

"I didn't think it was going to be such a sad place."

He escorted us through the outer Lobby and down on to the Terrace.

"This isn't like a church, is it?"

I looked at all the people sitting and having tea at little tables.

"No. Can you dive into the river from here?"

"We don't as a rule."

We sat down at one of the little tables. I watched Robin's face while he ordered our tea, and wondered if he remembered what he had said that day in his car.

A barge passed down the river. Mummie said:

"Isn't it odd how ship traffic soothes one, and street traffic has the opposite effect."

The waiter brought tea and small brown buns piled high on a plate. Mummie and Robin talked. Mummie laughed and made jokes. They seemed to forget about me. A man in a grey frock coat stopped and spoke to Robin, and Robin introduced him to Mummie. The man told Mummie that he had

read Father's latest book and thought it magnificent. He wore a red carnation in his buttonhole.

Another man came up and spoke to Mummie and to Robin. A grey-haired, small man with a twitchy manner and steady grey eyes. I remembered him vaguely. Mummie said:—

"Stella, you remember Mr. Faraday—Auntie Gwenda's husband?"

He shook my hand shyly, across the table. I said I didn't remember him. Auntie Gwenda had been to stay twice without him. He said to Mummie:—

"What a pity Gwenda's just left! She'll b-b-be so sorry to have missed you."

"What's Elsie's latest news of Rome?" Mummie asked.

Mr. Faraday leaned over the table during his answer. His occasional stammer made me feel embarrassed.

Robin escorted Mummie and me up to the Ladies' Gallery and left us there. We sat and looked down through a grille. My last illusions about Parliament were dispersed. I had expected congregated Members of Parliament to be very solemn or very bold. I saw rows and rows of little men, little shiny dark heads, and little pink bald heads, and little heads with silk hats tilted rakishly on them. Some slept, some lounged, some whispered or laughed together, some lay in acrobatic poses, their feet on the back of the bench in front of them. A voice was droning. Once or twice the voice was noticed and some recumbent figure shouted, "Hear, hear!" or "No, no!" with a bold unmannerliness.

I felt angrier than usual that Charles I had had his head cut off.

I caught sight of Robin. He walked up the gangway, inclined his head, and went and sat down next to a man who I saw was Mr. Faraday. I wondered why Robin had bowed like Milward did to the altar in her church at Wimbledon. I whispered to Mummie, indicating the Speaker's table:—

"Is the Blessed Virgin down there?"

She shook her head and looked at me oddly.

XIV

Father brought Mummie a grey squirrel coat from America. He seemed excited at giving it to her. He took it out of his trunk as soon as we had got back to Starr House, and held it up for her to see.

She said in a thin voice, “How very, very sweet of you, Lester!” But she was looking at his flushed face and not at the coat.

He made her put it on.

“You look like a Persian kitten!” he exclaimed, and drew her close to him and kissed her for so long that I felt embarrassed and puzzled, and wished I weren’t in the room.

When he stopped kissing her, I saw there were tears in his eyes. But she was pale, and said in a stiff, hurried way, “Don’t you think Stella’s grown, Lester?”

I drew myself up.

“Yes. She’s nearly as tall as you already, Cressida.”

I said, “Do you know Robinetta’s had puppies last week? They’re half fox terrier, but they’re rather sweet.”

“Really! How unorthodox of her!”

He turned to Mummie and asked, “How’s Robin? I met Lady Driscoll’s brother in Philadelphia, and he and his wife were full of inquiries about ‘Gloria’s boy.’”

Mummie took off her fur coat and folded it across her arms.

“Robin’s very well, and very busy. Stella and I had tea with him at the House one day. (I wrote you, didn’t I?) He and Sir George and Lady Driscoll are all coming down the week-end after next.” She smiled. “They want to hear a graphic account of America from you.”

“They shall. And I hear—Brace mentioned it in a letter—that Gwenda Faraday is doing Suffrage speaking and was arrested.”

“Yes. And Elsie is awfully distressed, as you can imagine. She wrote her mother a letter from Rome—all about ‘certain *convenances*,’ and so forth.”

They both laughed. Mummie seemed quite happy and natural again.

We all three went downstairs and had tea out on the lawn under the cedar tree.

Father lay back in his deck chair and gave a contented sigh.

“Mrs. Begbie’s scones are as delicious as ever.”

“You’ve got fatter in America, in spite of your exertions, Lester.”

He sat up so that his tummy didn’t seem so evident.

“I had to do justice to a great many banquets.”

I thought he was annoyed.

He said to Mummie, “By the way, I hope you kept all my letters?”

“Yes, of course. They’re docketed upstairs in the bureau in my bedroom. They’re tied up with a green riband—for grass widowhood!” She was looking at him again in the curious way that I had noticed while we were upstairs.

After tea, Lady Marion and Mr. Creed came over to welcome Father home. Lady Marion put up a black and white striped parasol, and asked him what he thought of the Americans.

He talked, and she listened intently, blinking occasional flashes of amusement. Mr. Creed hung about listening, too, for a time, and then seemed glad to come with me and visit Robinetta’s puppies.

When we came back from the stables, Father was still talking to Lady Marion, but Mummie had gone indoors.

XV

It was the following summer—the summer of 1913—that Mr. Creed carried out his plan of taking us all to the Eton and Harrow Match.

He called for us at Starr House in their new motor just after breakfast. I thought he looked nice and handsome in his pale grey top hat, and a dark blue rosette on the lapel of his frock coat.

He produced another rosette for me, but I said, “Oh, but I’m Eton, you know!”

“Jove, I didn’t!” He grinned at Father and Mummie. “That’s one in the eye for me, isn’t it? I’ve forgotten—were you at Eton, Midge?”

Father remarked he hadn’t been at either, and Mummie broke in with a statement that it was going to be a lovely hot day.

I didn’t tell them that I was Eton because Robin had been there.

When we arrived at Lord’s and pressed in through the gate, and began to walk along in the crowd, I felt as if I had been charged with electrical sensations of pleasure. The men looked so elegant with their top hats and tight waistcoats and spats, and the cool, gay appearance of the women, in light dresses and big hats trimmed with flowers, made me long to be grown up as quickly as possible.

Mr. Creed kept meeting people he knew. He stopped to talk with them, or merely shouted, “Hello, So-and-So!” or raised his hat to the ladies. There were quantities of boys accompanying their festive grownups—small boys about my own height, looking well-soaped and self-important in tight “Etons” and silk hats that seemed top-heavy; larger boys, ranging up to six feet and more in height, with broad shoulders and immaculate tails and an uplifted, swaggering manner.

Mummie said, “Next year Roger will be going to Harrow.”

Mr. Creed remarked, “I believe the de Freynes have got a box here this year. They usually have.”

We rested for a time in one of the stands and saw the match going on. The players appeared absurdly small and white far out on the brilliant green. But every now and then their activities produced a rolling gathering thunder of enthusiasm from the spectators. Mr. Creed would lean forward staring through his field glasses and exclaim and shout and clap. Father sat still, his arms folded and an expression of intent amusement on his face.

We had luncheon in a "marquee." I stuffed myself with chicken in aspic, and strawberries and ices, and more strawberries and more ices. Robin joined us while I was eating my third ice. I noticed his sky-blue rosette and hoped that he would understand the significance of mine. He sat down opposite us and the waiter brought him a plate of lobster mayonnaise. He and Mr. Creed began to discuss the scores. I thought Robin looked handsomer than any of the men there, and my feelings of pride and admiration stopped me wanting to finish my ice.

Father seemed morose, and when Mr. Creed got up to go over and speak to someone I edged nearer to Father and asked:—

"Have you got dyspepsia?" (He was apt to have this, and I liked pronouncing the word.)

He sat back in his chair and said rather loudly:—

"I've got a spiritual dyspepsia."

Mummie stopped talking across the table to Robin, and looked round at Father. Robin asked:—

"What's the cause? Crowds—or cricket?"

"Both—of this type. The whole dish is too rich for me. There's a creamy and rather vulgar snobbery about the whole occasion. Not being, so to speak, bred to it, it rather turns my stomach."

Several people standing near overheard this, and I saw them look at each other as if they were shocked and yet inclined to laugh. One of them, a man with a reddish moustache, whispered something to the lady beside him, and she nodded and turned away, smiling.

Robin said politely:—

"Oh, but I think the whole thing's rather jolly and spontaneous. Personally, I think it's one of the nicest social happenings; seeing one's friends, and all the absurd shrimps of small boys about, and all the fearfully proud parents, make it so friendly. Don't you think so, Cressida?"

Mummie looked troubled.

"Yes—I always love it. I haven't been for years till to-day."

After this we all felt depressed and were glad to get out of the tent into the hot sunshine. The crowd seemed thicker than ever, and Mr. Creed suggested that we should make our way to the de Freynes' box, where Mummie and I could have a rest.

Robin excused himself from coming with us. He said he had to be at the House early. He said, “You’ll probably run into my parents; they’re coming sometime this afternoon.”

Mrs. de Freyne seemed enthusiastic at seeing us. She held Mummie’s hand, and murmured, “Dear, dear Cressida, we never see each other now we’re no longer neighbors.” She looked at me and said, “*How* little Stella has grown! She must be nearly as tall as Roger. He’s growing so much.” She asked me how old I was now, and didn’t listen when I answered, “Eleven, next month.”

She had turned to greet Father, and I heard her saying, “My dear Lester, I think *The Companions* is quite, quite beautiful. So subtly written!”

Sir George and Lady Driscoll came in at this moment. Soon they were all talking about Father’s book, and Father looked benign and animated. Only Mr. Creed and Captain de Freyne stood at the front of the box, smoking cigarettes and watching the cricket down in the arena.

I was fascinated afresh by Lady Driscoll’s face. I thought she was so lovely. She wore a lot of pale pink tulle round her neck, and she was tall and slender. And the way she laughed, her face suddenly and transparently alight, reminded me of Robin.

XVI

When the war broke out young Begbie joined up. When Mrs. Begbie first saw him in uniform, she cried and said it seemed only yesterday that he was a baby, putting everything he could lay hands on into his mouth.

The second week of the war, a lot of soldiers were quartered on us. They slept over the stables and in tents in the orchard. Mummie and Mrs. Begbie became absorbed in the business of providing their meals. The officers were quartered on the Creeds. Father went up to London about three times a week and seemed very busy. Once when he came back he said to Mummie that he was sorry he was "over age."

He said, "I tried, and they wouldn't have me," and he looked unhappy and went out toward the orchard to talk to the Tommies.

Mummie had a letter from Robin saying he had got his commission. She handed it to Father across the breakfast table.

"He says he's coming down to see us on Sunday, before they go to camp."

Father said, "I'm glad we haven't got a son, Cressida—it's going to be a long business."

They both looked at me. He handed Mummie back Robin's letter.

"I'm sorry for the Driscolls."

I could only wonder what Robin would look like in a uniform. I couldn't take in that there was anything dangerous about the war.

He came down on Sunday just before luncheon. He seemed to me in high spirits. He joked and told funny stories about men in his regiment.

After luncheon Father took him for a walk in the garden and they talked. I sat on the edge of a stone vase on the terrace and watched them. Father seemed to be asking questions, and Robin making long, rather emphatic replies. Robin's leather boots shone like horse-chestnuts newly extracted from their skins, and his hair looked exactly the same color.

Finally they turned and came up towards the terrace. When they came to where I was sitting, swinging my legs, Robin looked at me gravely for what seemed a long time; my heart jumped in fast uncomfortable beats, and I wondered if he remembered that I had asked him to marry me, and if he thought it very funny and childish. I had often planned lately to say to him,

"D' you remember how funny I was when I asked you to marry me?" just to see what he would say.

His look turned from me abruptly. Mummie had come out on to the terrace.

"Can you stay until after dinner?" she asked him.

He shook his head.

"I must leave at six. I promised Mother to be back and dine at home."

I was going to school at the end of September. Father had said it was important for me to be isolated as much as possible from the "war atmosphere" while I was learning. I was to go to Leckendean, where I should be able to see Aunt Cathie and Grandpapa Midge at week-ends if I wanted to. I had only seen Grandpapa Midge once, when Father and Mummie and I motored over there for the day. I had been attracted by his brusque manner and his queer appearance (he had magnifying spectacles and a high white collar), and Aunt Cathie had always seemed irresistibly comic. Whenever she came to stay she brought a lilac leather dressing bag containing silver fittings and a mauve velvet pincushion shaped like a cat with eyes of green pins. And she was always mislaying about the house a feather necktie which she referred to as "my marabout."

Mummie took me up to London to buy my outfit. There was a printed list of what I must wear, including "a white dress for dancing and Confirmation, high and quite simple." Also "a shawl for concerts." There was a warning notice saying, "Everything, including sponges and toothbrushes, must be marked with a nametape, and no hair riband may be more than two inches in width."

We ordered "name-tapes." We bought black woolen stockings and black shoes and had rubber heels affixed according to schedule. After several hours' shopping, during which the printed list grew limp in Mummie's hand, we went to tea with Mrs. Faraday in Chelsea.

Mrs. Faraday looked at me with her beautiful dark blue sparkling eyes.

"Elsie reported that the child was going to be attractive.—Do you want to be attractive, Stella?"

I said, "I've got a silly sort of nose, like Father's."

“Oh, noses don’t matter any more. Your father has never let his nose disconcert him. Nor should you. Cressida, darling, you look worn-out.”

“We’ve been shopping.”

They talked about my school. Mrs. Faraday said that all girls’ schools were a mistake. “The whole principle of girls’ education is perverse,” she said. “Girls are meant by Nature to fall in love at fourteen—and learn later. The result of reversing Nature’s plan is that they can’t learn early, because they’re distracted by their instincts, and they fall in love years too late, when the romantic impulse has lost half its strength.”

Mummie smiled. “You’re rather unpractical, Gwenda.”

“That’s what Elsie says.”

Mummie asked, “How is she? Is the war affecting them?”

They began to talk about my godmother, and about various other people, and again about the war. Mr. Faraday came in and sat down to tea with us. He was rather silent, and looked sad and harassed. Soon he went out again, and Mrs. Faraday said:—

“Charles is breaking his heart. It’s as if he felt the tragedy the whole time, without a respite. Most of us can escape into activity, or trivialities. But you know what he’s like, Cressida! And he’s always foretold it!”

I broke in:—

“Yes—d’you remember, Mummie, what Robin said last Sunday? He said that Mr. Faraday was a genuine idealist, and that if people had listened to him—”

Mrs. Faraday nodded. Now that she wasn’t animated, she looked older, and I noticed that her hair was grey. She remarked:—

“Robin and my husband saw a lot of each other latterly. I hear Robin’s in camp now.”

Mummie stared through the long window out at the Faradays’ flagged garden. She said:—

“I do hope he won’t have to go abroad.”

“I hope not, Cressida.”

Mummie still stared, but as though she weren’t seeing.

“Dear, dear Robin! He’s been the most perfect friend to me, Gwenda.”

Mrs. Faraday said, “I know”—watching Mummie’s face. She seemed to hesitate, and then she asked, “You’re thirty-two, aren’t you, Cressida?”

“Yes—why?” Mummie’s gaze came back into the room. “Why do you ask?”

Mrs. Faraday took Mummie’s hand in hers.

“I don’t know, exactly, why I asked. It seems only yesterday that you and Lester met here—at that dinner party.”

Mummie didn’t answer at once. Then she said, “Yes,” dully, and drew her hand away from Mrs. Faraday’s.

XVII

I spent four years at Leckendean College for Girls. In the tradition of the College we were extremely well taught. Our daily life was punctuated by religious practices. At first this astonished me. Then I had a religious phase which lasted a fortnight. Then I became bored by it all and spent the time at morning and evening "house" prayers trying to make other girls laugh, and took a novel to church in my muff on Sundays.

We were very well taught. We did a lot of drill and played games every afternoon. The food was very nearly disgusting, and, as the war proceeded, became scarce too. Twice a term we had "fire practice." Several times each term lecturers came and the College assembled in its uniformed hundreds to hear about "The Russian Front," or "The Parthenon" (with lantern slides), or "The Work of the East Nicaraguan Church Mission," or "Fifteenth-Century Italian Art" (with lantern slides).

We were extraordinarily well taught. We were encouraged to read the newspapers. We all wore white shirts and blue skirts and house ties. We kept to the right in the long, wide corridors of the College, and never went upstairs two steps at a time. There was a slab of marble (twenty feet by fifteen) on the wall opposite the main staircase. It was engraved with decorative daisies (radius six inches), and its lettering advertised the importance of eternity. "Our life on earth," it said, "is only a prelude to the hereafter." The daisy was our symbol; I can't imagine why.

We were unusually well taught. The corridors were scrubbed with disinfectant soap. The laboratories were excellently equipped, and there was an art class, and a music class; and the examination classes were so organized that everybody passed their exams as well as acquiring a wider knowledge. There was a swimming bath. We had to wear voluminous bathing costumes of the type depicted as "giving way" in comic French prints of fifty years ago. We swam a regulation "stroke." In our "houses" we undressed in curtained cubicles, but slept with the curtains drawn back and the windows open.

On Sundays I went to tea with Grandpapa Midge and Aunt Cathie. In the winter we sat in the parlor by gaslight, and in summer we had tea in the summerhouse in the little garden.

Aunt Cathie always managed to produce iced cakes for me, right up to the end of the war, and homemade strawberry jam. She talked a great deal, except when Grandpapa "squashed" her, and she knitted bed socks and Balaclava helmets. She didn't seem to have altered since my last memories of her. She hasn't altered now. Her hair looks as if it were never taken down, and never needed it. The tobacco-colored pompadour is always in place; the fringe is immutable.

Auntie Cathie concentrated her powers of hatred upon the Crown Prince. In her bedroom she had cartoons of "Little Willy" stuck about with drawing pins. Grandpapa was always studying maps. He kept the table by the parlor window piled with atlases and maps; and a map of the Western Front, covered with little scarlet flags, hung on the opposite wall (though Auntie Cathie was apt to say it was a waste to cover up good pictures—you might as well sell them and be done with it).

The tea was always very strong, and seemed to go to Aunt Cathie's head like wine. The more she drank, the more she gossiped. She used to try and find out from me how much capital Father had, and what our income was. She "dare-sayed" that Mummie had a bit of her own, too. I didn't know. I had never thought about my parents' financial state. Father always gave me a generous amount of pocket money, and I knew that he and Mummie had invested a thousand pounds for me until I was twenty-one, in case I should want to make a *mésalliance* against their wishes and couldn't afford to.

Grandpapa sat in his black Sunday coat reading a book or a newspaper. He used to ask me, ironically, if I was learning anything at the College, and make quotations from Shakespeare and Tennyson and Milton, and ask me to cap them or give their context. Sometimes he read aloud from his favorite author, Carlyle; as he read, his speech grew broad and resonant, and at intervals his eyes glinted up from behind his spectacles to see if Auntie Cathie and I were attending.

Aunt Cathie taught me to knit socks. I knitted a pair of khaki socks for Robin and sent them out to him in France. I had a long letter thanking me and describing very funnily his attempts at making his dugout look like an English drawing-room. He said that he had the photo of me and Robinetta on his table. He added, "I hear from your mother that you are now the complete English schoolgirl and play hockey for your House! When I get leave I shall come and inspect you. If you say 'ripping' in every sentence, I shall first beat you, and then give you one of those powerful pills they have out here to help the British Tommy to win the war."

I slept with this letter under my pillow, and carried it about in the daytime tucked under my vest.

XVIII

Robin wrote to me several times before his next leave, which wasn't until the early spring of 1917. Then he came down with Mummie to Leckendean. They both took me out for the day (it was a Saturday) in a hired car. We drove up on to the hills above the town. The uplands were bare green under flying clouds.

Mummie had brought a luncheon basket—her own particular old basket with all her pet fittings and the blue enamel plates. We sat on a rug under the shelter of a hedge and she unpacked a thermos of hot soup, and hard-boiled eggs, and quantities of Mrs. Begbie's thick sandwiches, while Robin teased me and asked me fantastic questions about the College etiquette. He thought it comic that we had to stand still when the Principal passed us in the corridors, and watch her respectfully until she was out of sight. He said:—

"I suppose when you go to tea with her you have to throw your scones on the floor and then roll on them respectfully?"

From where we sat we could look far out over a panorama of country, and the dappling cloud-shadows chasing out towards the Bristol Channel.

Towards the end of lunch, Robin became silent, and Mummie was quiet too. I watched Robin as he sat with his eyes narrowed, gazing out over the far landscape. The wind silvered the tussocks of grass and kept up a soundless tension in the air. I felt as if all my emotions had run amok in my body and were hammering about under the surface of my skin. Yet it seemed quite natural that Robin should be sitting there, crouched up, gazing, and not know what I was feeling.

I don't think that, at this time, I ever imagined that the situation could be different.

Suddenly he dropped his forehead on his knees and remained so for about a minute. He must have forgotten us. When he looked up again his eyes and mouth were marked with an odd strained expression.

Mummie, who was sitting near him, touched his arm.

"Robin . . ."

He took her hand in his and held it, but didn't look at her.

I didn't see Robin again until after he was wounded in the spring of 1918. Mummie wrote to me that he had been badly wounded in the shoulder, but was getting on satisfactorily. "Too satisfactorily," she wrote, "as it looks as if he'll have to go out again sooner or later."

I went alone to see him at his parents' house in Park Crescent. Lady Driscoll came out into the hall.

"Stella!"

She looked dreadfully altered, and sad and older. "It's dear of you to come. It'll cheer him up to see you."

"How is he? Is—is his shoulder very bad?"

She shook her head. "Not any more. No. He's getting on. The surgeons are pleased with him."

She spoke these sentences as if from habit. "You mustn't stay with him too long, though. He gets tired so terribly easily."

She led me up the staircase and knocked at a door.

"It's all right. You go in."

She went downstairs again—half reluctantly, it seemed, looking back over her shoulder and trailing her fingers on the banisters.

I went in. The room was big and light and tidy; and there was a nurse. Robin was propped up against a lot of pillows; his shoulder and chest and arm were a solid structure of bandaging.

"Hello, Stella!"

"Hello, Cock Robin!"

I stood still. I felt myself shaking. I hadn't seen him for more than a year. But I had imagined him so vividly that the imagined Robin had come to have a static life for me, like a photograph. Now I felt the shock of his different realness.

The nurse came forward and said kindly, "I'll leave you for ten minutes. —Now mind, Captain Driscoll, don't wear yourself out talking."

He said, "Come and sit here," and indicated the chair beside his bed.

We looked at each other. I remembered that I was wearing my horrid school hat and snatched it off hurriedly. He smiled.

"Dear . . ."

He shut his eyes for a second and moved himself on his pillows. “You seem almost grown up suddenly. You make me feel quite an old man.”

“Robin—does it hurt very much?”

He shook his head.

“No.”

“When will you be able to get up?”

“In a few weeks, I expect.”

I hesitated.

“But you won’t have to go back for a long time, and by then the war’ll be over.”

He said, “Let’s hope so. I loved getting your letters, Stella.”

“Did you?” I caught sight of myself in the long glass in the wardrobe—lanky legs and a navy blue coat and skirt and my hair rumpled. When I glanced at him again he was abstracted. Then he asked:—

“Have you come up from home to-day?”

“No. I came from school to-day. I’m on my way home—through London.”

“Then you haven’t seen your mother just recently?”

“No.”

He was silent again. I saw how bony his face had become.

“You’re going down there this afternoon?”

“Yes.”

He shut his eyes as he had a few minutes before. He said:—

“How queer it all is.”

“You mean life is queer, Robin?”

He looked at me as if my question had surprised his mental solitude.

“Yes, my dear.”

I was possessed by a sharp unhappiness.

The nurse came back and said kindly, “I’m afraid I must ask you to go now, Miss Midge.”

Robin said, "Come and see me again, Stella."

"If I can get up to London, I will."

He moved uncomfortably, and the nurse readjusted his pillows. He looked white. He remarked:—

"When I'm better, I'm coming down to Starr House to convalesce for a time."

When I got down into the hall, Sir George Driscoll had just come in. For a moment he didn't seem to know who I was. Then he exclaimed:—

"Why—it's Midge's daughter, isn't it? How are you? You've grown up so. How's your father? I haven't seen him for a long time."

I said that Father was very well.

"I suppose you've been seeing Robin?"

"Yes."

He asked me anxiously, "How d'you think he seems?"

I said this was the first time I had seen him since he was wounded.

"Nurse says he doesn't cooperate at all. He doesn't seem interested in getting better. However, he seems to be getting on all right. Remember me to your mother. Splendid work she's doing." (Mummie had turned our three cottages at home into a shell-shock convalescent hospital.)

Robin came down to Starr House in the summer holidays. I went with Father to meet him at Banbury Station.

Father and I stood on the platform waiting for the train to come in. I remember that he talked about some book he'd been reading and I kept peering at the signals and wishing he'd be quiet.

I was startled to see that Robin wasn't in uniform. I had come to think of him as inevitably in khaki. He still looked ill, but his face had lost the hollow look that frightened me when I saw him in the spring.

In the car he asked, "What have you done to your appearance, Stella? Something?"

"I've had my hair bobbed."

"Oh, that's it? It makes you look very pretty." He scrutinized me carefully, half-smiling. Father remarked:—

“It makes her look extremely mature.”

I was disappointed when Robin said:—

“No, I don’t think so. I think it makes her look like a rather young angel.”

I flumped back on the seat.

“Well, I don’t feel particularly angelic.”

And Robin laughed at me.

Mummie was in the library when we got home. When Robin and I found her there, she gave a little gasp of pleasure and welcome.

“Oh—Robin! You’re back sooner than I expected!”

She stood holding his hand.

“Oh, my dear, dear Robin!”

It seemed to me that he almost shook her off when he remarked:—

“It is jolly to be here again.”

I wondered, puzzled, if the solicitude in her tones had annoyed him.

XIX

He was going back to-morrow.

Going away.

I couldn't bear to stay with them on the terrace.

I went indoors, and then out again by the side door towards the orchard. As I crossed the lawn I could hear their intermittent voices—Father's, Mummie's, Robin's.

I passed in among the shadows of the trees.

He was going away to-morrow—back to London. And back to France on Monday.

I reached the summerhouse and sat down on the step. I imagined I was going to think. I don't know what about. About Robin, I suppose.

I stared between branches and noticed that the stars were beginning to show—silver sparks in a green sky.

I don't know how long I sat there alone. Then I heard Robin's voice calling me.

"Yes. . . . In the summerhouse."

He appeared into the pale light.

"Some businesslike neighbor has just called in to see Cressida, so I made my escape."

He lit a cigarette and sat down beside me on the step of the summerhouse. He remarked:—

"How jolly it all looks."

"Doesn't it?"

He threw away his cigarette. Its smoke rose from the grass like a phantom. He lit another. The flare of the match left us to a speedier darkness.

"You must write to me again, Stella."

"You know I will."

"Even when you're reabsorbed in the giddy round of school? When d'you go back?"

"The twenty-fourth."

He was lost in his thoughts. At last he said:—

"We've always been great friends, Stella?"

"Yes."

"We know each other pretty well?"

"Yes—Robin."

"And you—" he turned to look into my face—"you aren't altogether a child any more?"

"No."

I waited.

"Did you realize that your mother has often been very unhappy?"

The question broke against the rigidity of my emotions and left no mark.

"I suppose so."

"Her marriage hasn't been altogether—halcyon. Did you realize?"

I was disconcerted by his intensity.

"Yes—in a way."

He said: "She and I have always been great friends. You'd help her, Stella? You'd look after her, Stella?"

"But—I don't understand."

I had never thought about Mummie's friendship with Robin because I had always taken it for granted.

"But I don't understand. Why do you say this, Robin?"

He hesitated. I couldn't see his expression.

"Simply this. I want to feel some sort of assurance about her. Because if I come back I don't think I shall stay in England, anyway."

"Oh, but you—" I heard my own startled whisper—"but you must, Robin, you must, you must—Robin . . . dear . . ."

I checked my voice. I sat rigid and became aware of him peering at me, bending close to me.

"Stella? Dear child . . .?" He waited. Then he said gently:—

"Dear—I didn't mean that I was morbidly contemplating not coming back. I simply meant that when the war's over I might be going to live abroad—for various reasons."

"But you mustn't, you can't . . ."

"But, Stella . . ."

"No—not right away—you mustn't."

I felt him hesitate. I felt that he was bewildered by my choppy, panicky sentences. I tried to calm my voice.

"I love you, Robin."

I think he didn't, even then, understand.

"Stella—dear . . ."

"Robin, I love you."

He got up and stood above me, quite still.

For long shadowy seconds he didn't speak.

At last he said:—

"Darling child—how could I have imagined?"

"I must always have been in love with you, Robin."

He knelt down in front of me.

"You're such a—child, Stella."

"D'you think I can't love you because I'm young?"

"No. . . ." He paused. "But I'm so old—comparatively. . . ."

"I couldn't ever love anyone as I love you, Robin."

"Hold my hand, Stella."

His grasp was cold and gentle. He said:—

"I think I must tell you something."

"Yes?"

I felt calm now that I had dispelled my illusions in speech. I had known that he couldn't love me, but I had cheated myself with my make-believe.

He said:—

"I've been in love with your mother ever since I first met her. That was seventeen years ago. She never was with me. She married soon after I met her. . . ."

I accepted his information and stored it in my mind to think over, later on. Meanwhile, I asked:—

"Doesn't she know?"

"No."

"Does Father know?"

"No."

I couldn't speak.

"Stella, darling, I didn't want to hurt you."

I said, "I'm glad you've told me."

"My dear . . ."

"I shall always love you, all my life, Robin."

"Stella, darling, thank Heaven you won't. It'll be all over soon, and you'll fall in love with someone young, and marry, and be happy. Dear child . . ."

I said, "But you haven't ever fallen in love with anyone else!"

He released my hands.

"No . . . never—really . . ."

We both stood up. I whispered:—

"I think I'll go in. Good-bye—for just now," I said.

He put his arms round me. His head was dark against the sky.

"You'll forget about it, darling. You mustn't let me spoil anything—Stella . . ."

I knew, even then, that he only half understood.

Mummie was coming across the lawn.

"Did you meet Robin?" she asked.

"Yes. He's by the summerhouse."

She said mechanically, “You ought to have a shawl or a wrap,” and then hurried on, and I heard her call, “Robin! . . . Robin?” and then his answer, from the other side of the orchard.

XX

Robin went back to France on the second of September. I went back to school on the twenty-fourth of September. On the thirtieth of September, Robin was killed.

Father wrote to tell me. He wrote a very kind little note, and said that Mummie had felt the shock dreadfully, and was writing to me in a day or two.

I was too stunned to feel much immediate pain. But I was sent home for a week because, as the school medical officer wrote to Father, “the sad death of an old family friend seems to have given Stella a shock. We think a change . . .”

I felt frozen into a block of non-sensation. From within its lucidity I saw that Mummie was only keeping up an appearance of calm. I saw that whenever she responded to any remark her mind moved dizzily, as if her thoughts staggered under an unbearable weight. She looked so white and shocked that I was surprised that Father could endure the nervous strain of watching her. But I think he was preoccupied with an article for the *Foreign Quarterly*.

I don’t think at this time I resented her unhappiness. That came later, when it seemed to me that she had no right to mind.

I returned to Leckendean in time for the Armistice celebrations on the eleventh of November.

That was ten years ago. Since then I have been to Oxford, taken a degree in history, published several short stories in small unprofitable intellectual magazines, and been secretary to a Member of Parliament for eighteen months.

And now I am engaged to Roger de Freyne.

Roger and I get on very well. He is bad-tempered but has considerable sensibility. He finds life sufficiently aimless to occupy himself with creating diversions for us both, so that we shan’t brood over our essential futility. For instance, he has joined a Flying Club, and we are planning to write a musical comedy together. He will do the music and I the words. We have done some of the lyrics already.

He is physically attractive to me. Also, there are moments when we are sentimentally drawn together by our early recollections. Possibly these are quite a potent factor in consolidating our relation. He can be very amusing when the mood seizes him, and is a very good mimic. (Almost his best imitation is the one of Father receiving a couple who have come from Texas on a pilgrimage to see Stratford and Starr House. He did it for Mummie the other day, and she laughed in her dry, tired way, and said that Roger's heart was made of looking-glass.)

Roger and I have already taken a small house in Chelsea. It is ramshackle, but expensive, and we are doing it up with characteristic taste. We have a Picasso in the dining room, and a Duncan Grant in the drawing-room. The bath is made of green glass. The water comes out of the snouts of two crystal pigs. Roger calls the cold tap Sacred and the hot tap Profane Love. Roger designed the bath and says it is his *chef-d'œuvre*. As a relief from the rest of the house we are having a Balmoral music room—tartan linoleum, horsehair antimacassars, and so on.

We shall not have any children, as we agree that it isn't fair to commit anyone else to a span of life.

But as a wedding present Roger is going to give me a pink and grey and black parrot to tone with the Picasso in the dining room, and perch on my shoulder during our amusing dinner parties.

PART FOUR

I

Lester remembered Robin Driscoll once saying that Lady Lang looked like Voltaire.

In her frail, bad-tempered old age, the resemblance was extraordinary. Sitting there on her Récamier sofa, with her stiff back, her stiffly rolled white hair, a suave malice shaping her mouth—

"So you go back to Clayton-Hatchetts this afternoon?" she asked.

"Yes. The legal business is in order, at last."

"I understand from Ruth that poor Cressida never made a will?"

"No. She can never have imagined there was any hurry."

"Very careless of her. Your solicitor should have seen that she did. However, I dare say she had no property of her own?"

Lester didn't answer. He felt choked by a new tide of misery. It receded again.

"Floyd Stobart was not naturally generous," Lady Lang was saying.

"Roger tells me that Ruth is starting a bookshop," said Lester.

"Yes. In the Fulham Road. I'm glad she's found something to do; instead of wasting her time running after artistic people. Roger and your Stella are to lunch with me next Tuesday. I understand they don't mean to postpone the wedding on account of mourning."

"No. They're going to be married quietly in a registry office."

"The more quietly young couples marry nowadays the better. It makes their divorce less conspicuous. If Roger and Stella have children I shall be a great-grandmother. And you will be a grandfather, Lester. How does that appeal to you?" asked Lady Lang crisply, her finger trembling down to press a bell on the console table at her side.

"It'll be like finding a cherub carved on one's own mausoleum. An infantile seal of mortality."

"Very prettily put!"

The footman creaked over the parquet. She took her glass of medicine and sipped it to the dregs. She put back the glass and wiped her lips slowly with a lace-edged handkerchief.

"I am expecting an old friend of yours at any moment—to take me for a drive."

"Really. Who—?"

He saw the door was open.

"Mrs. Neilson," announced the footman.

"My dear Fay," said Lady Lang, stiffly upright, blinking, waiting for a kiss.

"Dear Lady Lang."

"I think you know—Mr. Midge . . ."

"Lester . . ."

"My dear Fay," he said, gazing into her bold, silly, wrinkled face, meeting the smile of those carmine lips, the sympathetic and yet (even now) conscious message of her eyes. "My dear Fay," he repeated—remembering her letter of condolence, "Who should know better than I that you loved her best?" A kind of wisdom—wit, she'd always had, serving her better than brains.

"I had no idea I should see you here," Fay was saying, and weighed herself down, a little short of breath, next to Lady Lang on the French sofa.

"Lester has been lunching with me. The fact that my grandson is to marry his daughter draws us together."

"Oh yes—of course. Yes. I think Roger's such an attractive young man. I saw him with your daughter, Lester, at the first night of Robert's revival last winter of *Lady Dixon's Dilemma*, you know. And Mrs. Faraday came round in the entr'acte to talk to us and pointed out your daughter to me, Lester. She said, 'That's Stella Midge, you know.' Wasn't that extraordinary? For of course," said Fay, shuffling her scented bulk round to face Lester—"of course I'd never seen your daughter except that one time years ago when I came down to that sweet country place of yours."

"She was only five then," said Lester.

"Well, I'm not even going to *ask* you how old she is now."

"Stella is twenty-five—Roger is about six months older," Lady Lang remarked.

"You must bring her to see me sometime, Lester."

"I will."

He got up to say good-bye. "I have a train to catch at Paddington . . ." He thanked Lady Lang. He took Fay's hand.

"Don't forget to come and see me, Lester," she said, and he noticed the ruby on her outstretched hand.

Portland Place was painted over with sunshine. Warmth came up from the pavement. The footman opened the door of the taxi.

London was elegant and golden and warm with sunshine. And Fay had a double chin and her eyes set in an old silly mask.

At Banbury Lester met Richard Creed on the platform. He hadn't seen him since the funeral.

"Meeting someone?" Lester asked.

"Meetin' a dog that doesn't seem to have turned up," said Richard Creed, looking red and worried. "A new dog I'm expectin'—bein' sent down from the North."

"How's Lady Marion's rheumatism?"

"Oh, pretty well, thanks. This weather seems to be doing it a lot of good. By the way," he added, his gaze still raking anxiously up the platform, "I went over to your place this morning (with a present Marion wanted to send Stella), and Stella tells me that that dog of hers has got eczema, so I promised to get some special stuff of my own made up for her at Nealands'. I ordered it about an hour ago—it ought to be ready by now. Perhaps you wouldn't mind picking it up?"

"Yes—of course," said Lester, and left Richard Creed to his search.

"Stop at Nealands'," he said to young Begbie, and climbed in and found the floor of the car paved with bottles in brown paper.

"Miss Stella said I was to fetch these," Begbie explained.

Lester leaned back, resting his feet on a case of siphons. He felt listless and pitiful, and wondered whether Ada Fancy would be in. A talk with her might be soothing. Ada with her unchanging broad-bosomed charity. One needed charity—stability.

Begbie drew up at Nealands' and went in. Lester watched a motor coach pressing its way down the narrow High Street. When it had passed he found

himself staring into the greengrocer's shop across the street and remembering how Cressida had come out with a basket (Last summer? Last June? In that mauve dress!) and called out across the street that she couldn't resist the first strawberries. . . . Seeing her again, with her basket held up, her smile flitting across to him, her face so pale and small under her flopping hat, he wondered how much happiness he had ever given her. Staring emptily at a pyramid of oranges, he saw her youth, her sensitive groping maturity, her anxiously apprehensive middle years, dedicated to himself, informed by him.

How would another man, he wondered, have shaped Cressida Stobart? "She loves you more than you deserve, Lester," Ada had said. (He wouldn't go and see Ada, he decided, recollecting how she'd cried at the funeral.) "More than you deserve," and "She wasn't your kind, Les," Ada had said.

A car hooted down the High Street. . . . A woman driving. Wasn't that—wasn't it—that pretty American woman—Mrs. Denham, whom he'd met at the Creeds'? She waved to him. She drew up her car and got out, and came across to speak to him.

"Why—Mr. Midge—how do you do?"

She couldn't be more than twenty-two, he thought, despite her look of "finish" and her gay self-possession. She leaned her elbows on the side of his car. Her close-fitting white hat, her white driving gloves, her pearls, emphasized a delicious freshness.

"How's your house getting on?" he asked her, leaning forward with a sensation of gratitude for her prettiness and the flower-like yet solid grace of her body in its green dress.

"Oh, not so badly. You must come over and see it."

Begbie came out with the parcel.

"It wasn't quite ready, sir. I had to wait."

"I should love to come over," said Lester.

"I'll call you up, then," she smiled. "Carlton and I will be ever so proud to entertain you, Mr. Midge."

II

The hall was cool. Lester wiped his forehead and hung his overcoat in the cupboard under the staircase. He hung it up by the loop; and there was Cressida's floppy hat, stuck up on a peg, precariously and carelessly.

Stella came out of the drawing-room, followed by the sound of the gramophone. She was wearing the frock Cressida called "scrambled eggs and asparagus tips." (Stella had refused to wear mourning—"You know how Mummie hated it!") She kissed him perfunctorily.

"Roger's in the drawing-room," she said.

Lester handed her the parcel from Nealands'.

"I told Creed I'd give you this."

"Oh, thanks. He came this morning and brought me the oddest little relic from Lady Marion."

"What?" Lester asked, thinking that Stella looked too tired for her age.

"A bit of orange blossom she wore at her wedding! I shall have to write and explain that I'm going naked and unveiled into a registry office. But one can always sew it on one's garter, I suppose. One's blue garter . . ." said Stella, looking vaguely at her father.

He became exasperatedly aware of the gramophone.

> Dance, dance, dance, little lady. . . .
> *Life* is fleeting, to the *rhythm* beating
> In your mind. . . .

"It doesn't seem quite the moment to be playing the gramophone," said Lester. He felt Stella's glance and was puzzled by it.

"All right. I'm sorry if it hurts your feelings.—Stop the gramophone, Roger," she shouted, and it seemed to Lester that her tones broke nervously against the familiar white-paneled walls.

The tune stopped.

Lester followed her into the drawing-room. Roger was standing by the gramophone. He looked round and nodded, and the pose of his tall, slight body, and that turn of his head, and the intent stare of his black eyes, reminded Lester peculiarly of Ruth.

"Don't put on another, Roger. Father isn't feeling musical."

Lester watched her throw herself into an armchair.

"How was London?" she asked, and gazed at the toe of her shoe.

"Rather warm. I lunched with your grandmother, Roger."

"Really. How is she?"

"She looks ill."

Roger offered Lester a cigarette and then sat down on the arm of Stella's chair. Already the presence of his future father-in-law was giving him that feeling of irritation. He thought of something silly to say.

"I've always had a sort of *Schwärmerei* for Grannie. . . . What sort of complex does one have about one's grandmother? A kind of atavistic Œdipus, I suppose."

Stella laid her hand on Roger's knee.

"Shut up, darling."

"I met an admirer of yours there, Roger," Lester said.

"Really? Who?"

"Mrs. Neilson. Mrs. Robert Neilson."

"Oh," said Roger, stretching himself, "she's rather 'macabre,' isn't she?"

Mary looked in.

"Please sir, you're wanted on the telephone."

Lester got up, tasting Roger's words unpleasantly.

"I've promised to take you to see her, Stella," he said.

Stella didn't answer.

When he'd gone out of the room she looked at Roger.

"Father hasn't even the beginnings of a sense of decency. Put on the gramophone," she said.

"What's the matter, darling?"

"Oh, *put* on the gramophone," she repeated.

III

Mrs. Stobart called "Milward! Milward!" up the staircase. There was a heavy tread across the landing.

"Milward, bring me my jersey coat."

Mrs. Stobart waited, listening while the cupboard on the landing above was opened and shut, and the key turned, and Milward came downstairs carrying the coat.

"There's quite a breeze out," said Mrs. Stobart, "although the sun is shining. And the Doctor said I was to be very careful. One can't be too careful. I always think—" But Mrs. Stobart cut herself short, for it was against her principles to be communicative with servants—even with Milward.

But she couldn't help thinking to herself, as she went across the study and opened the French window and stepped out on to the gravel, that if poor dear little Cressida had been a little more careful of herself . . .

But Cressida had always been obstinate. As a girl she had been obstinate in all sorts of ways, reflected Mrs. Stobart, buttoning the top button of her jersey coat and noticing how the tulips were over already. . . . She must have inherited that obstinacy from poor dear Floyd. (Under the shelter of the wall like this, one scarcely felt the breeze.)

And how dreadful to think,—and Mrs. Stobart stopped, feeling suddenly impeded by a fresh realization of her sorrow,—how terrible to remember, that the funeral was only six weeks ago . . . six weeks. Pneumonia was such a terrible thing. And as Gwenda Faraday had written, Cressida was still so young. . . . And they had such an interesting life, she and dear Lester. All sorts of interesting people. . . .

Catherine Stobart glanced back at the house, and as her gaze traveled over its placid façade she thought, without mental comment, that it was improved since the Virginia creeper hadn't been cut back (Floyd had always so disliked creepers); it looked much cosier; and that rose trailed so prettily round Celia's window, and the buds would soon be out. . . .

She wondered if Celia appreciated having that room, except for its south aspect. Celia had insisted, when they made the new arrangement (for after all, what was more natural than that two sisters should live together?)—had insisted on a room with a south aspect, on account of her "sun baths."

Catherine Stobart found it difficult to get used to the idea of her sister lying naked on that couch by the open window. But anyway, that was better than Celia's alternative plan of lying out in the garden in that peculiar robe of white artificial silk. The gardeners wouldn't understand.

Celia's tones ticked out round the corner of the laurel walk.

"Good morning, Catherine."

They kissed as usual, and as usual Mrs. Stobart felt the rebuke in her sister's, "I've had such a delightful walk on the Common this morning."

It was all very well, Mrs. Stobart thought, but Celia had always been as thin as a rake; and it might suit Celia (though Catherine Stobart doubted if it were wise in the long run) to go trapesing about in the early morning on nothing more strengthening than orange juice and thrice-baked chaff, but for a woman like herself, who had lately been under a severe strain too (and there was no doubt that Celia was the more wrinkled) . . .

"Have you heard any more about letting your flat?" Mrs. Stobart asked.

"Nothing," said Celia. "It only confirms my theory that house agents are all futile."

"Because I had a letter from Mrs. Faraday this morning,—I can scarcely ever read her writing,—and she says that she wonders if you have let your flat yet, as Elsie and her husband are coming back next month and want something temporary in London."

"I don't imagine it would be smart enough for Mrs. Stanhouse," said Miss Osram.

"On the contrary," twittered Catherine Stobart, "it would be just the thing for them—if they can afford it."

"People in the Diplomatic Service are always well off, although they always pretend not to be. . . . I always think Elsie made a very sensible marriage. Far more so than poor Cressida."

"I don't agree, Celia. Poor Cressida's marriage was a great success. (And I always thought it would be.) She needed a clever husband, and if you come to think of it Lester isn't at all an ordinary man; and even Floyd came to see that in the end. That's what seems so specially tragic," said Mrs. Stobart, tears in her eyes and her footsteps hurrying beside her sister's stride.

"I have no doubt Lester will marry again," said Miss Osram, and paused in concession to Catherine's breathlessness.

"I shouldn't think so at all. He was so devoted to her. I shall never forget his face those last days when she was so dreadfully ill. And do you remember how he broke down at the funeral?"

"All men are sentimental when their wives are having babies or dying. But that doesn't prevent them being consistently selfish at other times."

They sat down on the rustic bench by the rhododendrons.

Celia was very cynical, thought Catherine Stobart. Of course, that came of being a spinster.

"That was a very beautiful obituary that he wrote in the *Morning Post* about her. It made me realize how much he loved her and understood her. I thought it was a very beautiful idea, his writing that."

"Doubtless he was paid for it," said Miss Osram, and looked at her watch; eleven o'clock; and then saw with relief that the parlor maid was advancing across the lawn with a tray.

"That passage at the end made me cry when I read it," Mrs. Stobart was saying.

Miss Osram took her saucer of Branmix and milk off the tray.

"Well, I must confess," she said, raising the spoon to her lips, "that I neither like nor understand the artistic temperament. Artists are like the modern domestic servant—they claim privileges, and don't seem to feel any obligations."

IV

Out of the window of his study Lester saw Mrs. Begbie halting across the terrace and down the steps. She turned towards the herb garden. She was carrying a basket, and the folds of her print dress were blown stiffly against her big stolid body. When she was out of sight the pigeons came flocking down on to the terrace again, to peck about for old Begbie's scattered grain.

He heard the door open.

"Can I help you? Are there many more left to answer?" Stella asked.

"Not many. If you'll go on with the other job upstairs," he said. Stella was sorting out Cressida's papers, Cressida's clothes, books. "If you don't mind," he added, and wondered how she could endure the touching and turning over of these things.

"No," said Stella, standing in the doorway, "I don't mind. Somebody's got to tidy up. And Mummie wasn't very orderly."

"Where's Roger?"

"Gone to London. Mr. Brace wanted to see him about the *Epoch* scheme."

"You mean turning the *Epoch* into a Liberal daily?"

"Yes. Roger's thinking of putting money into it and being taken on as its dramatic critic."

"The scheme'll be a failure. Since George Driscoll died the *Epoch* has been a failure anyway. As a daily,—and it was originally an unsuccessful daily,—it'll be fiasco. Brace had better change its name and call it 'The Lost Cause'!"

"You don't like failures."

"What do you mean?" he asked, and wished she wouldn't stand there, holding the door open.

"I suppose you're like lots of successful people. You're repelled by failure because it's the grisly thing that might have happened to you and didn't. You've been successful in your career, in health, in love—in everything. You can afford to be sarcastic about lost causes—but very often they're the ones that matter."

He felt hurt.

“I had no notion you were an idealist, Stella.”

“You’ve never thought much about me anyway,” she said. “Any more,” she added, “than you ever thought about Mummie.”

Lester watched the door shut, and heard his daughter’s footsteps cross the hall and go upstairs. He turned to take up a pile of letters from a tray. As he slipped the elastic band he wondered emptily whether Stella’s accusation were just. Impossible to estimate the strength, the extent, of one’s own egotism. This egotism that was the artist’s shell, the natural protection of his artistic integrity. One couldn’t “give off” both in life and in art, he thought. That was what Stella didn’t understand. That was what Cressida hadn’t understood, at first. “Using” life, “using” love—the young, outraged Cressida had called this hoarding in one’s shell. Cressida, whose quality was to be exquisitely hurt, exquisitely pleased. (So that if he’d hurt her sometimes, hadn’t her love for him made her happy? he asked himself, uncertainly, wretchedly. Hadn’t his life with her created her life?)

He began to reread the sheaf of letters (collected under the paper weight) he kept putting off answering; Elsie’s letter:—

Dear Lester,

It was only yesterday that Everard and I received Mother’s letter containing the news of your tragic bereavement. It was a dreadful shock to both of us, and especially to me, as you can imagine, who had known Cressida so intimately since our girlhood, and had always been so attached to her.

Mother writes that she died of pneumonia, following on influenza, and that she was very ill for several days. What a dreadful and completely unforeseen shock both for you and for dear little Stella. I scarcely know how to express our great sympathy for you in your loss. One cannot bear to think that she should have been cut off in the prime of her active and happy life, and at a time when she must have been looking forward to Stella’s wedding, and to the satisfaction of having little Stella *rangée* and happily settled.

Please convey to Stella the deepest sympathy both of Everard and myself. What a dreadful sorrow, too, for old Mrs. Stobart!

Yours affectionately, my dear Lester,

Elsie Stanhouse.

Lester put Elsie's letter on the "Answered" pile.

5, LAUREL CRESCENT
CHELTENHAM

DEAR LESTER,

Your letter just received containing the sad and terrible news. Dad and I scarcely know how to believe that such a blow has fallen on you and yours, and I'm sure you must be in a terrible state, for she was a good wife to you, poor little dear, and it is terrible to think of you as a widower. And to think of her being only forty-seven; it seems so young and so really sad. Our hearts must go out to you in this sad time of bereavement.

I suppose the funeral will be at Banbury, although you don't say anything about it. I have ordered my black, but am having trouble (as per usual!) to get it quick enough. But I expect you will be letting us know *re* all details about such arrangements. I enclose a note from Dad. He wouldn't have it posted separate on account of the stamp.

Your affect. sister,
CATHERINE.

DEAR LESTER,

Regret to hear of your wife's death. This is to convey the sympathy you deserve. I dare say she had not too easy a time and was thankful to come to rest.

Yours,
J. E. M.

12b, CADOGAN GARDENS
S. W. 3.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

Let me take your hand and sit beside you in spirit at this terrible time, and perhaps that Friendship and community of soul which has bound us together and given us so many precious and beautiful hours with one another may be of some help to you.

For Cressida, whom we both loved, is dead. I think I can say that we both loved her, Lester, even though she misconstrued me, I think, at times, and was unable to rise, mentally, to the plane of our relation to each other.

> For I think she was simple, Lester, and that perhaps, often with unconscious superiority, we were scornful of her simplicity. I always think she was one of those women born rather to be a mother than to be a man's friend and lover, and that it was this lack in her which made it impossible for her to understand such a mind as yours.

Lester stopped reading. He tore Ruth's letter across slowly into small pieces which fluttered down into the paper basket.

In contrast, Fay's note seemed so poignant that he could forget his meeting with her yesterday.

> I suppose it is foolish of me to feel so sad, for I scarcely knew your wife, Lester, and it seems years since I saw either of you. But I did think she was a sweet little creature. I hope she didn't have much pain. I *am* so sorry for you, and you must feel that the light has gone out of your life. Who should know better than I that you loved her best?
>
> Ever your old friend,
> FAY NEILSON.
>
> P. S. Robert was talking about her (after we saw the news in the paper this morning), and he said that the two times when he met her he had the feeling that she was "a rather great little lady." I thought you might like to hear that, for I think it is a beautiful description.

Lester put down Fay's letter and sat pressing his forehead on the palms of his hands. Pain seemed to close in on him—like walls in nightmare.

"Oh, my dear," he said, and the quiet in the room answered him. "My dear," he said again in a whisper, conscious of his words as a mere ejaculation of misery.

He put aside Bernhard Schön's note, and Aunt Celia's lines of formal condolence. "Answered."

He had been surprised at the letter Brace had written. He had never been aware that Brace had noticed Cressida.

> DEAR MIDGE,

One is arrested in the stress of existence by your news. A tragedy, utterly unexpected.

Your wife once said to me, "You don't like women, and knowing this makes it difficult for a woman to talk to you, Mr. Brace." It was equally difficult for me to explain how much I liked her, finding her exceptional. I liked to believe she found me a friend of latter years.

She was feminine in the best sense, living by the highest rather than the lowest uses of her natural adaptability; content to give her woman's qualities of perception and sympathy, rather than exploit them; loyal in her friendships, and conscientiously tolerant in her dislikes. Above all, she seemed able to endow with dignity and even beauty what R. L. S. describes as "the petty round of irritating concerns and duties," which form so large a part of all our lives, and by which so many of us are staled and embittered. One had the impression that, whatever her anxieties and sorrows, they were of the spirit, and not the penalties of obsession with vain or material things.

Yours is a great loss.

D. M. BRACE.

Stella looked in.

"Do you want me to sell or give away Mummie's fur coat?" she asked.

"Stella . . .!"

"Why be sentimental about a lot of dead squirrels? Anyway, she never liked that coat."

"How do you know that?"

"She always made excuses for not wearing it."

"Sell it," he said wearily, and turned again to his desk.

Gwenda Faraday was "Unanswered."

4b, TITE STREET
CHELSEA

Stella telephoned the worst news last night, and even now I cannot grasp it. A fortnight ago, Cressida and I were buying preserving jars together at the Army and Navy Stores!

I have known her since she was a child with big eyes and dreadful tartan dresses—so shy that it was difficult to realize her longing for friendship, and so quiet in her parents' gloomy house in North Oxford that it was the most delicate operation in the world to win her confidence; and to discover a mind starved for stimulus and amusement!

Ever since Stella telephoned last night my thoughts have been tangled up with all the phases I've known in Cressida's life. It seems impossible to think she ever got even to "middle age." I find myself thinking of her as always young and always on tiptoe for the great things life was just going to bring her. But perhaps that picture is perfectly sentimental and incorrect. Probably she was happier than another woman would have been in her place, because she had a child's power of becoming absorbed by the quality of the moment.

Anyway, she seemed to have that quality until the war. Those four years seemed to break her spirit in the most heart-rending way. I remember when I came down to stay with you in the spring following the Armistice and I was walking round the garden with her she stopped and interrupted something I was saying about the bulbs in the orchard by remarking, "It seems so queer that everything still has the heart to grow."

Is this an unsympathetic letter? If it is, you must forgive me, because I am so haunted by all my memories of her life.

I said to Cressida not long ago that I wondered how things would have worked out for her if you, or she, hadn't been at that dinner party of ours. And she said that if one thought about the incalculable consequences of everything one did life became like a room with a polished floor and polished furniture, where every step slipped you up, and every movement left a scratch, and every breath dulled a surface!

My dear Lester, I am getting too old for recriminations. Once I told you my opinion of your marriage as if it was your fault. But indeed, as you remarked at the time, I was implicated myself.

Believe me, I am your old friend,
GWENDA FARADAY.

V

Fumbling in a drawer with a notion of finding some elastic bands and putting all the letters together, Lester came on a cutting of the obituary he'd written for the *Morning Post*. He unfolded it and began to read it.

The paragraphs moved him, waking the feelings he'd had when he wrote the thing. Fingering the strip of print, he hesitated, overwhelmed and yet interested by this sharp renewal of his grief.

He hadn't realized that Stella was standing at his shoulder. She put a big sealed envelope down on the desk.

"What's that?" she asked. "Oh, the old blurb out of the *Morning Post*."

Her roughened voice made him wonder if she'd been crying. He was hurt by the vision of her crying up there in Cressida's room—moving about and tidying, and crying. . . . He held out his hand.

"Stella . . ."

But she didn't respond. She merely turned and, half sitting on the edge of his desk, looked down at him, carefully, but with an air of abstraction.

"Yes," she said, glancing at the cutting, "it was well written—in a way."

Lester looked past her out of the window and saw Mrs. Begbie coming back up the garden, her basket frothing parsley. He thought how little he knew his daughter. How impersonal and unrevealing one's relation with one's own child could be. All her life he'd felt this distance between himself and Stella—always as if her mind were afraid to give itself to him, as if she suspected some predatory design in all his attempts (and weren't there many?) at creating an intimacy. . . . Always defensive. He knew nothing of her life, her feelings. She'd inherited none of Cressida's spiritual generosity; none of Cressida's ability to give away friendship prodigally, with both hands.

"But I could have written a better one," Stella said slowly.

He felt annoyed, and yet his mental comment was lit by a gleam of amusement at her pretension.

"I doubt whether your talent for rather complicated and abstract literary criticism would help you to make a very human picture," he said, conscious that behind her manner—her impeccable coolness, her finished deliberation—there was a leap of resentment.

“As a matter of fact,” she said, “I’m just as concerned with the ‘human picture,’ as you call it, as you are. Only I don’t look at it through a pink magnifying glass. As a matter of fact,” she said, “I happen to have written a—a ‘document’ which would surprise you.”

He looked at her inquiringly.

“A document?”

“Well—really, an autobiographical novel, more or less.”

She seemed to reflect, and he watched her smile come and go on her reddened lips without understanding its import.

“It struck me,” she said, “about six months ago, when I first became engaged to Roger, that it would be amusing to ‘write up’ my brief existence. It seemed to me that I’d had really quite a lot of copy and it was a pity to waste it. And I thought if I finished it up with my engagement it would make such a jolly, virginal little ending.” She ran her forefinger along the edge of the desk. “I wonder just what you *would* think of it, Father. It’s very—what you call ‘human.’ I haven’t even disguised the names (I meant to when I thought of publishing it). But in its present form,” Stella said, “it’s just raw, human stuff.”

“Let me see it.”

“Yes, I think I’d rather like you to. . . . And then, if you really feel it’s worthy of your grand tradition, we might even invent some new names, change the district and places, and put a disarming little note at the beginning saying that all the characters are entirely fictitious.”

She was gone. Lester heard her bound upstairs, and while he was still wondering over this new aspect of her sensitiveness she was back carrying a bundle of typescript.

“It doesn’t look very long,” he said.

“It isn’t. And I’ve cut half of what there was originally. It’s very tempting to babble in a book,” she said, and handed him the manuscript with a little bow.

“Why the title?” he asked.

“*Modern Love*.”

“I don’t . . .”

“Don’t you know the nice little tag about—

“We’ll sit contentedly
And eat our pot of honey on the grave?”

“I’d forgotten,” said Lester, fingering the manuscript.

“It won’t take you long to read. I’m going to the station to meet Roger. Let me hear your verdict at dinner. By the way,” Stella added, “there’s a whole pile of papers there that I’ve brought down from Mummie’s bureau. You may want to look through them.”

“Thanks.” And, “I don’t think I can resist reading your manuscript now,” he said, and got up from the desk and settled himself in his armchair.

He turned to the first page:—

> Father used to sit in the revolving summerhouse at the far end of the orchard.

VI

When Stella came into his study towards ten o'clock that evening he realized that he must have been sitting for—how long?—like this, with her manuscript on his knee.

She stood there in the sherry-tinted shadows, outside the radius of his reading lamp; and the pallor of her shape seemed to intensify the quality of her revelation.

"You didn't come to dinner?" her voice said.

"No."

She sank down into curve and bulk on the sofa. He imagined a swan, hunched, unfriendly. He felt her silence question him.

"Is it—all true, Stella?"

"Almost inartistically true," her voice said. "Don't you think so?"

He was silent again. Then:—

"Robin Driscoll loved her?" he asked.

"Yes, that's quite true."

"What made you write it?"

"Cathartic impulse, I suppose. . . . I'm afraid it wouldn't sell, though."

"But d'you think it was true, Stella, that he loved Cressida? You don't think he simply told you . . ."

"Why should he? . . . I suppose you can't imagine anyone being in love and not getting to bed with the object of their affections as soon as possible."

Lester was startled back into that first contortion of anger to which her manuscript had provoked him.

"You're rather crude."

"Isn't it you who are crude?" her voice questioned, mildly. "Or perhaps," she said, "we're both crude; but you belong to a generation that pretends not to be. . . . We're both rather vulgar, of course. Robin—and Mummie—weren't. But we survive (I don't mean just because they both happen to be dead) and they don't. We're together. . . . We're really very tough," her voice said.

He couldn't answer. His mind was trying to pick out and consider the truth among her irritating sentences.

"If we weren't very tough and crude, and so forth, we couldn't live the lives we do. I couldn't be marrying Roger—feeling as I do about him. . . . I'm very grateful for my heritage."

"What d'you glorify, then?" he asked sharply, with a momentary sense of desperation. "What's the ideal you set against the thing you choose to call toughness, and I call vitality—the very power of living fully—a power which has to include courage and confidence and a live mind and a dauntless soul—" Lester broke off, reassured by his own words.

"Robin had all those qualities. And Mummie was alive enough, sensitive enough (although you lived on her vitality)."

Lester brooded, his hand resting on the odious manuscript.

How far was Stella right—about Cressida? . . . But even if Robin had loved Cressida, hadn't her own impulse been towards himself? Wasn't the very fact that Cressida had loved him a guarantee that she'd been happy? (And a justification of himself, as against—Robin?)

"I see no reason why you should have written this at all," he said, and realized his mind waking to its own soreness.

"I didn't think you'd like it," Stella was saying. "Of course, one shouldn't use one's life as copy!"

He felt her look towards him.

"You're clever," he said, and found himself wondering if he were hating her for what she'd done, or for her ability to do it (since that ability was his own, grimacing back at him from a convex pocket-glass; his own ability—contracted, contorted, feminized . . .). "But you don't make her out with any clearness."

"Who—Mummie?"

"Yes."

"You don't like the angle I've shown her from. You don't like the idea of her as a separate entity—from yourself."

But he wasn't listening; for he was suddenly tired, and Stella's talk, Stella's manuscript, seemed insignificant. He was tired out, and imagined how, if Cressida were to find them squabbling like this, she'd dissolve their

disagreement, check their talk with half a smile, put her hand on his shoulder, and somehow divert Stella, subdue Stella. . . .

Cressida's hand on his shoulder. . . .

"How she could ever have stayed with you . . ." Stella's voice was saying, over there, on the sofa. "And if she'd lifted a finger all these years Robin would have taken her out of it all."

Yes, thought Lester, yes, but it was him she loved. That's what Stella didn't understand—that Cressida and he had loved each other.

He saw his relation with Cressida tempered to a final beauty, shining and impervious.

And when Stella had gone out (Roger had come to the window and called "Stella!" from the terrace)—when Stella had gone out of the room, his mind began to shape Cressida and his imagination began to frame her life.

He saw her on the doorstep, Mrs. Faraday's doorstep, her shell-colored profile set to the door, her ears glowing. . . .

(And the jingle, the rubber-wheeled bowling sound of his hansom going off down the street.)

In Richmond Park she sat on the grass, her straw boater spick, tilted forward, her hands clasped in her lap. And he'd wanted to kiss her. The startling biting sweetness of that desire. . . . Her blue waistband. . . .

The wedding was heavy with lilies, heavy with black cloth, with gardenias; and they'd covered her with tulle—white tulle; and the detective guarding the presents. . . . In the carriage she'd put her hand in his. There was such a dreadful beauty in the marriage service, she said, that she'd wanted to cry.

Those first months in London—she was always there, up and down the funny little house, laughing, adoring, freakish at moments in her happiness. Funny and inconsequent, but still shy to the world.

She had a young happiness then. How could she foresee her long apprenticeship—to achieve their freer, closer unity?

“Chariot wheels,” Elsie’d said. “A permanent victim at your chariot wheels.” Wasn’t that unfair, to him—to Cressida? Or was it—fair?

“But we’re not equal,” she’d said. “Women are privileged and disqualified by one embrace. . . . We have to arrange to be happy on a different basis—in a different world.”

He’d given her Starr House.

This was where she’d made her world, put up her defenses. All her life was in this house, in these gardens. She’d served her apprenticeship here. He’d come back to her here so often.

He began to see her life as identified with Starr House. And their love the influences of climate: shining spells of friendship, gusty differences, jarring tempests, nervous April moods, comprehensions as clear as though the world had been born again under new skies.

He could make beauty, revelation, he thought, out of Cressida’s life. An epic of marriage. A search for the holy grail of understanding.

Robin’s love for her. His own lovers—Lester thought of them, faces, touches, words: Rosamund . . . Fay . . .

And call it—what?

Call it—“Chariot Wheels”?

He took sheets of foolscap out of the third left-hand drawer of his desk. He laid his hand on them. They had a cool and inviting familiarity. The forming of words, moving the nib on the paper, gave him an habitual sensuous relief.

“Chariot Wheels,” he jotted.

An epic of marriage. . . .

His eye glanced several times at the big envelope that Stella had left on his desk without informing his mind. When he realized that he had been reading the words, “Private. To be destroyed,” he laid down his pen and took up the package.

For why should Cressida have scrawled like this, “Private. To be destroyed”?

But he knew her. She had a quaint sensitiveness. . . . Some fairy story of her own, scribbled, pushed away, hidden, even from him.

He broke the seal, since it didn’t occur to him to honor the superscription, and took out a sheaf of letters, written on India paper and scraps of paper, in Robin Driscoll’s handwriting.

VII

5/9/18

Your letter written the evening after I left has just come. Just when I was beginning to assure myself that the whole thing was a lovely, dreadful dream. I keep reading it over again.

You say such lovely things, my darling. Only you could say such lovely things. And I sit wanting to weep over them, and keeping up an appearance of stolidity.

It is incredible that four nights ago we were in the orchard at Starr House. I keep going over those hours in my mind and asking myself how it began? What made me tell you suddenly, like that, after seventeen years of keeping it to myself?

I suppose because I'd been realizing all day that if I didn't see you again you'd never know how much I'd loved you. You see, I didn't mean to see you again whatever happened. I knew that I should never bring myself to go back to pre-war life (or rather to whatever takes its place), and that I couldn't deliberately settle down to grow into your "dear old friend"—which was about the only destiny I could hope for, as far as you were concerned. I felt I'd been your dear old friend too long.

But I don't understand now, even though you say it again in your letter, why or how you should have realized that you loved me. I've been so used to knowing that you didn't. Sometimes the very fact that we were such friends and you were so fond of me seemed worse than if you'd been indifferent. I used to try and fall in love with other women. There were times when I almost hated you, my darling. You seemed so damnably kind and sweet, and completely unfeeling. I used to try and prolong the periods of resenting you because it made the business of living easier.

So you see you've got to be tolerant if I seem pretty well dazed by the process of adjusting my mind to what's happened now. If I could have said to myself seventeen years ago, "Cressida loves me," I should have been madly and deliriously happy. But now I suppose it is analogous to a man who has been starved for a long time; I can't, I daren't, just gulp down the whole realization. I feel tentative, and rather afraid, and at the same time so

desperately grateful that I'm inclined to abandon my whole mind to gratitude.

I keep rereading that last sentence in your letter, "*And when you come back we shall find that our life is just beginning!*"

"*Just beginning!*" My darling. Bless you, my darling.

Yours,

ROBIN.

September 8th

MY DEAREST,

I won't let you take up this attitude that you are to blame and that you've made me unhappy. Because it was so essential in you that once you'd taken a decision you should have gone straight forward and taken the rough and smooth of your life with him as well as possible. It wouldn't have been you, if you'd shirked when things were horribly difficult. (Do you remember that day when you came across the field path to meet me after you'd realized about L. and Ruth de Freyne? I shall never forget it.) And it wouldn't have been you, if you'd given way to self-pity and introspection (even though, as you say, that might have made you observe your relation to me more closely).

It was just because you were so matter-of-factly loyal to him, and at the same time absolutely unself-conscious and generous in your friendship with me, that I tried never to let my response be anything but what you expected. You say why didn't I break down all the pretense (since I could see that it was pretense), and you ask me why I didn't make you realize that you were never really in love with him.

I don't think you make allowances for the fact that even though you were never in love with L. you were fascinated by his mind; and very, very fond of him. Nor do you allow for my knowing that you had never imagined me as anything but a rather jolly friend—a kind of pleasant dog who would always come and divert you in your idle moments.

Can't you imagine that there have been numberless times when you seemed suddenly very lovely, or when I could see that you were unhappy, or when some flash of sympathy struck us both—countless times when I just didn't smash up the pretty picture,

and say that I loved you, and implore you in spite of everything—your husband, and your child, and your traditions and your scruples—to try and care for me.

How strange it is that after all these years you should have let me take you in my arms, suddenly—just as if all the years had been no more than a second of hesitation between our first meeting and our first knowing that we loved each other. Perhaps they are. Perhaps we can compress the years into that second, and say that we met (at Oxford, at that Ball, do you remember?) and that our hearts missed a beat, and then we found ourselves together in the orchard at Starr House.

3 hours later

You say that you feel guilty because now the whole question of L. has no more importance for you.

He is important, I am sure he is important. But he isn't important to us, Cressida! He is, as you say, only the ironical incident that deflected you when we were heading for happiness.

Good night, my darling. Bless you, my dear.

September 11th

Only time for a hurried note. Of course if you "think better" of it all I could understand you. *If* that were what you felt.

But that isn't your plea. What you actually plead against us both is that L. needs you. This is cruel, futile humbug. L.'s attitude to you has always been an odious mixture of the predatory and sentimental. And anyway, the whole business of "needing" someone else, and tying them down on that score, is, to my mind, unspeakably disgusting. Your choice is simply between the truth of your relation to me and the falseness of your relation with him.

Darling, don't for heaven's sake write me another letter like that.

September 18th

Back for a rest. I've been reading over your letters. Why torture yourself with your own misgivings—e.g., about your own disloyalty; about Stella; about me? (Why, above all, about me? What have I got to lose in the world except you?)

As for Stella, she is nearly grown up now, and from what I've seen of her lately she needs change and activity and a breaking away from her home life. At present she is too introspective. She'll be happier when she gets to Oxford and meets lots of really young people of her own age. And whatever your presence can give her won't be stopped by your leaving L. Why shouldn't she be with us as much as she likes? She and I have always been such great friends. She's too direct and too young to be prejudiced, and she'll be happier in seeing you free from a tyranny that she understands far better than you imagine, my dear.

Believe in me, my darling, and believe in yourself. You say that you feel as if I were imprisoned in one nightmare and you in another. But our nightmares can't last. We must be out of it all sooner or later. Dear Sweetheart.

September 22nd

I've no time to write these days. Only moments, saved from this wreckage of time, to think about you. I hope to get off a coherent letter to you at the end of this week. Darling, I adored your letter, as I do you.

September 30th

Robin, my darling, when will you come back? When will it all be over? I must see you again soon. I feel as if I couldn't bear to wait for you any longer. Lester came back from London to-day with a rumor that it'll all be over very soon. It's impossible to believe. When he told me (he'd seen Bernhard Schön, who ought to know) I could hardly stop myself breaking out with the explanation that you were coming back, and that we were going away to make up our lost years. (But as you say, it's better for you to be here when we tell him.)

Perhaps the years aren't quite lost. In a way we've been growing together all this time. So much so that I don't think there's any point at which, looking back, I can quite disentangle my past from yours.

You've been so lovely to me, so sweet to me, my dear. Such hundreds of time I've turned to you with whatever troubled me or whatever enchanted me, as if you were the light I lived by. And yet it was only when you said that you were going away and wouldn't

come back to England that I knew that, if you did, I should find myself without any desire to go on living.

I don’t think there are any words which can possibly say how much I love you, Robin. If you were here I could make you feel it perhaps. One feeling breaks and breaks through my mind. Does it reach you, my darling? Does it come to you?

All our lost caresses, all the lost times I could have held you in my arms, couldn’t explain for me either. They’d explain a little, but they’d still leave what I can’t say to you unexplained.

Perhaps when people are in love as we love each other there always must be this strangled sense and this aching to explain what can’t be said. I think that when we’ve lived together for years I shall still have this inviolable feeling.

But how I loathe and dread even this temporary separation. I get seized by fits of sheer terror; as if I were waiting and watching for you to come to me along the edge of a precipice! I can only . . .

The letter was never finished.

VIII

Lester took up Robin's letters and went over to the fireplace. He bent—he was beginning to bend with a sense of effort—and laid the letters in the empty grate.

He lit a match and stooped again. He realized how methodically he was lighting the four corners, and watched the flame licking slowly and softly round the edges of the paper, charring brown, flaking black, licking softly and more and more quickly inward, invading the ranks of words.

When only black ash was left he turned back to his desk. The sheet of foolscap inscribed with the title of what he'd thought of as Cressida's book was still clean, still inviting, and he found himself wondering whether its frustration were a part of the pain that he was enduring, or whether his present feeling were primary, and a direct response to what he had discovered. He sat down and covered his eyes with his hands so that he might give himself up to the least tremor of his sensations.

And from the core of his darkness his mind beat out, and went on beating out to him, monotonously and repetitively, that he had never possessed her, and that he had lost more than he had ever gained of her; and that Robin's claim of her had been merely the final incident in an emotional destiny so complete that it seemed to need neither end nor beginning. . . .

Lester tried to remember the details of that last evening that Robin had been here. But he could only remember clearly that he'd felt tired and oppressed, and gone up to bed early, leaving the doors for Cressida to shut when she came in with Robin from the garden. He could remember standing by the open window of his bedroom and seeing a pared moon rise above the trees; and breathing night air that held a promise of autumn.

"He is important. I am sure he is important. But he isn't important to us, Cressida. He is, as you say, only the ironical incident. . . ."

Lester saw himself as becoming an old man.

For he was sixty now; and suddenly sapped of his illusions. (And that book—that he'd thought of as Cressida's book—could never be written.)

Stella would be gone. Starr House empty. Empty, he thought; and the word was hollow, and rigid with echoes.

Empty.

He heard Stella's voice calling: "Father. . . . Father . . .?"

"Yes?" he said at last. (Empty, he thought—and the grey blinds closing down, pressing out the last chinks of light.)

"Yes?" he called.

"You're wanted on the telephone," said Stella; and as he got up slowly (for he was growing old, he felt), and passed her in the doorway, he was aware that she was looking into his face (and thinking that he was growing old?). "Who is it?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"I don't know. A female voice."

He crossed the hall and took up the receiver.

"Hello!"

"Is that Mr. Midge?" the voice asked. And the voice was gay, alive.

"Yes."

"We-ell. And who do you think it is?" The voice was youthful, insinuating. His hearing sipped, tasted it, sparkling, and a little heady.

"I don't know," he said. "You must tell me."

"Well. I hope you *remember* me. It's Lynette Denham!"

"Oh, Mrs. Denham!"

"That's right. Remember me now?"

"Indeed I do."

"And do you happen to remember that you rashly promised you'd come over and lunch with me one day?"

"I'm delighted you should have asked me."

"Well, I'm asking you now if you'd come over to-morrow. I'm just dying to show you the house. I'm afraid Carlton may have to be away, but . . ."

“I shall love to come, Mrs. Denham.”

“Well, that’ll be lovely. Half-past one,” pronounced the tones, gay, sparkling, a little heady.

Against his will, Lester knew an exhilaration in his nerves.

He put down the receiver slowly, as if he feared to spill even the dregs of Lynette Denham’s voice.

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 *Chariot Wheels* by Sylvia Thompson]