



SUMMERS NIGHT



SYLVIA THOMPSON

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By Sylvia Thompson

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

SUMMERS NIGHT

BY
SYLVIA THOMPSON



*So lovers dream a rich and long delight
But get a winter-seeming summers night.*

DONNE, "Loves Alchymie"

BOSTON
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*Dedicated to Peter
in
Gratitude and Admiration*

PART ONE

I

When Charles Bitterne was a child he thought Theresa was beautiful. She dazzled and amused and comforted him. She was tremendously reassuring and looked magnificent in the evening. She used to come into the night nursery to show him her evening dresses. Her skirts swept down to the floor and swirled behind her; the top of her sprang out of her tight waist, and jewels glittered round her neck. She made jokes with him and jokes with her nurse, Victoria, and stood about laughing her laugh that began at a canter and broke into a gallop and made everything in the room quiver and shine. Then Charles's father shouted, "Theresa—Theresa!" and she hugged, whispered, and was gone, rustling with big strides and leaving a smell of carnations. She went down to the visitors. Different visitors every week-end, but nearly always Leroy, the painter.

John Leroy painted her dozens of times. (He painted her still.) The portrait he had done when Charles was a child hung in the drawing-room now: flowered taffeta, black waistband, ruched bodice, carnations pinned at her bosom, her big hands holding a book. Leroy, successful sentimentalist, had made her face beautiful. But she was no subject for Leroy. A drawing by Toulouse-Lautrec would have got her black and paleness, her big eyes, her nobby nose, her pushed-out cheek bones, the oval trend of the chin chopped square.

None of her adorers, except poor Leroy, ever said she had been beautiful. They said to Charles: "No, your mother could never have been called a Beauty, but—" and sought for phrases, saying, "'Charm' is such a banal word—and 'personality'" —

Her young womanhood haunted the emptiness after those "buts." . . . Luminous and violent, a bitter tongue (sometimes), a hot volatile heart, a dozen talents, a hundred impulses and interests.

Evelina said that Theresa had always got away with everything. She had always levied feelings from people. She did it now.

Charles knew that she did it now. He paid her his freedom as a matter of course.

She wasn't magnificent any more in evening dress. She had become eccentric about clothes and wore old cardigans over black dresses. Rusty clothes. She laughed about them, her black eyes shining and her monkey-

like mouth drawn awry in a delicious grimace. She called them her “charring outfits.” Her diamonds, she said, were for Charles’s wife.

Charles and she had legends about the imaginary wife. “Young Mrs. Bitterne”! Theresa, the actress, mimic *comédienne*, playing scenes. The girl is introduced. Theresa, the platitudinous dowager: “And naturally now that I am not so young as I was, I want to feel that my Charlie has someone who really has his interests at heart—studies his interests. We have been all in all to each other since my poor husband died—” Theresa, the epitome of Girl: “Charles and I seem to get on terribly well . . . I’ve always been thrilled about pictures, so it’s marvelous his painting—” the future young Mrs. Bitterne sitting, from her plucked eyebrows to brilliant toes, in the place of the lanky old woman—

Charles occasionally wondered how Theresa would “take” a real young Mrs. Bitterne. But he didn’t want to marry.

First memories of Theresa were mixed up with first memories of Melcombe.

Melcombe was the world into which he came. Melcombe was the house he grew up in, the gardens he played in, the place he came home to from school. (A fairy outpost by the dark frog pool in the corner of the rose garden; ghost of Captain Hook round the oak tree. Indian footprints behind the old cricket pavilion on the edge of the woods; *Vanity Fair* in the apple loft—and the cannonading rhythms of Victor Hugo and the smell of apples; *Les Fleurs du Mal* drowned in the boathouse down on the river, dropped while Theresa tied the painter and a new moon lay prostrate in the sky.)

He felt the loveliness of Melcombe whenever he came home. It stood in a sea of lawns: Charles II period; burned rose-color brick; a low balustrade crowning two stories of cream-framed windows, hiding the roof and the dormer windows on the top floor. A reflective house, just in its proportions, ripe and quiet and hospitable. The jasmin fringed the frame of the third drawing-room window. A pane of the boxroom window had been splintered ever since Charles was at Eton. The disrepair didn’t matter. Evelina said the place had a bloom on it—the warmth of two hundred and forty summers, and the dignity of many winters endured and survived.

Evelina had come for a month twice a year when she was a child, and Victoria (“Vicky”), Charles’s nurse, had looked after the two of them. She still came, but not for so long, because she knew that Theresa might think she was going to marry Charles.

Theresa herself at twenty-seven had married her cousin, Merrick Bitterne. For nine years they had no children. Her first question after Charles was born was, "Is it at all queer?"

Charles was delicate. But he wasn't queer. Vicky had looked after his health from the time he was six months old. Between the ages of seven and thirteen, though Vicky remained, he had a tutor. There was an invaluable young German whom Theresa "found" in Heidelberg. Rudi Scheuer was erudite, sensitive, and a good horseman. He comforted Theresa by pragmatic fusions of rationalism and Christian doctrine—when Merrick Bitterne died after a hunting accident in 1910. Charles was then nine. He had been out himself that day on his pony. He came home early in the afternoon. He was having an egg for his tea when the nursery maid rushed into the schoolroom and told Victoria that Mr. Bitterne had been brought home in Dr. Stafford's motor car—Charles was kept away from his parents' rooms, and stood on the top landing and smelled chloroform for the first time in his life. He saw a nurse come upstairs to the landing of the first floor. His mother came out and spoke to her and took her in. Charles went to Vicky in the nursery. His father died at two o'clock in the morning, soon after the specialist arrived from London.

Herr Scheuer left in 1913. Evelina kept a lock of his hair in a mauve cardboard box with Tiffany on the lid. Mr. Rendle taught Charles during the year before he went to Eton. He was older than Herr Scheuer and a snob, but he drilled Charles in Latin and preliminary Greek. He was killed on the Somme during Charles's first summer term. Charles, at his mother's instructions, wrote to Mr. Rendle's mother, but never had an answer.

Charles became stronger as he grew older. He had a persistent talent for drawing and painting. But he was attracted in turn by science, history, and metaphysics. During his school years he developed a gnawing mental appetite, and felt that it was never quite justified by his intellectual digestion. He read continually, but didn't remember more than half of what he learned.

In 1919 he left school. He was to go to Oxford in the spring. He and Theresa and Evelina spent the summer and autumn in America, staying with friends and with Theresa's relatives on her mother's side.

They enjoyed themselves. Theresa was in tremendous spirits the whole time. Her own vitality redoubled in the vital climate. Charles was interested by the American mixture of simplicity and sophistication. He enjoyed the luxurious hospitality and the eager friendliness of everyone he met. The young men of his own age seemed to him very young, but admirably

vigorous. The girls amused him; they were all smart and had a sparkling charm and assurance. He traced Theresa's intellectual enterprise to her American blood; she had that habit of going in for everything, from tennis to theology. And she never bothered to criticize herself. On the other hand, Theresa had subtleties and reservations from the Bitterne side. Like all the Bitternes, including Charles himself, she was an optimist in practice and a pessimist at heart: she had their vein of sour temper (Evelina explained it as "the family bile"); she had their respect for places and their disregard of time; their delight in beauty and their fear of boredom.

During those three months in America all three of them kept enjoying *not* being bored. Evelina became transformed in America. She was then nineteen. She went there rather dowdy, her interests centred on poetry and hunting. She became elegant. She bought American clothes and shoes, and had her gold hair cut and waved close to her small head. She painted her funny mouth an orange-red, and this showed up the mauve blue of her eyes. Theresa said that Evelina had changed from an ugly fairy into a magazine cover—a remark which made Charles realize that Theresa was afraid. But he couldn't imagine falling in love with Evelina; they were too much alike. She even looked like a gold coining of his own looks. The features that made him good-looking made Evelina plain—the short aquiline nose, the narrow face and square-cut chin. Evelina's mother had been Merrick Bitterne's sister. She had had those narrow cheek bones and wide-set eyes with big eyelids.

From that time in America, Evelina saw Charles less often. She was then at Cambridge doing English. She finally got a Second, after which she traveled a good deal, and in the intervals lived with her father in Northamptonshire, where she hunted in the winter and played tennis with neighbors in the summer time. Her father was a high-spirited clergyman who bore with Christian fortitude an indigence which did not prevent his hunting three times a week. He did not care much for female society, and after his wife left him was content to see Evelina when she was at home, and forgot her when she was away.

Charles's three years at Oxford seemed a world while they lasted and an episode when they were past. He was at Christ Church and had rooms in Tom Quad next to the porter's lodge. In his third year he had rooms in Oriel Street. He did history, worked hard spasmodically, and got a First (to his own surprise). He was an inactive member of the O.U.D.S., pleased himself and alarmed Theresa by rowing for the House, and was first a member of the Carlton and then the Labor Club. He spoke at the Union in both capacities,

defending Private Enterprise in his second year, and Nationalization in his last. He wrote articles on political and literary subjects for ephemeral magazines, and on one occasion wrote a letter to the *Times* on "Political Clubs in Oxford," pointing out that their funds should be subsidized by the parent societies in London. (This was when he was Secretary of the Labor Club.) During this period, Charles lost interest in painting altogether. He was informed by social-political zeal and had a scheme of graduating through a Settlement in Liverpool (run by one of his Labor friends) to Westminster.

Theresa said that his career as a Labor member would be like traveling third on a first-class ticket. She became stagey and proclaimed that none of his forbears had ever been anything but Tories. Charles pointed out that it had always been in their interest to be conservative. However, he promised to make no definite plan for six months, and to "get over being an undergraduate," as Theresa put it, at Melcombe and at his cousin's villa at Fiesole.

He and Theresa went to Italy in the middle of that September. Charles had never been there before. The country gave him an emotion which he characterized to himself as Browningsque. He and Theresa stayed in Florence for a hot night. Their rooms were on the Lungarno. He walked about the streets looking at the high shadows and the façades of churches, and the moonlight on the statues in the Loggia dei Lanzi.

The next day they drove in a landau up the dust-white road to Fiesole. The sunshine bathed everything, and Theresa put up her purple sunshade. Twice her hatbox fell off the landau into the road. Mary Langridge's economy was never to send her car to fetch people.

The heat made Charles feel less Browningsque in mood. The gardens and villas by the roadside looked cabbage-patchy; the cactuses were silted with dust, and the poplars were like exclamation marks all over the pale scrubby hills. When he looked down at Florence it seemed like a model of itself in a case with a looking-glass river running through.

They approached Fiesole. He could see that there were too many beautiful villas there, full of Americans like Theresa's cousins. He hardly remembered the Langridges. They had come to Melcombe when he was a child, and Cousin Mary Langridge had given him a fan with "S.S. Mauretania" on it and the picture of a ship surrounded by violets. . . .

The *fiacre* stopped at iron gates, and there was an avenue of poplars leading up to a beautiful villa the color of cream circus horses. Suddenly he thought of making a picture out of the perspective of trees and the flash of

villa and the lowering blueness of the sky. They drove up the avenue and a stout woman came out in a rather mediæval tennis dress calling Theresa "Thereeza." Charles disliked her at once and all the time he stayed with her.

But in spite of Cousin Mary, he enjoyed his visit. The house was cool and furnished with the "collection" to which Angus Langridge dedicated his fortune and his life. Charles liked Langridge, less as an individual than as a specimen of the expatriated American, who might have stepped out of the labyrinthine paragraphs of Henry James. Something of the patina of antiquity subdued his Occidental vitality, just as his brown beard elongated his square face and the gray tussore jackets that he affected æstheticized his somewhat massive build. The word "quattrocento" punctuated the erudite periods of his speech; Florence was his plaything, and he had the habit of casting his mental shoe across the Renaissance as if it were no bigger than his dressing-room floor. Theresa called him "Dear Angus" and talked him down. But Charles let himself be escorted round Florence, and by separating Langridge's facts from his theories learned what he wanted to know. Theresa dubbed Angus "the Gray Guide."

During their visit Cousin Mary often referred to the Whichfords and their daughter, who had been staying with them and whom Theresa and Charles had missed by two days. Cousin Mary spoke of Jasmin Lengel, the daughter, as a "lovely high-spirited girl" and said that Lady Whichford was so charming when you knew her, and that Angus had found Lord Whichford "most cultured." Theresa said that she understood the Whichfords were "dreadful beyond belief"—though she could imagine old Whichford was as "clever as Satan." Cousin Mary looked sanctimonious and said that people were too apt to be unchristian about people they only knew by hearsay—and Theresa remarked that one couldn't be unchristian about Jews any more than cats could be uncatty about dogs. Cousin Mary ended the topic by explaining that Lady Whichford,— "Rose" Whichford,—anyway, came from an old Suffolk family. . . . On another occasion, when Cousin Mary was showing Charles her snapshot album, she pointed out a photograph of a girl in a white dress sitting by the edge of the fountain. The girl was laughing and pushing back her shining hair from her face. Charles thought she looked attractive. Cousin Mary pointed out another photograph of the girl, arm in arm with a slender woman in a hat, and said, "Rose and Jasmin intertwined"—a phrase which she herself had written underneath the print in green ink.

During these weeks at Fiesole Charles took up painting again. He bought materials in Florence and started by painting the composition he had seen

the afternoon he arrived, of the poplar avenue and the villa at the far end. Soon he became obsessed by his painting and got into the habit of starting out every morning with his easel and canvas before Cousin Mary emerged from her room or Langridge could propose yet another conducted tour of the Uffizi. Every morning he went out with a new elation into the sunshine, caught a dry whiff of autumn roses and herbs, saw the towers and the river far below in a haze and the Apennines beyond, like streaks of Prussian blue laid on beneath a cobalt sky.

He painted every day for six weeks. The habit of painting got hold of him. The business of making pictures, formerly a diversion, became a passion. When he wasn't painting he thought about pictures: how they ought to be made; how they could be made; what was important in their making. Wherever he went his thoughts dug out and constructed pictures from the landscape, from bits of road and houses, from the Florentine streets. He only got a few of them painted, and those plagued and fascinated him by their failure. He began each picture with an excited belief that he could make it what he had intensely, and yet not quite clearly, focused in his thought. He worked through the drawing, the first application of paint, the adjustments and attempts with tones and colors, with the sense of struggling in pursuit of a created prey. On each canvas he hunted down the picture he believed he could make; and saw at the finish that he had only got yet another ordinary oil painting, full of meretricious light and violet shadows, and smeared about with casual pigment. Each time he was thwarted he felt the fascination of the thing afresh, and began again—sometimes with a new theory, or a new palette, always with the expression of what he sought glowing like the reflection of an ill-focused magic-lantern slide at the back of his mind.

As the weeks passed the discrepancy between what he wanted and what he finally got, between his significant, if blurred, conception and his dull “painty” productions, challenged his plans for the future. Although he avoided any definite conclusions, he became aware that painting had become for him more important than politics. Its problems seemed more exciting, its results, however elusive, more in his own power.

It was Theresa who made him decide.

Three days before their departure she was walking with him, arm in arm, up and down the flagged terrace, while Cousin Mary Langridge sat in the verandah on a rocking-chair, and knitted and read *Marius the Epicurean* with frequent exclamations on the beauty of the style. In the rose garden below, Angus Langridge, an ambulatory “Panama,” was snipping off old blooms and humming the “Jewel Song” from *Faust*.

Theresa asked Charles what he meant to do when he got home—"Do you mean to go back to your political-philanthropic plan—or are you going to paint?"

Later he remembered how the deep notes of her question hung in the fine radiant air. Later she remembered the form of his reply:—

"This painting's getting hold of me . . ."

"In fact, you want to be an artist."

"I might become one."

Characteristic attitudes to the matter in hand. She preferred clearness to the shades of truth. Charles weighed things up in the nice hesitant scales of his judgment.

"You want to give up politics?"

"No. But I think I want to paint."

"Where will you paint? Where will you work?"

"I haven't considered."

They turned about at the end of the terrace. Charles looked down on Florence and at the plains and mountains beyond. "I *like* this country."

But Theresa kept him to the point.

"You're twenty-two. That's late for a painter to begin. John Leroy began in a Paris *atelier* when he was sixteen. You'd have to work hard." She meant to make Charles obstinate, and succeeded.

"I don't mind the prospect of work."

She was relieved. She had set her mind against his career as a Labor politician. Better out of politics altogether, she thought. She liked the idea of his being an artist, for she had known many artists and found them good company. And she thought his work showed promise, and that he had more talent than herself (though how much more her critical powers, definite rather than delicate, did not enable her to perceive).

"You could start off in Paris," she remarked.

Charles stopped still. He dropped his mother's arm, thrust his hands in his pockets, looked into her face intently without seeing her at all.

"Yes," he said, unconscious of what word he had used. "Yes," he repeated. . . . Then he took her arm again and walked on. The assumption in

her phrase that he might actually be a painter sprang a vision in his mind. (The meaning was incidental—Paris, London, Rome, could be decided in time.) He saw that he was going to paint; not, as at present, in a desultory fashion, but persistently, day after day, getting down to it and working as he had never worked at anything in his life. He saw himself concentrated, using every ounce of his power. . . .

In fact he did begin in Paris. He went to Paris the following January and worked there for a year, returning only twice to Melcombe during this time: once at Easter, when Theresa had a party of people staying; and again in August, when, except for Evelina's visit of three days, he and Theresa were alone.

During that August he found subjects to paint in the neighborhood. He rattled along the quiet Warwickshire roads in the old Chevrolet, which he left on the grass track at the side of the road while he took up his "pitch" for a long day's work. Sometimes Theresa came with him and brought her easel and painted too, producing with impartial enthusiasm a Monet-esque oil, or a water color in the "Early English" manner. Occasionally Vicky, his old nurse, accompanied him, and sat on a camp stool and sewed, exactly as she used to sit beside his pram on summer afternoons. She even wore the same type of clothes—a dark gray print dress and the Victorian nurse's small black straw bonnet, adorned with a black velvet bow and set high on her sleekly parted white hair and tied with ribands under her comfortable little double chin. Victoria, as she liked to relate, had been so christened because she was born on the Queen's birthday anniversary in 1866. In Charles's childhood he had an identified image of Vicky and her glamorous namesake the "late Queen"; and even now Vicky's resemblance both in feature and, more humbly, in dress to the Sovereign of her youth made it impossible for his imagination to dissociate the two. Sometimes Charles wondered how far it was this impression in his mind and how far an early habit of obedience which made him give Vicky's simple utterances their special prestige.

It was Vicky, not Theresa, who suggested that after his year in Paris he should work in London and at home, condensing her doubts of the French capital in the utterance that "it would be healthier in more ways than one for Charles to work at home."

Charles felt he had got enough, for the moment, out of the Paris schools, and liked the idea of working during the following year at the Slade. He had made some friends in Paris, mostly French and American students of his

own age, and had enjoyed the life there. But he wanted a change. Most people, even if he liked them, bored him after a time and made him want solitude or new company. He would find both by having a studio-flat in London, and would be able to be at Melcombe for all holidays and weekends.

Theresa was pleased. She had wanted his company more than she cared to tell him. (She “had a horror,” in theory, of “influencing people,” though in fact she did so all the time.) She supposed that Charles had had some little *affaire* which had petered out, and had had a reaction against Paris life. She hinted as much to Vicky, who closed her mouth with traplike obstinacy, and then, after a moment’s disapproving cogitation, remarked that if she knew anything of Charles he was likely to have been too interested in his work to have his head filled with such things. Vicky’s surmise was nearer the truth.

Charles found a studio-flat on the borders of Chelsea and Belgravia. It had a bedroom, and that hybrid room peculiar to the “smart” artistic poor, a bath-kitchenette. He furnished it with some old white bedroom furniture from Melcombe, divans from Heal’s and odds and ends culled from Woolworth’s and the King’s Road. Vicky made cushions and curtains out of the Rodier silks he had brought from Paris, and insisted, in spite of his protests, on making frilled pelmets, and finishing the cushions with tassels and convolutions of silk cord. He painted the white furniture with aluminum paint, and disliked the result but couldn’t bother to change it. The whole effect of the place was clean and livable in—“piggable in” Evelina said, when she saw the bath-kitchenette with curtains round the bath. And the plan worked well. When he was down at Melcombe, he painted in the big attic with skylights, which had once been his playroom and harbored his old toys.

In July, as the Slade term had finished, Charles shut up his studio and decided to work only at Melcombe, and do nothing but out-of-door work until the winter set in. He thought that the Slade had been good for his drawing, but in reaction against the incessant discipline of pencil he wanted to get back into color, and splurge about with paint. He decided, if possible, to paint into the late autumn. After the following Christmas he meant to go and paint abroad, either in Morocco or in the South of France.

II

That year November was gold and bitter-sweet as October. Theresa invited Evelina for the third week-end. Charles concluded that Theresa believed him to be in love with Caroline Vernon,—Maurice Vernon's artist wife,—who had constituted herself his casual Egeria during the last four months. As she lived only ten miles away and had leisure, charm, and intelligence, he had enjoyed her frequent company. He was flattered by her excitement over his painting. He realized, too, that he was in some way a consolation to her, and liked her the more because she made absurd jokes instead of gloomy confidences.

But as for his being in love—Theresa held the belief, common to women, that a young man must be always in love. She had feared Evelina, condoned Myra Lane, jibed about Cynthia Wrench, and now tolerated Caroline Vernon—Charles failed to convince her that each of these women had for him the same significance as a book, taken up with interest, read with pleasure, put down when finished as a matter of course.

Charles, waiting for Evelina in the library, glancing through the *Nation*, reflected on each of these women and mentally exempted Evelina from the list. She was, after all, both a cousin and a habit. Also he thought that he was really fond of her. . . . Myra Lane, amusing at first, had become a bore; sentimental and always "offering herself." Cynthia Wrench was gay and witty and lovely to look at, but he hadn't wanted, at that time, to go away with her, or anyone else. . . . Roma Doone had been too neurotic altogether, and talked about ART—Caroline Vernon was a relief. She made no amorous demands and understood the business of making pictures.

Charles strolled up and down the library. He took out a volume of Tennyson, glanced through it. How bad and how good—one forgot how good he could be. . . .

Charles was now twenty-five. A young man, looking boyish. Slender face, square shoulders, narrow hips, long legs. Clay-brown hair brushed from a side parting above an artist's square big forehead. Slate-gray eyes set very wide apart, creased in between long thick eyelids, and shadowed by brushy brown lashes. Eyebrows black and peaked at the outer ends where they define the heavy corners of the brow. A short aquiline nose with delicate nostrils; a wide mouth, the upper lip sensitive, the lower lip sensual with a fine cleft in the centre, emphasizing the deep cleft below it in the chin.

A square thick chin to underline the thoughtful, fastidious qualities of the face; a strong chin—yet a little too rounded, a little self-indulgent. The ears good; well shaped, no decadence there. Nor in the hands; broad palms, strong fingers. Nor in the fine shape of the head, the equable poise of neck and shoulders and body.

Poise. Unconsciousness of self. A child's absorption in the physical spectacle of life. A woman's sensibility to spiritual undercurrents (a man's belittlement of their importance).

The expression of the lips serious rather than firm, breaking slowly to a smile. The eyes observant or reflective, observant even in laughter. The gray iris black-ringed, as if by a fine pen.

At twenty-five, Charles Bitterne had never been ill, never been poor, never been in love. His experiences were æsthetic and sensual, intellectual and social, epicurean and athletic. Beauty made him thirsty for more beauty; women confirmed his instinctive mistrust of emotion. Knowledge made him hungry for more knowledge; social life pleased or bored him. He liked tennis, good food and drink, good company. . . .

He was restless, uncertain, insatiable, as an adolescent.

Brancker, the critic, who ought to have known, thought his painting good. After Brancker had been down to Melcombe to stay (puffing cheap cigars all over the house), Charles worked.

When his cousin, Evan Campbell, had been staying, Charles brooded over the inferiority of his own tennis and went up to Queen's to play with the professional.

When his mother had house parties, Charles talked and idled and, when the guests had gone, cursed them for absorbing the precious and bitter drops of his time, and walked in the woods or paced the gardens resolving to cut loose and go to Paris to work, to escape from the enchantment of Melcombe, from his mother's delicious and exacerbating company—to get away from his own leisure, and work, work, work. . . .

When Evelina arrived, the wind was rising and a primrose-colored sunset had begun. Charles heard arrival noises out in the hall and put the book back on the shelf. A phrase remained swaying in a corner of his mind like a cobweb:—

Man comes and tills the earth and lies beneath
And after many a summer dies the swan . . .

He heard her voice:—

“Are they in?”

“Mr. Charles is in the library, miss.”

(*Mr. Charles is in the library, miss—And after many a summer dies the swan . . .*)

She came in and saw him silhouetted against a window. For a second she stood still.

He thought she looked luminous, as if the sunset light were inside her skin instead of on it. She came and kissed him. Her blue eyes raked his face, searched the room. She sniffed, arching her nostrils.

“Smell of wood, smell of burnt rosemary, smell of old books. . . . The Melcombe smell. *How* I like it!” She sat down on the fender stool, and pulled her hat off her brass-yellow hair. “Are you well, Charles?” She threw the hat into an armchair.

“Yes.”

“Busy?”

“No.”

“Happy?”

“No—”

“—As I drove up the avenue I saw the last leaves come off the beech trees. I stopped. You never heard such a silence. . . . It was like being at a ritual—”

(—*the leaves decay and fall . . .*) “Melcombe always gets you.”

“Always. Terribly. ‘Open my heart and you shall see . . .’ Where’s Theresa?”

“Out.” Charles sat down in the armchair on Evelina’s hat. Neither of them noticed.

“I know. She’s pacing the woods, stamping down the moss and frowning tragically and planning a dinner party. Is she well?”

“Very.”

“Busy?”

“As ever. Indefatigably busy. Starts painting at 7 A.M. Stops writing at 1 A.M. Plays the piano whenever she feels she might be slowing down. She got a piano tuner from Leamington here yesterday and played to him all the afternoon. I sent Starbright in with a whiskey and soda at 5.30. The man had to stay the night and finish his job this morning. He departed Mother’s slave, with a copy of her *Primrose Path* in his pocket.”

Charles referred to Theresa’s vindication of her political views, *My Primrose Path*, a trenchant and specious pamphlet published in 1912 when Merrick Bitterne was member for Selchester. Charles added, “She’s editing a new edition with a preface to the female electorate.”

Evelina’s flicker of laughter answered his. “What’s she painting now?”

“Cézannish. Apples defined by unearthly beams of light. Packing cases and furniture from the kitchen-maid’s bedroom.”

Evelina lit a gold-tipped cigarette with a shagreen-covered lighter. Charles noted the characteristic expensiveness of her paraphernalia. Evelina needed luxury in the way that he needed books. The perfections of materialism satisfied her spirit and pleased her mind (her body was incidental and would have served her will had she suddenly decided on a course of hard living and painful self-denial). For her perfumes, her 100-gauge silk stockings, her first-class traveling, she denied herself—with what seemed to Charles an amazing perversity—a whole range of other pleasures: missing plays because she couldn’t afford to go in the stalls, refusing invitations when tips and fares would overtax her depleted exchequer, and depriving herself, at different times, of music and pictures and company for what Charles symbolized in his mind as the difference between a yard of real and of imitation lace. His comment at this moment was:—

“How are the debts?”

“Like green bay trees. . . . Are her paintings bad?”

“Like all Mother’s painting, vehemently bad.”

“And your own?”

“You shall see.” He wanted and feared her criticism. “To-morrow, when there’s some light.”

Evelina asked:—

“What’s your mother writing just now?”

“Her Memoirs.”

Evelina’s coraled lips curved at the corners.

“That ought to be a hotchpotch.”

“Hotchpotch of Dinosaurs. Every creature larger than life and indecently more natural.”

“All the men who loved her?”

“Every one—including poor Leroy.”

“And all the women who’ve been her ‘very dearest’ friends?”

“All of them. And their photographs.”

“And a reproduction of László’s portrait of Theresa in pearls with you on her knee?”

“Exactly. It’s going to be the frontispiece—‘The Honorable Mrs. Merrick Bitterne and child.’”

“Oh, well. It’ll sell. Theresa said in her last letter to Father that you were financially desperate—but then she always thinks people are ruined when they can’t afford a second chauffeur. She has Edwardian standards.”

Charles walked to one of the windows and looked out. The lawns were freckled with leaves. The park beyond lay within a horseshoe belt of trees. In the far centre of the horseshoe he saw a figure emerge. A speck of black. Theresa . . .

“Our financial situation is quite vague to me. Occasionally Mother dismisses a gardener or goes to London to see our solicitors. She hints at disaster, but chooses to be mysterious. I have my small income, as you know, from my farseeing father. Theresa’s affairs are entirely separate, and Melcombe is hers during her life.”

“If I were ‘designing,’ Charles, I should marry you to have Melcombe in the end.”

“Could you marry me, Evelina?”

“I don’t know. I think we’re safe.” She paused, then said lightly, “Too intimate to fall in love.” She held out her hand. “Come here.”

He came from the window where he was standing. She drew him down beside her. She smiled, a flash of a smile that he’d liked when she was a little girl (queer little girl: like an anemone in a spring storm). They sat looking at each other, brown and gold facets of the same medallion.

“Seriously, what’s the matter, Charles?”

“Actually—nothing. *Weltschmerz*—I’m sick with life.”

Starbright brought in tea.

“Good evening, Starbright.”

“Good evening, miss.”

“How are you?”

“Very well, thank you, miss.”

“How’s the Turf?”

“Well, I haven’t had a very lucky season, miss.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you, miss.” Starbright lingered for a moment by the tea table, his red square-jowled face puckered in a hundred small creases of melancholy. Evelina reflected that his figure, always like a sea lion’s, had increased steadily in girth in the last fifteen years: result, she supposed, of the modest but regular toll he had levied on Merrick Bitterne’s cellar.

Starbright roused himself and made a ponderous exit.

Evelina said:—

“D’you remember how he used to give us port in a medicine bottle for our feasts in the loft?”

“Mm. And you had a bilious attack after we tried to make a port flip that wouldn’t flip.”

“And when he gave us Green Chartreuse to take to the schoolroom with the savory and we didn’t like it and put it in Mrs. Brendon’s scent spray!”

“And she was furious and told Mother that we ought to be at school—” Charles smiled. “Extraordinary—that grown-up world seen over the banisters. Completely Olympian.”

Evelina took a shortbread biscuit off the plate. “And now we’re on Olympus it seems quite flat. . . . We can’t begin without Theresa, can we?”

“She’ll be in any minute.”

“I saw Mrs. Brendon the other day at the Whichfords’. Very handsome. She asked about you and Theresa. She said you never came to see her.”

“She’s got a dreadful daughter who’s a mannequin.”

“Yes. She was at the Whichfords’, too. Why weren’t you there?”

“I don’t know them.”

“I thought you knew Jasmin—the girl?”

“No. She was staying at Fiesole with the Langridges just before we came two years ago. I just missed her. I gather she’s less dreadful than her parents?”

“You said ‘dreadful’ just like Theresa! As if social dreadfulness existed any more! As a matter of fact, Jasmin Lengel is lovely. Somehow the mixture of Jew and big blonde Cockney—Lady Whichford is pure Highgate *au fond*—has produced something rather good to look at.”

A door banged out in the hall. Three muddy cocker spaniels scampered into the room. Large footsteps, a pause, the clatter of heavy boots thrown down on a parquet floor, then a rapid thudding approach of stockinged feet, a deep “Well—well—well, where *are* you? Evelina, my dear—” and Theresa in the doorway, her arms stretched out, her old purple blanket coat flowing from her shoulders, her eyes like black lamps in the cream-colored monkey-like structure of her face. “Evelina, my dear—”

Evelina went forward—the big hands gripped her shoulders. The kisses came dramatic as ever, one on each cheek; a caressing mutter of affection, and the smell of carnations and wool, and that look, emotional, humorous, probing, indifferent, that lit you, glowed through you—and left you to grow cold.

“—my dear child—my dears. . . . To think of you waiting for tea. . . . You must have it at once. Charles—fetch me my shoes. Sit beside me, Evelina, and tell me about everything you’ve been doing. . . . Take my coat, Charles—tell Storr to dry it. The trees are dripping—the morning frosts don’t dry off. Scones? Why are there no scones? Just ring, Evelina . . . thank you, my dear!” She unwound a crêpe scarf from her neck. She threw it over the back of the worn William and Mary settee. “How Merrick would have laughed at my piece of crêpe! I was going dowdy even then. Starbright—there are no scones? Tell Mrs. Lenox to send in scones.”

Starbright retreated. Theresa smoothed her hair, which grew back off her forehead in silver-crested waves. Charles brought in her shoes—worn patent leather with buckles and square heels.

“How’s your father?”

“Very well.”

“Still hunts?”

“Yes.”

“Wonderful old man—You’re looking attractive. When are you going to get married?”

Evelina shrugged her shoulders.

“I hate the idea of being tied.”

“That’s foolish. It’s love that ties you, not marriage. . . . Here are the scones. Have one. . . . Find her a husband, Charles!”

Charles said, “What . . . I beg your pardon, Mother . . .”

“Find your cousin a husband. How old are you, Evelina? Twenty-five, aren’t you? Six months older than Charles. I married at twenty-seven. Too late, really. I’m just doing that part in the Memoirs. Has Charles told you? About the Memoirs? What do you think of the idea? I’m going to call it ‘The Unforgiving Minutes.’”

“Oh, Mother!”

“Why not? You know the thing.” She declaimed:—

“If you can fill the unforgiving minute . . .”

Evelina broke in: “Kipling’s rather *vieux jeu*.”

“So am I, thank goodness. The new game’s too tame for me. Have some jam on your scone. Strawberry or damson? And give me some strawberry. Yes, Renners are going to publish it. They’ve made me a very good offer already. Charles—eat a sandwich. Now tell me about yourself, Evelina. What have you been doing?”

“Nothing.” Evelina always spoke with a slow lifting of her eyelids, a slight movement of her aquamarine eyes. She gave the impression of being crystally walled in her own element and looking out at people like a creature in an aquarium. When she came out,—and Charles was one of the few people who had seen her do it,—she breathed life too painfully.

“Nothing?”

“Nothing that matters—”

“You should, then. Your detachment is a disease. Charles has it far too much, and you’ll die of it. Why, at your age I was running a Settlement, writing poetry, dancing all night, and desperately in love. Have some more tea?”

“In love with whom, Mother?”

“I can’t remember. . . . You ought to have been in the woods this afternoon, Charles. Coming back, the house was like a scene one remembers from a dream. . . . Bury me at Melcombe, Charles. . . .” Her look fixed him for a moment, half-tragic, half-amused. She cut herself a slice of plum cake. “I can’t imagine myself under the lawn—” She paused, then said: “Ledbury’s coming.”

“*Ledbury?*”

“Yes.” She added, with her put-on air of tyranny, “Why not? A solicitor must do something. He wants to see me. . . . As a matter of fact, we telephoned this morning—”

“You telephoned?”

“We telephoned.”

“You rang him up, Mother, or he you?”

Theresa bit her plum cake. “I rang him up.”

“Why?”

She put down her plum cake, took a handkerchief out of a hidden pocket in her capacious skirt, and wiped her fingers carefully one by one; then she said:—

“Because I had a letter from him by the morning post.”

Charles and Evelina glanced at each other. Theresa looked over their heads at nothing in particular. They saw that she would tell them nothing more. Evelina said:—

“I remember him when Father divorced Mother. Father took me to see Mr. Ledbury at his offices in Lincoln’s Inn. We drove on a foggy afternoon in a four-wheeler, all the way from Paddington—miles, it seemed. I remember the fusty room with the fog outside the window and a green reading lamp on Mr. Ledbury’s desk. I remember he said, ‘So this is—er—the child,’ and I knew he was shy of me. He asked me some questions and put me in another room. I was ten.” Evelina saw that Theresa was listening for Ledbury to arrive. The bell rang at this moment.

“There he is,” said Theresa. “Ring, Charles, for some more tea.” She observed her niece’s translucent attention and remarked, “Don’t make the good Ledbury shy again, my dear. You’ve got a stare like a couple of

arrows.” The mocking cadences died out in the room. Charles got up with a jolt and switched on all the table lamps.

“Give me a cigarette, Charles.”

He gave her one out of his case.

“Thanks.” Theresa laid her hand on his arm. He got a charge of her emotions: she was frightened, angry, shaken by a tenderness for himself.

“Mr. Ledbury, madam.”

Ledbury came in with a rapid, light step which seemed to belie his weight. His ham-colored face had convex cheeks, his body carried a convex stomach on which rested a thick gold watch chain. His fair gray hair was sparse but neat, his eyes small and kindly, his shoes burnished to a chestnut brown. He shook hands with Theresa, and briefly renewed his acquaintance with Evelina and Charles. He asked after George Bitterne’s health. Evelina replied that her father was well and walked away to the window. She saw that Ledbury, behind his sanguine manner, was distressed. She stood watching the reflection of the room in the darkened glass, and listening to the talk. Theresa and Ledbury discussed the excellence of the train service from London. Charles was quiet. They compared the weather in London and in the country. Charles didn’t join in. They talked about dogs. Ledbury spoke of his wife’s dislike of cats. A good many of his remarks ended, “It’s a peculiar thing, that.” He said, “I believe there are some people who feel about birds in precisely the way that my wife feels about cats. It’s a peculiar thing, that!” He said, “Two lumps, please, and rather strong.”

Evelina turned her head and saw that Charles was watching his mother.

When Ledbury had drunk two cups of tea and discussed with Theresa the possibility of a general election before the spring, he bent his head a little forward, put down his cup, and, half rising to his feet, said:—

“Er—well, perhaps, Mrs. Bitterne . . .”

Theresa rose.

“We’ll have our conference in the business room.” She added, with a perfunctory graciousness, “The young people can entertain one another.”

Ledbury bowed ten degrees to Evelina, nodded to Charles, and followed Theresa across the hall.

III

Charles and Evelina looked at each other in silence. Then Evelina took her crumpled hat out of its armchair and said:—

“Let’s go up and talk to Vicky.”

They crossed the hall and went up the circular shallow staircase to the second floor. On the farther side of the landing their footsteps crossed from the worn green Wilton to the age-enduring cork carpet which defined the nursery and schoolroom domain.

The day nursery, with its three big windows, was now Vicky’s living room. The cream paint was marked here and there, the rocking-horse had aged, the dolls’ house in the corner had the secret expression of houses that have been shut for a long time. But the coal fire seemed to Evelina exactly like the fire which used to glow at her when Vicky let her stand on the hearthrug to be dried after her bath in the “tub with ears.”

Vicky was ironing at the table in the middle of the room. When she saw Evelina come round the screen by the door she put down her iron and waited with her prim smile for the girl’s hug and kiss. When it was over she surveyed Evelina with her pale blue, slightly prominent eyes and then patted her shoulder.

“Dear, dear . . . what a pleasure it is to see you again.” She glanced at Charles and then back at Evelina, while her hand automatically took the iron from its stand. “The fire’s been lit in your room ever since ten o’clock this morning and the bed’s been airing since yesterday. . . . Everything seems to get so very damp at this time of year.”

Evelina went to the fire and sat on the fender. Charles came and sat beside her. Vicky folded one of Charles’s handkerchiefs and put them on one side.

“Don’t you go and burn yourselves,” she said.

Evelina remarked, “Nothing so nice as warming one’s behind,” and saw Vicky restrain a reproof. She glanced obliquely at Evelina and her upper lip closed more firmly on the lower. She was not amused. She folded and pressed down another handkerchief and added it to a pile.

“It *is* lovely to see you again, Vicky,” Evelina said, seeking absolution by her remark.

"I'm always the same," remarked Vicky, and then half smiled. (Absolution was granted. Evelina felt happier.) "And how's your dear father?"

"He's very well, thank you."

"You don't look altogether as you should, yourself. I dare say you've been gadding about more than is good for you."

"I've spent an awfully quiet summer. . . . I expect it's my debts beginning to tell on my complexion."

"No doubt it is," said Vicky dryly, and remarked to Charles: "*You do wear your heels through.*" She glanced at them both again, observed that they were troubled, and brought her iron over to the fire.

"Is your mother with Mr. Ledbury now?" She stooped and took up the other iron. Charles stood aside while she did so.

"Yes," he said.

Vicky went back to her table. She pulled the electric light farther down. It shone on her pomaded white hair, with its pink centre parting and twisted knob secured by a net, and lit the brooch which secured her collar band and framed, as in a circular reef of coral, one of Charles's baby curls.

Charles watched the iron leave a smooth pathway across a pair of his pants. The coal shifted in the fire. He noticed Evelina's scent. He supposed that Vicky knew what the interview downstairs was about. Theresa discussed matters with Vicky which she would avoid with him. She was more often influenced by her judgments than seemed to Charles wise. She was apt to assert that Vicky had no intellect, but possessed "the truth in her soul." Charles himself cared about Vicky's opinions, but hadn't Theresa's almost mystical sense of their value.

Evelina asked: "How do *you* think Charles's painting is getting on?"

"He'll get on if he works steadily," said Vicky. "More haste, less speed. . . . He's done a very pretty view of Melcombe Church with the post office opposite and the trees in the churchyard. Quite true to life. It gives you quite sad thoughts to look at it."

Charles said, "It gives me rather sad thoughts, too," and began to brood on the general futility of his work. "After Christmas I'm going to chuck up painting and become a bartender."

And now Adolphus is the boy
Who shakes the drinks at the Savoy!

I should look well in a white jacket and I should invent new cocktails to celebrate great public events, such as the births of royal children and the taking of a penny off the Income Tax and the arrival of female cyclists at the North Pole.”

“Now you’re talking foolishly,” said Vicky, pressing down the scalloped edges of one of her own petticoats. Then she paused, lifting the iron. Evelina’s hand slipped through Charles’s arm. They heard Theresa’s stride in the corridor.

The door was opened. She appeared round the screen. She looked pale, but spoke with a boisterous intonation, and a smile.

“The devil take solicitors,” she said, and then sat down heavily on the rocking-chair, and folded her arms. “I’m out of luck this time, Vicky,” she said, and for a moment covered her eyes with her bony hands, so that her rings glittered in the low radius of Vicky’s light.

She said at the end of their long silence:—

“The gist of it is that I’ve got to sell. We can’t go on living here any longer. Ledbury’s been telling me so for two years—but I’ve hung on, trying to believe that my wretched affairs would put themselves right. They seem to have done anything but that. Ledbury showed me some pretty convincing figures. . . .” She looked at Charles, then at Evelina, then at Vicky, who was standing quite still. She interlocked her hands, pressing the palms together, and tilted back her head in the manner of an actress about to recite. “The main facts which he says I have to face are: firstly, that I’ve been spending much more than I could afford—living on capital, he calls it—for so long now that nothing but getting rid of the place itself will put us right. . . . With Charles’s consent, of course” (she glanced at Charles; he glanced back, oddly), “—with his consent, Ledbury’s going to arrange for the mortgage to be paid off—and the place sold. . . . I wanted just to sell the land and farms, but he said, ‘I’m afraid, Mrs. Bitterne, you don’t quite grasp the economics of the situation.’”

Her imitation of Ledbury’s voice was perfect. “He says the safety of the ostrich is brief and illusory. . . . Though that wasn’t the way he put it. . . . He was kind—dear old thing. He patted my hand. . . . There seems no other course,” she concluded.

“No,” said Charles.

Vicky shook her head slowly and folded up the ironing blanket. Evelina stood up from the fender and felt in her pocket for her cigarette case. She watched her aunt’s face, touched by her visible and unexpected self-control. Theresa’s “dramatics” were for small occasions; there was something gallant about her “matter-of-factness” now.

Charles accepted one of Evelina’s cigarettes. He found that his imagination refused the implications of his mother’s words. He felt the unhappiness which quivered in the room; he perceived Theresa’s rigidity, Vicky’s grief, Evelina’s locked-in agitation. But he could get no coherent view of what the abandonment of Melcombe would mean. The thing didn’t seem possible. His glance took in Vicky, the table, the Normandy cupboard, the big chest of drawers, the curtains printed with dim cornflowers, the dolls’ house, the high cuckoo clock—it didn’t seem possible that this room could be furnished in any other way. He asked:—

“Has Ledbury gone?”

Theresa nodded yes.

Vicky pushed the electric light upward again. As she did so Charles saw the tears on her cheeks. (He remembered that he had seen her cry at his father’s funeral, pressing her face with her white cotton handkerchief which she held in her shiny black-gloved hand.) Vicky’s voice was husky but controlled as she commended her infallible remedy. “Let me get you a nice glass of hot milk, ’m.”

For a moment Theresa hesitated, looking up into the old woman’s face; her gaze deepened, flickered queerly.

“Yes, Vicky—you may.”

Vicky departed to her pantry, where she still kept a nursery milk larder outside the window. They heard the clink of a saucepan being taken down from the shelf; the scrape of a match.

“I think I’d better go and see if my things are unpacked,” said Evelina. She threw her cigarette, half smoked, into the fire and went out of the room. As she passed the pantry door she had a glimpse of Vicky watching a saucepan on the spirit lamp. Down in her own bedroom, on the first floor, she found the chintzes gleaming peacefully in the firelight and her evening dress laid out on the bed.

Charles felt Theresa's mood change when Evelina had gone. She got up from the rocking-chair and began to walk about, talking half to herself, half to him.

"If only I hadn't been a fool! If I'd pulled in the purse strings at the right moment. . . . It's this extravagance—it's in the Bitterne blood and seems to come out in the women. (Evelina has it—in a different way.) Merrick used to say I had no 'sense' of money. It's true. It isn't just being generous and lavish—it's simply a question of not being able to realize that everything one gets has ultimately to be expressed in terms of money. It's a sort of mental deficiency with regard to practical things. . . . And now it reacts on you, as well as myself. Even on dear old Vicky—"

"It's absurd to blame yourself, Mother."

"It's not absurd. It's just. We could have gone on living here if I hadn't spent in a manner which the good Ledbury chose to describe as 'somewhat princely.' (Though I certainly thought I'd been economizing these last years.)"

"You never spend anything on yourself."

"That isn't the point, my dear. I've spent on living in general. The mere upkeep of the house; the garden—those new cottages . . . not that the place hasn't got shabby enough anyway since the war."

"You give away a good deal."

"That's a luxury, too. Charity's an expensive self-indulgence." She stopped by the chest of drawers and stood leaning against it, her arms folded. "Generosity, expensive leisure—buying books, buying pictures—" Her magnificent voice lapsed, with a sort of relief, into drama. "Even fostering beauty and ameliorating other people's conditions can be—mere self-indulgence—"

"The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices—"

"Make instruments to plague us." She held out her arm and took the glass of milk from Vicky's tray. "Thanks, Vicky . . . bless you!"

"Drink it while it's hot. It'll do you a power of good." She turned to Charles. "You wouldn't like a glass?"

"No, thanks." He realized that he wanted to be alone. His depression and his painful sympathy were obscured by a desire to escape from the spectacle of his mother's self-reproach, and his nurse's pious but stricken resignation to the ways of Providence. He murmured that he thought he would go and

dress for dinner, and went out with a conscious, awkward speed, shutting the door after him and hurrying down the corridor away from the two women, as if the shadows of their grief might escape from the nursery and follow at his heels.

IV

A fortnight after Ledbury's visit Theresa got a letter from Cousin Mary Langridge.

BROWN'S HOTEL
Thursday

MY DEAR THERESA,

Angus and I were so very much surprised by your letter which reached me through our bank when we got to London last week, explaining that you could not have us, as we proposed, for Christmas, because of the sad and dreadful news that Melcombe was to be sold. We really could hardly believe it, but dear Mr. Ledbury, whom we had to see on a small business matter last Monday, confirmed the sad news.

First let me say that this seems really a most tragic thing. How you must hate the idea of your husband's old home being occupied by strangers. We have wondered sometimes if you could not have lived there in a more economical way than you have done, in which case the beautiful old place might not now have to be sold. But it is no use crying over spilt milk, is it? And half the reason of this letter, apart from our wishing to condole with you, is that I am glad to say that I think I may be able to be helpful.

Yesterday we were lunching with the Whichfords, and I happened to mention to Lady Whichford that you were having to give up Melcombe and that it would have to be sold. She then told me that they were looking for a country house, as the one they have at present (a most delightful Elizabethan old place near East Grinstead!) is not big enough for them, and there is no good hunting in that district, which is important to her husband, who has taken up hunting these last years. She seemed most interested and enthusiastic about the idea of seeing Melcombe and going into the whole matter, and Lord Whichford also seemed most taken with the idea. They want a *big* house and they like the idea of living in Warwickshire, and they asked me to write to you, and she said that she would write to you at the same time. I think you will be lucky if you sell it them as they will pay whatever is being asked—and they are sure to furnish it very beautifully, as Rose Whichford always has the best interior decorators to work for her.

Let me know just what happens. Also if you are likely to be in London while we are here these next weeks. It seems so sad to hear of you beginning to “clear up,” and I wonder what your plans are when you do leave. In some ways it’s always cheaper to live abroad. I expect Charles is feeling badly at leaving the home of his childhood.

Dear Theresa, this is to convey all our love and sympathy for you in your trouble.

Always your devoted cousin,

MARY LANGRIDGE

Lady Whichford’s letter arrived the next day.

120 GROSVENOR SQUARE, W. 1

December 15th

DEAR MRS. BITTERNE,

Your cousin, Mrs. Angus Langridge, who is such a great friend of ours, lunched with us two days ago, and tells me that you are thinking of selling your lovely place, about which one has always heard so much. I wonder if she has written to you yet to explain that we are looking for exactly the kind of place that Melcombe has been described to me as being, and that it would be the most marvelous good luck if by any chance it did do for us!

It would be so *very* kind of you if you would let us come down and look at it one day soon. Perhaps you would write to me, or ring up my secretary and let me know when it would be really absolutely convenient for us to come.

We are so looking forward to meeting you.

Yours sincerely,

ROSE WHICHFORD

Theresa answered each letter in turn.

MY DEAR MARY,

Thank you for your good offices on my behalf. Your client has written to me. I’ll let you know what happens. I can’t discuss the matter. It’s like waiting to have one’s eyes plucked out by vultures.

THERESA

MELCOMBE, WARWICKSHIRE
December 18th

DEAR LADY WHICHFORD,

Thank you very much for your letter. I shall be delighted if you and your husband will come down almost any day—see the house, and have luncheon here. Please let me know which day you want to come.

Of course all the business side is carried out by our solicitors, Graves, Ledbury and Wrench.

Yours truly,

THERESA BITTERNE

Lady Whichford's secretary telephoned the next day to ask if Mrs. Bitterne could have them on Sunday. Theresa informed the cool secretarial voice that she could. The voice said, "Only Lord and Lady Whichford will be coming."

"Thank you," said Theresa.

She put down the receiver and remarked to Charles, "Did she think I expected the twelve tribes of Israel to lunch?"

"There's a daughter—and a son, I believe," said Charles. "Probably there was some question of their coming too."

"You'd better marry the daughter," said Theresa, "then you could go on living here, and I could come down as a guest."

They came on Sunday.

At ten minutes to one Lady Whichford's black Daimler emerged silently from the beech avenue and drew up on the expanse of drive which divided Melcombe from its western slope of lawn.

Lady Whichford got out first, followed by her husband, whose movements were more cumbersome and whose sight was less acute. She glanced over the façade of the house before entering the hall. Lord Whichford followed her, his dark tonsured-looking head jutting and moving

from side to side, so that Charles, observing him approach down the vista of the library, was reminded of a large Hebraic tortoise.

Starbright announced them. Theresa went forward and welcomed each in turn and introduced them to Charles. Lady Whichford's remarks, in a key of a sharp effusiveness, were reënforced by her husband's deep-gonged:—

“How d’you *do*. . . . Jolly place you’ve got here. . . . How d’you *do* . . .” This to Charles.

Theresa said, “I hope you found your way quite easily.” She reflected that Lady Whichford made a distinguished first impression which was soon contradicted by a second view—her fair acid handsomeness, her cold eyes and straight back, indicating merely a latent ruthlessness.

“Oh, quite easily. The place is too charming. That *view* coming up your drive. Ab-so-lutely divine.”

“Do you live here with your mother?” Edgar Whichford boomed to Charles. He had walked in with his tweed cap on and a large muffler knotted inside the astrakhan collar of his coat. He took off his cap and put it in his pocket, and began to undo his muffler with clumsy fingers, two of which retained the stump of a cigar.

Charles said that he also had a studio in London.

“You paind, do you?”

“Yes.” (Theresa had taken Lady Whichford to leave her coat upstairs.)

“Hope you paind well. There are a lod of rotten artists about.” Lord Whichford allowed Starbright, who had reappeared, to finish taking off his coat. He seemed as relieved of its weight as an animal of captivity, and began immediately to pace the room and puff at the stub of his cigar, stopping every now and then to stare out of one of the windows, or examine the mantelpiece, or stare up at the plasterwork on the ceiling—and then pacing on again, always with that curious tortoise-like turning of his head. “My impression about most modern painding,” he began, walking faster, “is that none of you fellows know whad the devil you’re getting at. You don’t paind sacred pictures because this isn’t a religious age, and you don’t paind what I call profane pictures, like Rubens did, with a lod of magnifizend harlots rolling about the woods, because this isn’t a red-blooded pagan age either. In my opinion . . .” He settled down to a continuous low roar of monologue until his wife returned, when he was interrupted by:—

“Edgar darling, you never saw anything so utterly lovely as the staircase, and the paneling and fireplace in Mrs. Bitterne’s room!”

“Really, really?” Lord Whichford boomed absently, looking at the bookshelves.

Starbright announced luncheon.

Charles observed that Lady Whichford had taken off her furs and was dressed in a neat brown tweed suit which showed off the excellent preservation of her figure. He noticed that Theresa hadn’t bothered to change out of her most charwomanly outfit—the capacious black skirt, the black woolen cardigan, the cream lace scarf knotted round her neck as if she had a cold (and surprisingly fastened by her diamond star brooch). He heard her say as they crossed the hall, “The dining room is interesting. It was ‘done up’ early in George Third’s reign. The wood wainscoting has some lovely carving. It’s supposed to be some of the best work of its time.”

When they entered, Lady Whichford exclaimed with almost spontaneous pleasure at the carving at the head and base of the tall panels in the room. Lord Whichford gave a grunt of interest and walked rapidly up to the walls, to examine the work more closely: carved trophies of arms, musical instruments, agricultural implements depending from knotted ribands almost down to the centre of the panels; below, the chasing and snaring of birds and beasts wrought in the solid oak of the panel; pheasants going into traps, monkeys shooting at opossums with bows and arrows.

“Beautiful. Very beautiful indeed.”

“Ab-so-lutely *charming*!”

Theresa motioned Lord Whichford to sit on her right. Lady Whichford settled down, talking to Charles about the woodwork, and glancing at the set of Jacobean chairs. Charles thought that she checked a comment or question.

While he listened with his habitual air of grave attention to her regrets that her present house was too small, he took in his mother’s talk with Lord Whichford, and reflected on her aptitude for finding, and seizing, a core of interest in every occasion. She had disliked what she knew of the Whichfords almost as much as she resented the reason of their coming: as far as Charles could interpret her almost too casually gracious manner with them, he concluded that she found them as pretentious as she had expected them to be. And yet, committed to a conversation with Edgar Whichford, she could forget that he was the possible, and most antipathetic usurper of her home, her gardens, her woods and countryside—and draw him out on the

organization of United Tar Products until she, clearly, felt that no other subject was more enthralling, and no other matters so new and significant as the products and byproducts of tar.

As Edgar Whichford expanded his replies to her questions Charles too became interested, glimpsing the panoramic nature of the subject through the network of Lady Whichford's small talk. She had got on to the topics of hunting and Families, and Charles gave her information about his cousins and aunts, and made courteous assents to her anecdotes about a visit in Leicestershire, while he gained an impression that half the economic world was welded by coal tar.

"Yezz. . . . My original company, the Lengel-Soda Corporation, was incorporated with Dutch Chemicals in 1900. In 1903 we started factories at Toronto and Hamilton. We didn't join with Plimmer-Schön until 1913—just in time to turn over all our north-country works for munitions. During the war we were able to switch over our plant with a minimum of trouble. United Tar Products wasn't formed until 1922 (that was the year Bernhard Schön of Plimmer-Schön threw up Free Trade and crossed the floor of the House). I think he decided," boomed Lord Whichford, "that the only satisfactory form of Free Trade was within an International Combine!"—and his laugh echoed suddenly from his cavernous red-lipped mouth, issuing from under his thick untidy moustache like the warning of a lurking dragon. Charles wondered how Lady Whichford had endured sleeping with him. He concluded that her lack of fastidiousness had had its mundane compensations; and that whereas Edgar Lengel's mistresses—Charles recollected various stories—had merely acquired jewelry or advancement for their husbands, his wife, stoically conjugal, had by now probably realized her most picturesque castles in the air.

Theresa was answering Lady Whichford's interruption.

"Thirty-two bedrooms altogether. A good many of them haven't been used for some time."

"That sounds really just about what we want. You see we *don't* want an *enormous* place, as we're having this villa built at Antibes and Edgar always takes something in Scotland in August and September."

"Of course," said Theresa. "As a matter of fact I believe you took a place belonging to some cousins of ours, three summers ago—"

Charles watched Theresa's grave amiability, and remembered the reports of Lord Whichford's kilts, and of two pipers who had been imported to play the bagpipes every night during dinner, to the Whichfords and their guests.

“My son adores shooting, too, and my daughter-in-law, ‘Peter,’ is a thoroughly out-of-doors sort of young woman.”

Charles, who had once seen “Peter” Lengel at the opera, wondered why Lady Whichford should have chosen this inaccurate description. He asked: “Does she hunt, too?”

“Oh, she *adores* hunting. She’s hunted ever since she was a child, of course—Peter’ll be simply enchanted by this place.”

“Does your daughter hunt, too?” Theresa asked.

“Jasmin?” demanded Lord Whichford. “Oh, Jasmin hunts—when she’s got a craze for it. But she’s a funny girl,” he rumbled. “She goes mad about different things. Last summer she went off to some ‘Dance School’ near Paris where they all wore tunics and sunbathed (and made love, I expect!) all day. A few weeks ago she was writing poetry. Now all she can think about is learning Greek, and she reproaches me because I didn’t send her to a university. She said to me yesterday, ‘You wouldn’t keep machinery rusting in your factories in the way I’ve got brains lying idle in my head. . . .’ She said, ‘I’m trying to rationalize my brains, Daddy, and it’s damnably difficult!’ All these girls swear,” Lord Whichford added.

“She sounds an interesting girl,” said Theresa. “So many girls won’t use their brains. I’ve got a niece who’s really very brilliant indeed, but she likes to spend her life as a dilettante.”

“Oh, Mother—I don’t think that’s just to Evelina.”

“My dear Charles—what does Evelina do, except read poetry and keep her imagination unspotted from the world!”

Charles didn’t answer. He couldn’t dispute his mother’s injustice with Lady Whichford gazing at him through that spasmodic lorgnon of hers. But he was angry, and took up, with a certain acerbity, a remark of Lord Whichford about the value of university education for women. The latter’s dictum that “in the end it was only the attractive women who got to the job” provoked Charles to a defense of woman’s need of mental training as a substitute for the use of her so unjustly distributed physical charms. “Women *oughtn’t* to get on by being attractive,” he asserted.

“That doesn’t alter the facts, young man!”

“I doubt if those are the facts, sir.”

“My dear boy—don’t tell me that you wouldn’t take more trouble for an attractive woman than a plain one?”

"I don't know—that depends on the woman, and the circumstances."

"Well—well," boomed Lord Whichford. "You seem a very cautious young man."

"You begged the question, sir. I consider that women need to be educated whatever their faces are like."

"The priddy ones never learn anything."

"My cousin, Evelina, whom we were talking about, is most attractive, and she got a Second in English at Cambridge. And one of the most beautiful girls I know got a First in History when I was up."

"I should like to meet her!"

"You probably have. She's just married Leroy's son—Denis Leroy."

"Really. . . . I didn't remember."

"Edgar darling, you must remember. We went to the wedding."

"So we did . . . Oh, yes . . . Yes . . . Lovely girl. Lovely figure."

"Leroy painted Jasmin last year, you know," said Lady Whichford, turning to her hostess again.

"I hope he painted her well." Theresa added: "He's one of my dearest and oldest friends. He's coming to stay with us this week, for Christmas."

"*Such* a darling, isn't he? . . . Yes, he did a really lovely thing of Jasmin. Rather 'Court-Painterish,' as he always *is* of course, and not at all modern—but then one really rather likes that, and he made her look lovely, which she is, instead of distorted—" She bent again to Charles. "Do you paint portraits?"—and made him talk to her until the end of luncheon about his work.

When they had finished their coffee, Theresa proposed a tour of the house while the daylight remained. She led the way through the library into the drawing-room.

"We don't use it much," she said. They crossed the parquet floor and passed through the double doors to the anteroom beyond. Both rooms had white plasterwork of the same date as the carved wainscoting in the dining room. But the plasterwork was degenerate and over-ornate, and was stained in places by patches of damp. Lady Whichford remarked on the Hepplewhite sofa and chairs, and the fireplace in the anteroom. . . .

They passed through the second door in the anteroom, through an outer vestibule lit by two big windows, back into the inner hall below the staircase.

“The ballroom,” said Theresa, standing with her back to the shadowed tapestries, “is the other side, beyond the dining room. . . . It was built on, as you may have noticed, as an extra wing, by a gay couple who had the place between 1790 and 1816. It’s beautiful in itself, but incongruous. . . .” She led the way again, along a wide corridor which flanked the dining room. She opened the heavy walnut door. “I’m afraid it’s rather sad in its dust sheets,” she said.

Lady Whichford advanced and stood halfway down the gallery-like room, appraising through her lorgnon the rich late Georgian stateliness of its proportions, the pilasters which divided the length of the duck’s-egg-colored walls, the two Ionic columns which marked off each end of the room and gave an added impression of height to the ornamental plaster ceiling from whose central line hung four chandeliers. She went up to one of the windows and looked out, turned again, glancing at the worn velvet of the long curtains, and surveying the room once more from where she stood. Lord Whichford joined her, remarking, “Very fine indeed—very fine”—while Charles and Theresa remained by the doorway where they had come in. Charles watched the prospective buyers of his home standing side by side, and tried to appreciate only the comic aspects of the matter. This ballroom would become a dazzling arena for Lady Whichford’s hospitality. She would stand and receive her guests by one of the pillars, just where Theresa stood now with her arms folded and a look of ironical patience on her face. For a second she turned and met her son’s look: for a second one corner of her mouth twisted down, and one of her dramatic eyebrows jumped higher than the other. She looked away again.

“No,” she answered Lady Whichford, “we haven’t used it for some years. I’ve entertained very little since the war.” She watched her guests proceed to the far end of the room, where they stood by a shrouded group of chairs making some remarks which she couldn’t hear. Lord Whichford nodded and rumbled. Then they returned and asked to see the rest of the house.

Theresa preceded them, remarking, as they went up the staircase and visited the bedrooms on the first floor, that she almost felt the need of a megaphone. Charles, following, noticed in how many ways the house showed its need of repair. In many corners the paint was chipped or darkened; the chintzes were all faded, and in the south bedrooms the pattern

on the curtains had become indistinct; the carpets were discolored near the windows and worn by the doors; here and there where a picture had been moved its shape was marked pale on the painted panel of the wall, or a rearrangement of furniture had left a fresher wall space exposed to the light.

Going from room to room, through the first floor, then up to the second and through the rooms there, he felt, as if for the last and first time, the enchantment of the house—its lovely quiet, its homeliness, its age-troubled beauty. . . .

While his mother escorted the Whichfords to the housekeeper's room and the linen cupboards, he stood on the top landing looking down into the hall. He felt as if the pain nerves in his mind had just come alive. He put out his hand and touched the banisters. He turned and looked at the queer-faced clock which stood in the angle of the nursery corridor. He thought of the hours and minutes that its dry ticking must have marked in his life: and remembered how in the firelit night nursery its distant tick . . . tick . . . tick . . . used to count him from wakefulness to drowsiness, and from drowsiness to sleep.

He heard Theresa's voice coming down the other corridor from the back stairs, and felt that he couldn't see the Whichfords again. He heard Lady Whichford's grating amiability, Lord Whichford's flat-footed tread. As if by the release of a spring, he turned and fled downstairs to his own room. He saw himself white and strange as he passed the mirror—

He lit a cigarette and sat down in the window seat. He stared at the silhouette of the cedar tree against a mist that was already drifting up the steep park land from the river; and heard his mother and the Whichfords go down into the hall.

Three days later Theresa wrote to Cousin Mary Langridge:

MY DEAR MARY,

The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold last Sunday. He has now made an offer which I shall, perforce, accept. They will then come again—a regular Vulpine tribe next time, sons, daughters, and what not. Whether I shall stomach a second visit in person, I cannot be sure.

All the same, I must thank you for your very provident and helpful intervention.

As a character Ld. W. has his points. Her qualities I leave to a
milder tongue and blunter pen!

Your devoted cousin,

THERESA BITTERNE

V

John Leroy came for Christmas. Evelina, who was to have come, had bronchitis at home in Northamptonshire, so Theresa and Charles and Leroy were alone. The three were used to each other, and Charles felt that the absence of other guests was a relief.

Leroy arrived the day before Christmas Eve, looking, as Theresa had once described him, "like an exiled Spanish monarch shaken up with a brigand and then painted by Velásquez." His appearance mingled the regal and the picaresque, the militant and melancholy—a rich, conscious sophistication with a warm heart, a conceited temper, and a simple imagination. Under his sallow skin he had indeed the "Hapsburg" structure of face—long, with bony brows and cheek bones, but with a less pronounced chin, and a pair of dark moustaches which he had first grown in 1889 when he returned from his studies in Paris, and first dyed in 1911 when his position as a portrait painter seemed to demand of him the signs of a perpetual youth. His eyes, big and light hazel, expressed observation, humor, affection—varied by sadness or annoyance. His hair he allowed to be less dark than his moustaches, and the white hairs reminded Charles, in intolerant moments, that Leroy was well over sixty and belonged by tradition to an age when mannerism in dress was rare enough to advertise a young painter. The moustaches, the broad-brimmed black hat, the light waistcoat with jade buttons, the black cloth cloak with the green velvet lining, expressed something of his nature (which was endearingly flamboyant), but more of his artistic success, which was flamboyant too—and less endearing. In his sixties he still painted elegant portraits of aristocrats, plutocrats, and celebrities—and still carried a cloak and cane when he walked, observed but unrecognized, down Bond Street.

Theresa greeted his arrival with outstretched hands.

They kissed each other—the formal gracious kissing of two monarchs. Within a few minutes they were engaged in a long intimate talk, that compound of gossip and philosophy, confidences and anecdotes and reminiscences, which was the stuff of their friendship. As they sat by the library fire, Theresa must hear the details and happenings of Leroy's life since she had seen him last. The parties he had been to, the houses he had visited, the people he had painted. Then he, looking into her face with the gaze of a fascinated child, must question her on her doings—her writing, her painting, her reading—Charles, listening to them, felt the glow of their intimacy; saw how Leroy's devotion kindled her affection, how her affection

vitalized her mind, and how this play of her mind renewed for Leroy her charm and dearness.

During the four days of Leroy's visit Charles felt himself detached but interested, on the outskirts of their warm relation. They talked to him, they tried to draw him into their discussions—but their converse was essentially mutual. Their recollections were of friends or incidents he only dimly knew; their agreements were of books he didn't care for, characters he'd never met, of moral questions which seemed to him to have no relevance to life. Their melancholy, too,—and its shadows hung about them during these days,—had a sort of mutual poignancy, the present tolling for them among the confused golden echoes of the past.

As for their gayety, which seized them in moments of reaction, it had a richness, a flavor, a mellow sparkling beauty which Charles mentally described as "vintage humor," and which made the mirth of his contemporaries seem cheap and thin. Charles would watch the two of them, as they sat in the evenings in neighboring armchairs: Theresa in a black velvet dress of outdated elegance, wearing her pearls in Leroy's honor, a black lace scarf draping her shoulders, buckles sparkling on her shoes; Leroy in a frogged smoking jacket of moss-green velvet which emphasized the yellowish pallor of his features. Theresa moving about in her chair as she talked, leaning forward to emphasize a point or to listen intently to an anecdote told by Leroy with a smile lurking under his moustache; Theresa throwing herself back in one of her magnificent and helpless fits of laughter, while Leroy, silent and yet shaken with the same delighted mirth, grasped the arms of his chair with his delicately formed hands—

Sometimes, as on Christmas evening, when their talk idled into the past Charles got new glimpses of his mother's life. Leroy had said, in a satisfied but sentimental manner, that his portrait of her which hung in the drawing-room scarcely differed from her as she was now. Theresa's laugh disclaimed his compliment. "And anyway," she added, "it was always too flattering."

He said, "My dear. The fact is that nobody could paint you justly."

She said, after a pause, "D'you remember, John, what fun we had over that portrait? Merrick dubbed you Penelope, and accused you of undoing it every night!" She turned to Charles. "I don't suppose you remember,—you were only four,—we took a small house in Hertford Street that summer. And John took one next door. He manufactured a sort of hatch in the wall between his bedroom and ours, and Merrick and I used to lie in bed and

shout at him and make him laugh—and push him through a cup of tea in the morning . . .”

Charles had an incoherent memory of that summer, chiefly connected with the tarry smell of London streets, and the Guards in Whitehall, and a shower bath in the bathroom.

Leroy said: “And Winterbourne, the best valet who ever existed outside fiction, gave me notice because, he said, ‘the Hon’rable Mrs. Bitterne talking through the wall didn’t seem neither one thing or the other, if you take my meaning, sir!’”

“And d’you remember our charades in the evenings—D’you remember the one which shocked Paula Brendon so (Merrick’s idea—he had a genius for them)—‘Gladstone’? George Freyne did the Grand Old Man himself, and the end syllable was me, as Mrs. G. O. M., filling a stone hot-water bottle with soup—and then George Freyne’s final representation of Mr. G. rescuing the wrong kind of lady in Leicester Square—”

Leroy laughed. “I remember our charades were very political that year.”

“I suppose we were all very much excited by the 1906 elections—I remember Merrick saying after his defeat that the Liberal victories had pushed forward the cause of Socialism a quarter of a century.”

“Merrick was always Die-Hard—”

“So am I.”

Leroy threw away yet another half-smoked cigarette. “I always thought George Freyne’s political nickname for you was extremely apropos—‘the Red Primrose.’ You always had a streak of Socialism.”

“Who hasn’t, when they’re feeling well-disposed toward the world?”

“Merrick was right, though, my dear Theresa—only an uncompromising Toryism can remain Tory. The best compromise leads straight to Socialism in the end—”

They plunged into a discussion, Theresa enlarging an idea of a benevolent conservative despotism, Leroy asserting that only by reactionary legislation could the vulgarization of society be checked, and the arts and social life continue. . . .

It seemed to Charles that their enthusiastic minds failed to understand the realities of which they talked. Whenever they discussed current questions their joint mentality seemed like a phrase which had been taken

from its context and lost significance. They intensified one another's views, and displayed the mental eagerness of the dawning century over problems which Charles was used to discussing with the reluctant intellectualism of the nineteen-twenties. He heard them range to and fro over the deeps of politics, conduct, art, literature—magnificently unaware, in the strength of their generation, of the Janus-like aspect of Truth.

Leroy hadn't been in the house with Charles since the latter began painting at all, and demanded on the day after his arrival to see his work.

Charles took him up to the attic studio while Theresa was resting after luncheon. Leroy sat down on a battered ottoman.

"Now show me all your stuff. Don't be reticent. Remember I'm a worker myself—not a critic."

Charles unstacked his canvases from the corner, and put one on the easel.

"That was done in the park here. . . . Down by the river, you know," he said, when Leroy was silent.

"Show me some others."

Charles felt Leroy's doubts standing round him like a crowd round a street accident. He put three more canvases in turn on the easel without giving any explanation of their subject.

"Who's that?" Leroy asked.

In the picture a female figure in a blue dress was seated by a window.

"As a matter of fact, it was Evelina. I wanted a figure just there and she was staying—"

Leroy shook his head, his melancholy dazzling smile lurking under the moustaches. Charles said, "I'm afraid you don't approve?"

A gesture from Leroy. "On the contrary. I'm very interested. But I need—instruction—" He broke off vaguely, watching while Charles unstacked some figure studies he had done the previous summer. One was a nude, a stout red-haired girl curled on a couch among some crimson and magenta cushions, her back reflected in a mirror beyond the couch; the second was a study of an old man; the third of a sallow middle-aged woman in a Spanish shawl sitting in the middle of a square, brightly colored room. Charles

remarked firmly that he was rather pleased with the last, which he had done in a friend's studio. Leroy took him up:—

“Now I want you to tell me, Charles, exactly what the—the qualities are” (Leroy had a mannerism of hesitating before his choice of the obvious word) “which make you—satisfied with that latter canvas?”

Charles hesitated, his usual air of dreamy watchfulness constricted to a sort of haughtiness which reminded Leroy of Theresa defending an indefensible statement. He looked from Leroy back to his canvas, to the woman's hollowed face and neck set like a piece of carved and illumined ivory in the glowing pattern of shapes, subduing the brilliance of colors by its strong delicate neutrality.

“. . . I think it's quite well arranged. . . . I think the balance of form and color's good, and the thing isn't garish, though it might be. . . . I think the whole arrangement is quite satisfying and escapes being obvious and 'picturesque.'”

Leroy indicated the nude in the couch. “And that? Are you pleased with that?” He got up and went close to the canvas, scrutinizing the use of pigment in the flesh tints. Charles saw the thrust out of his underlip, the half-perplexed lift of the eyebrow, and caught, “*You all do that.*”

“No, not very. I was at the time. The figure's too light for the rest—I mean too light in weight. It isn't rich and solid enough, and the surfaces are dull in places—no variation of tone wherever the light gets it—on the shoulder, and on the whole big curve from hip to thigh, for instance. . . . And the reflection doesn't echo far enough off, or in the right key.”

“I see.” Leroy stood upright again and walked up to the end of the studio, his right thumb thrust in the armhole of his buff waistcoat.

“Very interesting,” he said. “Very interesting to me—”

Charles said, “I'm afraid ‘interesting’ is an expression of politeness.” He had known that Leroy wouldn't like his work, but he was annoyed all the same, and surprised by his own annoyance (just as he had been surprised by the excitement he'd got from Evelina's praise). After all, it was clear enough that if Leroy was satisfied by his own richly euphemistic painting, with his velvet shadows and shadowed velvets, his alabaster complexions and jeweled eyes, with female perfections glowing from the ministration of some “dapper Cupid,” and masculine “distinction” tapered out and veneered by an equally Meredithian spirit, it was clear enough that any work with different methods and aims would puzzle him into hostility.

Leroy faced Charles, both his thumbs in his waistcoat now, and seemed to gather himself up for the forceful expression of his judgment.

“Surely,” he said, “surely Nature was good enough for the old masters? Surely Nature as she is—things as they are—are good enough to paint?—Good enough subjects?”

Charles’s resentment vanished. He felt quite sure of himself, and interested by what he perceived as the innocence of Leroy’s artistic experience and the corresponding frivolity of his judgment. He said: “They are my ‘subjects.’”

“That may be—But what I mean is—the thing that I find so wrong-headed about all young artists to-day is that they—they do not think their subjects good enough—in themselves. To me a beautiful woman is something—wonderful, exquisite, that I must try to reproduce—”

“They aren’t all beautiful, anyway.”

“Perhaps. But then I pick out what *is* beautiful. I emphasize that—or, with an older person, I emphasize the dignity, the fine character. With a landscape I choose an aspect of a—beautiful countryside—and that’s what I try to make a picture of—Nature has done well enough, at her best, to make the reproduction of ugliness unnecessary.” Leroy glanced once more at Charles’s canvases. “I don’t mean that you haven’t got great talent—great talent, one can see that. But I must confess that to me your whole ideal is incomprehensible: forms, patterns, tones for their own sake . . .”

“But one wants—” Charles ventured, thinking that it was foolish to argue, yet forced to make a defense. “What one wants, surely—I mean what I suppose we all of us are getting at, is to produce in each picture, not a copy of anything, but some sort of—” his hands described a globe—“of whole—a whole expression, not just chunks of the visible,” he added, observing that Leroy didn’t pause to examine his argument at all.

“You cannot hope to make a beautiful object, woman, flower, or landscape, more beautiful than it is,” said Leroy with an air of indulgent finality. “Even the old masters couldn’t do that.”

“But they could—they did—it was just that unity of conception—”

“Most of us,” continued Leroy, “are glad enough to get within reasonable distance of painting what we see—or rather what our special perception as artists enables us to see.”

“Yes,” said Charles, turning the red-haired nude to the wall, relieved to hear Theresa calling Leroy from the landing below. He remembered Evelina’s description of Leroy’s portrait painting as “gilding the turnip.”

VI

Jasmin Lengel dismounted at the top of the Row, patted Prince Consort's neck, and with a nodded "Good morning" handed him over to the groom.

She glanced at the clock by the Park gates, and, observing that it was already quarter-past eight, quickened her customary walk back to Belgrave Square. Her parents had planned to start at nine for Melcombe, and her father never allowed himself to be kept waiting by anyone except his wife.

As she crossed Hyde Park Corner, her spirits enlivened by the frosty sunshine, her body glowing from the exercise of her ride, she became preoccupied, imagining to herself what Melcombe would be like. Her mother's description of its architecture and her father's comments on its "magnificent furniture" and "jolly staircase," together with their emphasis on its need of "doing up," gave her an impression of a sad, grand old place which it would be a moral act to restore—a sort of architectural *Téméraire* demanding rescue. . . . She saw its rose brick, its many clear windows, its stone pediment, as beautiful, but bearing the cold marks of decay. She imagined that the Bitternes (queer name, she thought) would be relieved to hand it over to her parents, even if its restoration, she reflected with an impulse of dislike, were put into the fluttering but curiously capable hands of Roger Mandeville. Turning the corner into Grosvenor Crescent, she wondered what the Bitternes were like. Mother had described Mrs. Bitterne as "dowdy and rather *grand dame*" and the son as an "awfully good-looking boy." Clearly Mother had disliked Mrs. Bitterne, but her liking for the son made Jasmin suppose him smooth and tiresome.

A voice interrupted her thoughts.

"Hello! Good morning, Jasmin! Aren't you going to take any notice of me?"

It was Evan Campbell, handsome, bowler-hatted, his guardsmanly bearing informing his mufti with the same unmistakable regimentalism that the cut of his moustache and his piercing yet faintly stupid blue gaze gave to his countenance. Jasmin turned; the flush of exercise deepened under the warm tones of her skin, her lips parted.

"Evan!" She held out her gloved hand, the other hand mechanically grasping her habit skirt. The young man took her hand and held it rather hard, staring at her face, whose irregular vital loveliness attracted other glances in the street besides his own.

“Why didn’t you answer my letter? I was just on my way to see you.” He jerked his head in the direction of the Square.

Her eyes seemed to darken under their heavy eyelids. Their look shifted and returned half-gently, half-impudently, to the young man’s stare. She drew away her hand and pushed back a thick wave of brownish-gold hair which had escaped from under her hat.

“I—couldn’t answer it,” she said at last.

“Can I walk back with you?”

“Yes. . . .” The low uncertain tones of her voice escaped from her lips as if she were thinking of something else. In fact, she was wondering why the apparition of Evan had made her feel shy.

“I say—Jasmin—”

“Mmm?” The shyness had gone. She noticed that her strides were as long as his.

“Well, I mean—what did you make of my letter?”

She took in a picture of the great Square in the morning sunshine. She had an impression of Evan’s tall figure, of his strong, meaningless profile and his gloves and his stick, slowing down beside her. . . .

“My dear—I *absolutely* couldn’t marry you,” she said.

“But, Jasmin—”

“My dear, honestly. You see, I’m not in love with you.”

“But you—”

“Yes, I know I find you—attractive in a sort of way. . . . I like being taken out by you, and dancing with you, and—”

“Why did you let me kiss you last Thursday?”

They stood still now, outside the house. She looked up into his face with a sigh, more for her own stupidity than his, more because she was puzzled and angry with herself than because she was annoyed at the assumption he had so eagerly made.

“I suppose because you’d given me too much champagne—and because,” she added with a mixture of resentment and humor, “it’s so unnatural to be a virgin at twenty-three!”

Even as she spoke she reflected on the mistake of making Bloomsbury remarks in Mayfair; they were never, as in this case, understood. Evan Campbell colored; he was obviously shocked, and in some obscure way his pride was hurt.

“Oh, well—I mean to say—I—”

She said, “I was only joking—”

“What d’you mean you were joking?” he pounced.

She saw his line of suspicion and said quickly: “Oh, my dear—I mean my remark was just—flippant.” She reassured him: “I’m *really* as respectable as you thought; enough for you to marry if—”

Out of his bewilderment he could only reassert, “Well, then—”

“Evan, I *must* go in and change.”

He seized her arm. She saw that he was angry and hurt, and she felt abruptly sorry for him. He saw her expression change.

“Jasmin, darling. Come out and have lunch with me. . . . I’ll get the old car.”

“I can’t. Really. I’m going down with Mother and Father to the country for the day.”

“Put ’em off. Where are you going?”

“To see the new place they’re buying.”

“I’ll motor you there. Where is it?”

“Warwickshire—Melcombe. I must go with them—” He’d dropped her arm.

“I say. Melcombe? You don’t mean to say your people are buying the Bitternes’ place?”

“Yes—why?” Jasmin asked, relieved by this deflection from the personal.

“By Jove! What a coincidence! . . . They’re sort of cousins of mine, you know—twice removed, or something, but still . . . I’d heard they were having to sell, but—”

“How odd! Look here, Evan, I absolutely must go now. But I’ll dine with you, if you like, to-morrow night—”

“All right. That’s fixed then, mind you. Don’t forget.”

“All right.”

“Don’t forget.” He stood watching her as she sprang up the steps and vanished with a glance over her shoulder, behind the heavy ironwork of the front door.

Evan Campbell walked thoughtfully round the Square and down Brook Street towards the Guards’ Club. Had she really meant to turn him down, or not? Women were queer. . . . And that about being twenty-three. . . . But he would make her happy, or he’d try to, if only she’d have him. . . .

That last sight of her as she went in, in her neat habit, with her astonishing smile, was photographed in his thoughts. He couldn’t help trying to cheer himself up by a doubt if she really did know her own mind. . . .

Lady Whichford went up to her daughter’s bedroom and found her lying on the chaise longue, wrapped in a bath towel, reading. Jasmin’s maid was fidgeting with her stockings and shoes. Jasmin glanced absently over the top of her book at her mother.

“Jasmin darling, d’you realize the *time*?”

“More or less.” She put down the book. “Has Father begun to champ?”

“He can’t come after all. Something about the Stubfield Works. He had a telegram early. So there’ll just be you and me and Roger.”

Jasmin got up, threw off her bath towel, and began to rub herself down with eau de Cologne. Lady Whichford observed her daughter with prudish curiosity.

“You must be careful not to get fat, darling. Everybody’s so slender just now.”

Jasmin laughed and began putting on her clothes. “You couldn’t call me fat, Mother. But I couldn’t look like *Vogue* if I tried—concave chest, no hips, knock-knees, and falling backwards.”

“Oh, well, I expect your riding is good for your figure.”

Jasmin wriggled into a jumper and remarked with the forced good humor with which she usually spoke to her mother:—

“You really needn’t worry, Mummie. It isn’t my figure that is keeping me a spinster.”

Lady Whichford said, “Evan Campbell rang up about half-past eight and said he was coming here to see you after your ride.”

Jasmin took her shoes from the maid and then nodded to her to go. “Yes, I met him on my way back.”

“Well?”

Jasmin made a face at herself in the glass. “Well nothing,” she said.

Rose Whichford never minced any matter except in public.

“Well—has he asked you to marry him?”

“Yes. He often does.”

Lady Whichford surveyed her daughter in the mirror. “Having missed or thrown over various chances, I should have thought you’d show some sense if you accepted him.”

Jasmin pulled on her hat and jabbed at her mouth with a lipstick.

“I’ve told you, I’m not in love with him.”

“My *dear* Jasmin, you’re simply being childish.”

“Well, then, I shall go on being childish.”

Lady Whichford drew up her excellent figure and said: “I’m terribly disappointed, Jasmin.”

Jasmin took up her gloves and bag, remarking, “I suppose it’s Evan’s baronetcy that you like? A bloody hand in the family is worth two coronets—in the bush, so to speak.”

“I must say I don’t understand you,” said Rose Whichford.

Jasmin shrugged her shoulders and followed her mother downstairs. The idea of a long drive with the shrill and restless Roger Mandeville in the car was so oppressive that she almost refused to go. But she wanted to see the house.

Charles had heard the Whichfords’ car arrive and hurried out of the house by the library passage door, dragging on his overcoat as he went and slipping a book into his pocket.

He hurried across the lawns and down the still-frosty shade of the yew walk, and through the iron gate into the sunlit winter formality of the rose garden. He hesitated. His favorite stone bench in the corner looked inviting

and almost warm. On the other hand, “they” might very well, on such a day, stroll out into the gardens, and the rose garden would be their first objective. (“They”—as he and Evelina used to flee from strolling guests.) He crossed the rose garden, vaulted the low stone balustrade on the far side, and proceeded down a slope of lawn flanked by long pergolas towards a deep glimmer which betrayed the swimming pool set in its long grass hollow beyond a wall of trellis and the twisted branches of trees. He rounded a group of shrubs and with a sort of relief came to a standstill on one of the flagstones which edged the shining darkness of the water.

He stood quite still. Glancing down at the steps which spread into the water at this shallow end, he noticed layers and rifts of ice against their sides. . . . Up where the deep end lay like a harbor under its steep bank he saw patches of rime glistening in the shadows of the big tamarisk that heaved its gnarled trunk and bent its branches across the pool. (“The Witch,” Evelina called the tamarisk one summer—the Tamarisk Witch staring down at the reflection of her pink hair. . . .)

A bird darted from space, arrowed the water, skimmed away. The mirror set again over the shining edges of a cloud.

Charles drew a breath; the sunlight tasted in his mouth and flowed down into his body like a still strange wine. . . . He had a fancy that summer and winter had met him here to say good-bye. . . . (Good-bye to all the summers, all the adventurous winters. . . .)

He moved off the flagstone, strolled along the edge, finally spread his coat and threw himself down on the bank above the deep end. He rested his cheek against it, while he stared obliquely downward into the water. He lay still for a long time, half hypnotized by the sunshine and the flickering quiet, his heart beating against the ground.

Absently, and then with surprise, he became aware of a new reflection in the water: a vertical reflection on the farther side; moving, then still; then moving again. The reflection of a human figure—of a body darkly outlined; a head, deep against deep trees, lit to a dim phosphorescence. . . .

The reflection of a woman—a girl. . . .

Charles looked up.

He raised himself on his elbows. Stared. Became conscious that he was staring. (. . . The girl was lovely.)

She stood still, as if startled by the sight of him. Then her “Oh, I’m sorry!” echoed strangely across the pool. He saw the creamy-tinted oval of her face suddenly flushed. He scrambled to his feet.

“Please.”

She took a step backward, clutching her hat and handbag with a funny guilty air, her brilliant look fixed on his face. She faltered:—

“I’d no idea there was anyone—” she broke off. “I mean you were as quiet as a tortoise asleep—”

He noticed the caressing way she let out each word between her lips; the effect was of a delicious softness and distinctness. He smiled. “A tortoise?” He glanced down at her reflection and then once more at the girl herself, at her beautifully poised figure, the curling light in her hair, and now at the astonishingly sweet glowing smile, which dawned from her eyes to her lips and chin.

“A very young tortoise!” she said. And then, as he approached her down the bank and under a branch of the tamarisk tree, she added, “I’m Jasmin Lengel.”

She said this just at the moment when his own process of thought, still half dazed with his lying in the sun, had begun to perceive that she must, of course, be accountable for as something more than the reality of her own image in the pool. . . . Of course.

“I’m Charles Bitterne,” he said.

“That’s what I was afraid of.”

“Afraid?”

She drew in a sigh that was almost a gasp of anger.

“Of course. . . . You were hiding. I saw—before I could go. . . . I’m *sorry*.”

“But, Miss—Miss Lengel—”

She looked about. “It’s so, so—*so* lovely,” she breathed at last, the “lovely” coming out with that caressing precision from between her lips. “Of course you were hiding,” she added, in a curious tone of self-reproach.

“But I assure you—”

“You were hiding from us—from Mother and that ghastly Mandeville, and me.” He got her profile now: the childish brow, the blunt straight nose,

the short upper lip and rounded chin; an effect of intelligence and sweetness, of vitality and expectation—and, at this moment, of a sensitiveness too easily embittered. He caught the word “Interlopers!”

The way she ignored the absence of an introduction between them helped Charles to forget his own formality. His habitual politeness gave way to a spontaneous desire to go on talking to her. (He remembered the snapshot now in Cousin Mary’s album at Fiesole.) That last word, spoken away from him, provoked in him a mixture of chivalry and embarrassment.

“No,” he said. “It wasn’t that a bit. I mean—my instinct, anyway, is to get away from things.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Unsociable, I suppose. I don’t really like people,” he confided, “except occasionally as a diversion.” He wasn’t sure, as he spoke, whether he really felt or purely assumed this feeling (he was never quite sure on this matter). But the vividness of her retort, her surprise, the way her whole body became a gesture of protest, enchanted him:—

“And I *adore* them so! I *live* for people!” Her eyes were brilliant hazel under their carved eyelids and straight-drawn eyebrows. (Their color was like light in a mountain stream, he thought—they flickered from gold to dark and from dark to gold with the flitting of her thoughts; glowed and sparkled with the uneven vibration of her feelings.) “I don’t believe you,” she said. “You don’t look,” she sought for words, “cold, misanthropic—‘cave-mannish.’” The faintest coquetry showed in her pronunciation of the final word, and vanished, leaving her expression questioning and intent.

“I’m not exactly—” he broke off. “Anyway, I’m glad you came. I was simply idling. The sun’s so surprising in February. Won’t you—won’t you come and sit down, or would you rather walk about?”

“I’d like to be lazy.” She walked up the bank and settled herself on his coat. Looking round her again, she said, “You paint, don’t you?”

He stopped himself gazing at her. “Yes.”

She indicated, absently, that he was to sit beside her.

“Mother told me—Mother and the Mandeville are in the house, as you probably gathered.”

“Didn’t your father come?”

“He couldn’t. Needed at one of the works at the last moment.” She went on staring at the water and then chuckled suddenly and became grave again. “Do you *know* the Mandeville?”

“No.”

“Lucky for you. He’s simply nauseating; but as clever as a cat—at his job. (Architecting, you know.) Peter—that’s my sister-in-law—calls him the ‘Mandedrille.’ But she likes him, all the same. He makes one feel as if there were a drain in the room with rats looking out of it. Mother adores him,” she added. “He makes her feel *grand dame* and a Patroness of the Arts, and so forth. It’s rather his line; that’s how he gets so much work, pretending to be the *cavaliere servente* of women like Mother.”

Charles’s surprise at these references to her mother was mollified by the way in which she turned with a curiously earnest appeal for his judgment.

“I do hate ‘hangers-on,’ don’t you?” she asked; and, seeing that somehow the species was less familiar to him than to herself, she added, “I mean—‘toadying’ people. Always crowding round—” She broke off, plucked a short blade of grass and put it between her lips, her eyes faintly smiling now.

Her words gave Charles a new angle on the Whichford world. He felt an odd pity for her.

“They must be beastly.” He reverted: “Is Mandeville doing this—this place?”

She colored; nodded. “Yes.” Then: “Will you show me the garden? It’s getting rather cold, isn’t it? I left my coat in the car.”

Charles got to his feet.

She held out her hands. “Pull me up!”

Her fingers were delicate and smooth and warm. For a second her face was so near, laughing, that he could see how the iris of her eyes was flecked with green and gold. He felt her nearness like the passing of a light; as she stepped back, thanking him, a dim phosphorescence remained on the surface of his senses.

“Take me round and talk gardening to me.”

“You’ll be bored.”

“Facts never bore me. I’m like a man in that way. I like knowing how the wheels go round; when I learned to drive I learned the mechanism of cars,

too.”

Charles was amused by this funny little lapse into boastfulness. He said:

—
“My cousin Evelina holds the opposite view. She says cars are meant to go, and when one doesn’t go, then she must have another that does.”

They strolled by the “long border” towards the kitchen garden. Jasmin said:—

“That sounds very grand.”

“Evelina is very grand.” As he made the statement he perceived that “grandeur” was indeed one of his cousin’s queer qualities.

“I wonder if I know her?” said Jasmin.

“Possibly . . .” He checked the rest of his reply, which was to the effect that Evelina despised the ordinary ruck of London people. But the question conjured up a picture of the two girls: Evelina, with her cowslip-yellow waves of hair framing her clear square brow and narrowing face, her calm aquamarine eyes with storms in their depths, her long legs, her exquisite hands; and the girl beside him. He looked at her again while she talked,—she was describing their present country house,—and felt his whole consciousness irradiated, as if her beauty were a burning glass for her warm dancing life. He contrasted Evelina’s air of vaguely startled indifference with Jasmin Lengel’s almost childlike excitement. . . .

“Yes,” he said, “the stabling is good”—in answer to her question.

She began talking about her horses. She said:—

“If everybody in the world died and I still had a horse to ride I should want to go on living.”

“You’ll hunt down here, then?”

“Oh yes. That’s why we wanted to come here partly. Do you?”

“I used to—regularly. But the last three winters I’ve been away, first in Paris, and then in London. But I’ve been out several times this last autumn.”

“You were here then?”

“Yes.”

“What shall you do—when you leave?”

“I’ve got a studio in London—and Mother’ll take a house. And I’ve got a plan of getting some small house in the South somewhere where I can paint.”

“How *lovely*! On the Riviera?”

“I’m not certain. I rather dislike the Riviera itself.”

“Oh, do you? You don’t *really*?”

She looked so surprised that he laughed.

“I’m afraid I do. But possibly I’m biased. I went there for an Easter vacation when I was at Oxford, with Mother, to stay with an eminent writer of salable fiction. The place seemed to me a nightmare of cold winds and trams and dust and French suburban villas punctuated by luxury hotels swarming with the richer scum of every nation. Our host gave huge luncheon parties every day which lasted till half-past three in the afternoon. I used to sit and rage inwardly at the inanity of the talk and the disgusting ‘unrealness’ of all the people—I was a Socialist at the time and longed to guillotine every one of them as they left the dining room, ‘swollen with wind and the rank breath they draw.’”

Jasmin gave a soft uneven chuckle that died out suddenly and left her lips and eyes still laughing.

“Who was your host?”

“Miles Storrington.”

“*Oh*—Miles Storrington! His villa’s almost next door to the one that Daddy’s building—near Antibes, you mean?”

“Yes.” Charles felt embarrassed. “Of course—probably your father’s villa is right away from the rest of the population and if he’s building it—”

“Yes, the Mandedrille’s building it.”

“Well, then, it’ll be—individual. Not just a little sugar palace.”

The girl stopped and turned to face him, and said with an odd glimmering intensity that made their situation suddenly personal:—

“You’re terribly—nice.”

“I—” He couldn’t make out her impulse.

“Nice and—sensitive,” she insisted, examining his face. “Being polite about our villa—and all the time Mummie’s ramping round your lovely,

lovely place, and planning to put fixed basins in the powder closets and do awful things to the ballroom.”

For a moment Charles was irritated by the pictures she evoked.

“Sensitive, perhaps,” he said, “but essentially not ‘nice.’”

Her gaze shut down and she turned to walk on with the abrupt sadness of a child reproved.

“It’s you—who are nice,” he said. “In fact,” he insisted, seeing the profile lifting, “it’s because you’re so nice that it’s easy for me. I was prepared to dislike you,” he said, giving way to the charm of seeing his every word renew the light in her face.

“And I’m not so dreadful?”

The adjective she hit on recalled Theresa’s strictures on the Whichfords. He felt himself absurdly color. They paused by the seat at the top of the kitchen garden. He said with a constrained jocularity which felt foolish:—

“Not really . . .”

The chimes of the stable clock sang out in the air above them, each chime full and deliberate, falling from its rich life to a long shimmering echo. They listened, gazing distantly and yet easily at one another while the twelve chimes made a slow circle round their silence.

Jasmin spoke first.

“I suppose we’d better go back to the house.”

Charles nodded.

On the way back they only spoke twice. Charles had been seized by a mood he didn’t understand. He felt disturbed and resentful, but alive. He glanced once or twice at the girl and wondered what she was thinking about. Her profile had a drowsy expression which reminded him of a kitten falling asleep before a fire.

Lady Whichford was in the hall looking somewhat stiff and impatient, so that Charles wondered if she was hungry. She ignored her daughter’s reappearance and introduced Charles to Mandeville, a spindly, elegant young man with a big forehead, a long tinted face, and glazed almond-shaped eyes set flat and tilted, so that the porcelain appearance of his features seemed to show a Chinese influence. His fair hair was arranged in a

big and small wave across the top of his forehead, his eyebrows were carefully shaped, and Charles observed with a feeling of prejudice that his mean, succulent mouth, so characteristic of his type, was defined by a lipstick. He offered Charles his hand and then flickered it away as though its fingers were unnerved by even so brief a capture.

“We’ve been doing a sort of preliminary canter,” said Lady Whichford to Charles. “Roger’s been going round with me and having the most marvelous inspirations about what to *do* with everything.”

“Really,” said Charles.

“The man who built the house had some inspirations, too,” said Jasmin.

Her mother looked at her. Charles had an impression that Lady Whichford disliked her daughter, but admired her appearance. At the same moment he wondered if Lady Whichford had any redeeming qualities. There must be a woman, he supposed, under that mother-of-pearl surface.

“Where have you been, Jasmin?”

“Mr. Bitterne has been showing me the gardens.”

“Oh yes. We saw them last time. Delightful.”

“My—dear—Rose,” Roger Mandeville interrupted, speaking in a sharp indrawn breath, and pointing upward with his right hand and with his left supporting his right elbow, so that Charles was reminded of an attitudinizing figure of a fan. Lady Whichford turned to him, her upper lip drawn back with an air of expectancy over her regular teeth.

“I see it; I—see—it—exactly—my dear: *quite* perfect! Canary-yellow curtains and pelmets in both halls, *and*—the—library—my—dear, *lined* with parrot-green. And the stair carpets yellow—and the green caught up again, only a little darker, by substituting a malachite slab for the marble one on the top of that *guéridon*!” He stood back, lifting his hands as if he had let his ideas rise like a flight of tame birds; his clever nostrils dilated, the slanting glass shapes of his eyes expressed a demand for approval. “Very—seducing—don’t—you—think?”

Lady Whichford was delighted. She began a shrill superlative description of her pleasure in Roger’s schemes for Melcombe.

Charles said: “I think I must go.” He wondered if she had hoped to be asked to luncheon. He had forgotten Jasmin.

“I’m *so* sorry. . . . As a matter of fact, we’re just going off; we’re going to have a picnic in the car, by that marvelous view along the river. I was *so* sorry not to see your mother. . . . Tell her I *do* hope she’ll be much better next time we come. But bronchitis is a thing to be so careful of, isn’t it?”

“Thank you.”. . . So Theresa had revolted at the last minute! He remembered the girl again. She said, turning her back on her mother: “I wish you could have shown me the house—as well as the garden.”

“Your mother will do that, I expect, in due course.”

He was too angry now to care if the girl was beautiful. He saw that she was hurt by his rudeness, and didn’t care. Her charm was only a palliation of what her parents had done.

She turned away and he watched her follow her mother and her mother’s architect out of the house. Her figure displeased him from the back. Her neck was too solid, her shoulders square, her ankles were ungraceful, and her movements were sensuous and without precision, giving him a notion that she might grow stout in middle age. . . .

VII

Evelina arrived at Paddington at five minutes to six, to go down to Melcombe with Charles by the 6.10. She bought herself *Vogue* and two evening papers. The porter carried her rug and her dressing bag and her lilies of the valley, and installed her in an empty first-class carriage. She liked his face and thought he must have a wife and gave him two shillings instead of one. She wondered what he would get for his wife. . . . She hoped he'd buy her something.

She sat back in her corner. Six o'clock. It was a relief that Theresa had consented to her coming for the last two days. Evelina thought she might help them to get away. She might protect Charles from his mother's histrionics. . . .

Curious, the persistence of this impulse to protect Charles. A dangerous impulse, since Charles would resent being protected. He had a nervous passion for freedom, the more intense, she thought, because he had never been free. She could never make out how far it was his nature and how far his circumstances which imprisoned him. He adored Theresa, and chafed at being with her too long; loved Melcombe, and wanted to be beyond its charm; had a dozen interests, hobbies, diversions, and grudged the time he spent on them. But you couldn't tell, she reflected, whether he actually indulged himself in Theresa, Melcombe, in politics, books, hunting, philosophy, tennis,—bartering his integrity as a painter for these various pleasures,—or whether their hold over him was real, and his work secondary. Did he know himself? Did he ever question himself, she wondered.

He came into the carriage. He was with her so suddenly, bending over her, kissing her forehead, standing upright again.

Her heartbeats slowed again.

He smiled, glancing at the lilies of the valley. "I see the 'railway smell' still offends you, darling."

She held them out to him, watching his face under the light.

"Lovely," he sniffed. He put his hat on the rack and sat down opposite her. He observed her.

"Evelina, are you ill? You look so white."

She shook her head. (She was trying to know what it was that had happened to him. . . . Something had happened.)

He leaned over. "Are you *sure*, Evelina?"

"No, my dear—I've been shopping. . . ."

He was reassured. His glance paid a tribute to her clothes.

"You look very—elegant," he said. "Much, much more than any other young woman I ever see. . . ." His expression changed at the end of his sentence, and she knew that the "thing" that had happened was that he was in love.

The girl must be Jasmin Lengel. Theresa's letter had mentioned that she had been to Melcombe twice.

This knowledge was like someone jamming a weight on to her heart. She had always expected to mind. But she had hoped for a sentimental sadness. She found her ticket and gave it to a collector who asked for it. He pushed the sliding door. She saw a train move out from another platform. Several people scrambled exclaiming into the next carriage. Doors slammed. . . .

"What have you been doing in London?" she asked. The train jolted and began to move out. "Are you in the Lowndes Street house yet?"

"I am. I was there last night. Starbright's there, flowing with crocodile tears, but really very pleased to be in London. . . . And it's all ready and fairly tidy now. Mother wouldn't come up, as she means to rearrange things (can't you imagine?) when she arrives. She and Vicky have determined to do a formal renunciation of Melcombe and a retirement into exile."

He spoke lightly, tapping the arm of his seat with his fingers.

"And when do the Whichfords go to Melcombe?"

"Not for some time. They're going to 'decorate' for three months. Not until May, anyway."

"Do you like them?"

"I don't like the parents. The girl's rather nice."

"I thought so when I met her once."

"They—she—asked me to lunch next week."

He brought out this fact as if it relieved him to get it said. He added, "Of course Theresa wouldn't go, anyway."

Evelina peered out at the network of sad lamplit streets.

“That’s no reason for your not going. Theresa’s likings are arbitrary enough, goodness knows!”

“She’s really charming, you know,” he said, with just that tautening of his underlip that showed her how conscious he was of his thoughts.

“Who is?” She couldn’t resist mocking in a small, painful tone. “Theresa?”

“No . . .” (Again the too clear gaze, the contraction of the mouth.) “No; Jasmin Lengel.”

Evelina checked her dreadful mood. She thought: “I mustn’t be mean, vulgar, unkind—I mustn’t hurt him; now, when he’s most vulnerable.”

“Yes. I know she is. I’d like to meet her again.”

“You must.” He became preoccupied.

Evelina took up *Le Lys Rouge*. She opened it and didn’t read. Charles was staring out of the window now: his profile like a cameo against the dark blue of the upholstery—hard, sensitive, delicate. Her body ached as if a nervous alchemy were changing her emotion to physical pain. She shut her eyes. The scent of lilies of the valley circled like a heavy mist in her brain. . . . She had known this would happen. She wondered when she had begun to fear it. (Perhaps since she was six years old, when Charles had told her he was going to marry a Princess with a motor boat.)

“How many of the servants is Theresa taking to Lowndes Street?” she asked.

Charles answered after a pause; his thoughts had come back a long way. A smile streaked like a light across the back of his eyes.

“More than necessary. They couldn’t bear to leave, and she couldn’t bear to abandon them. I think she’s forced herself to part with the scullery maid and the boot boy and the third housemaid—and inevitably the garden staff. But she’s almost breaking her heart over old Renfrew. She can’t bear leaving him to delve for the Whichfords. She had a most astounding plan of getting Strang at the Office of Works to give Renfrew a gardening job in Hyde Park. He was to live in our basement in Lowndes Street,—*where*, I don’t see, as the kitchens are there!—and proceed to the geranium beds in the Park every morning carrying a spade.”

“And the cockers?”

“*All* coming. Nine in all now, and three not housebroken. One of the points about the house is that the former owner built a big conservatory out at the back, which has been furnished for the dogs. Nine baskets in a mystic circle on the mosaic floor, and a canary in a cage because Pocohontas is supposed to be going to miss the bird song at Melcombe.” He said, mildly annoyed by Evelina’s inattention, “I’m glad you spared the time to come down.”

She closed *Le Lys Rouge*.

“I’ve got a big balance of time—I always have plenty of it.”

He said without interest, “You’re very calm.” A cool enclosed life in her, he thought.

She understood his thought. She saw that warm alien sweetness steal his mind again.

Theresa paced her bedroom. Charles and Evelina couldn’t arrive until eight o’clock. She was alone with her room.

She looked at the big Hepplewhite bedstead with its carved medallions, which was to come with her to London to-morrow (what were the Dinosauriac furniture vans called?—“Pantechnicons”) because she would sleep in no other bed. She had meant to die in that bed—and in this room. The curtains had gone to London, and the windows were dark, trellised by the white window frames, making the room look mournful and hard.

She kept on thinking about death. Vicky came in every now and then bearing shoe-trees or roller towels, or forgotten knickknacks, and asking questions in a constrained voice, her protuberant eyes showing a watery glare. Theresa answered, and kept thinking about death, and finality, and change. . . . Sometimes she stopped her pacing and stood by one of the uncurtained windows rigid with a long pain of remembrance. Sometimes she sank down for a moment on the Récamier sofa, or the stool by the dressing table, and could smile, or draw in a quick breath of pleasure at a slight absurd recollection, a trivial happiness—and be stabbed to an awareness of how trivial, how far past. . . . (“When life ran gayly as the rippling Thames. . . .”)

“. . . When life ran gayly—” The words came to her, dancing across a vision of Merrick and—who else? Straw boaters, sunshine, frilled parasols on the lawn, tea set out; Leroy too, in a light suit, with a fly whisk. . . . Had

they indeed all laughed so much, been so gay? So light-hearted? So energetic?

A succession of Melcombe parties crowded in her memory: Paula Brendon, John, Harold, Fanny, Amy Randle, Rupert, the absurd George. . . . Had they all been, as she saw them now, so care-free beneath their conventionalities, so impulsive in their formality, so eager and frivolous, so violent and so sophisticated, so warmed, so exquisitely intoxicated by the rich, smooth, delicate security of their civilization? The theatricals, the boating parties, the Christmas hockey, the cricket weeks (the wooden heat in the Pavilion, the chairs in the longer grass; *chaud-froid* of chicken and hock cup in the tent; that *click*—and the white figures running, and the spasmodic drowsy talk, and the shadows of the chestnut trees moving on to the pitch with the slow passing of the afternoon). . . . Merrick, in that shrunken Ramblers cap. . . . A Meet, with Charles clamoring for cherry brandy (and Rupert drawing her aside for a moment, handing her a glass. . . . “Would she come—a day—two days?”).

Rupert. . . . Two days in that Inn at Savernake.

She paced again; saw his face. . . . Tawny eyes, a brute’s nose and chin, a brain like a steel spring . . . an angel’s sense of humor. . . . Then he’d gone. Thank God the Colonies needed governing! They’d hated each other too —“how sad and mad and bad. . . .” And she’d walked out of Victoria Station blinded by her tears and the east wind. . . . A letter two years after:—

*Nous n’irons plus aux bois,
Les lauriers sont coupés—*

His writing. Nothing else.

Now he was dead.

She stopped; went close to the window, pressed her forehead against the dark pane. *Tout lasse, tout casse, tout passe*. . . . That wasn’t true—for her. That renewing of interest, that perfect mending of the heart was more terrible, more terrifying.

But Rupert had left just that crack—hurting in bitter times like a scar in cold weather. . . . His snatches of poetry, brute sentimentalist that he was, haunted her now:—

“Your ghost will walk, you lover of trees,
If our loves remain, in an English lane—”

If our loves remain. . . . His young widow was bringing out his daughter this year.

She came to a standstill at the foot of the bed. Vicky's prim, kindly tones were speaking.

"I've told Alice that Charles and Evelina won't be changing for dinner. Is that right, 'm?"

"Quite right, Vicky."

Vicky was gone.

Theresa was thinking of Merrick now. If Rupert could twist her still—that was a pain that came, and was gone. But Merrick whom she adored, Merrick who was enchanting, handsome, adoring, whose spirits matched her own, whose brain outweighed hers, whose heart was kind and steady, whose spirit had so great an integrity—Merrick who had been her lover and her dearest friend. (For hadn't they been young together, foolish, quarrelsome, passionate, bitterly at odds and helplessly at one again?) Merrick's death had been like all the light in the world going out. Lying in this bed—that night—his moustaches the color of teakwood against his livid skin.

Vicky's skirts whispered in the doorway. "You won't be leaving the spare-room bed table for the Sale, will you, 'm?" She said "the Sale" with a quiet inflection of horror. Theresa stared. "What?—Oh yes. No. Not if you think we can use it. . . . It can go in the—pantechnicon."

"And Mr. Starbright telephoned this afternoon, 'm, to say Charles's trouser press was not to be forgotten. Not that it would've been forgotten, nevertheless."

"What's the time, Vicky?"

"Five and twenty minutes past seven, I believe."

"Send Storr to me, then."

When Evelina and Charles arrived she met them in the hall, dressed in her black velvet, her diamond *rivière*, Merrick's wedding present, glittering on the ivory texture of her skin.

At dinner, Evelina perceived that the diamonds were to be the keynote of Theresa's evening. As if her niece and Charles had been two strangers, she laid herself out to charm them, giving out that mixture of brilliant formality and irresistible ease which was her manner for the world. Her dark eyes, the

carved pallor of her features, the glistening waves of her thickly piled hair, were ochred by the light of the candles, so that she looked, with her fierce tragical brows and laughing mouth, like a soul seized and painted by Rembrandt within the vivid pitiful grandeur of its flesh. . . .

Evelina watched her from the height of her own shivering composure, as if she were a great city spread out to her view,—the metaphor satisfied her fancy,—a city crowded with incessant life, glinting and throbbing with traffic, exotic with half-a-dozen architectures, achieving here grandeur, there vulgarity, by turn exquisitely elegant and astoundingly pretentious. She saw Charles gradually drawn out of his preoccupation by his mother’s talk; she saw him observant but fascinated by her mood, amused by her extravagances, diverted by her wit. . . . Evelina wondered whether Theresa had used any conscious effort to rouse Charles out of his thoughts. Did she know?—guess?—suspect? Probably she didn’t, for her egoism limited her powers of observation. But Evelina wondered what her reaction would be. She was so used to her unconscious and effortless hold over her son.

But Theresa was incalculable. Who could have imagined—as Charles had remarked before dinner as they came downstairs—that Theresa would want “to dress up and act” on this last night? And yet Vicky had said, bustling into Evelina’s room, “Be good to your aunt to-night, Evelina, she’s breaking her heart over this.” (As if Vicky’s own heart weren’t cracking quietly under the neat high ridge of her bosom!)

At the end of dinner Theresa lifted her glass of port.

“What’s the toast?” she said to Charles.

He looked up at the carving on the panels, then at Evelina without seeing her, then at his mother; then said, in a gust of anger, “*The Old Home*, I suppose.”

Theresa gazed intently, taking in his words. Then the façade of her spirits shattered. She sat still for a minute. Then she got up and went out of the dining room holding her hand to her forehead, with a gesture that left her audience feeling mean and afraid.

VIII

At eleven o'clock the next morning Theresa's 1911 Fiat (an elderly limousine), the Ford, the luggage cart (drawn by the lawn-mower pony), and a furniture van hugely inscribed "Wetherall Removals" were drawn up in a team in the drive. Already at eight o'clock Wetherall's two men and the boot boy and two gardeners had begun to load the van with all the things that Theresa and Vicky could not leave behind and had refused to send in advance. The Récamier sofa, two Persian rugs, a child's high chair, a wicker worktable, Theresa's bed (this appeared at 8.15); two pairs of silver candlesticks swathed in a Cashmere shawl and standing in Vicky's *papier-mâché* basin; the cuckoo clock, the rocking-horse, the Sargent drawing of Merrick Bitterne, four stone hot-water bottles, a bust of King Edward in bronze, the Helleu etching of Theresa, Vicky's mahogany cupboard, a bed table, a big square basket with a lid and several small baskets and boxes with pink labels tied on. . . .

Charles and Evelina came out once or twice after breakfast and stood in the damp raw air and watched the loading going on. Charles saw his trouser press borne out on the boot boy's shoulder. Behind came two of the men carrying a wardrobe trunk.

Evelina, shivering, standing with her arms crossed, said:—

"It reminds me of the things stolen by the Two Bad Mice—'a bookcase and a bird-cage and several pots and pans.'"

Charles shivered too.

"It's more as if a tribe of fantastic settlers were setting out for the lone prairies of Hyde Park. What's going in the Ford?" he asked Wrench, the second gardener, who seemed to be in command.

"Mrs. Bitterne's orders was that the dogs was to go in the Ford. Four on the seat, and four on the floor."

Evelina asked, "And which of them driving, Wrench?"

The man scratched his head and then smiled, nodded his recognition of the joke, and went off to help with Theresa's chest of drawers.

"Pocohontas would drive well," Evelina remarked, and went indoors again and crouched down by the blazing, crackling log fire in the hall. . . . To-morrow morning this fire wouldn't be lit.

Charles stayed out of doors for some time. He dreaded seeing Theresa. She looked so old this morning that the night might have lasted twenty years. (How old was Theresa, he wondered vaguely. Thirty-five when he was born, and now he was twenty-four—fifty-nine. And she'd been at Melcombe longer—thirty-two years, she'd said last night.) The man hoisted Vicky's bedstead now, a chipped white enamel frame which Vicky believed had some special power to make her sleep; now old Bruin—his fur worn as smooth as his old saddle and one of his wheels gone.

The mist that hid the river at the foot of the hill and lay over the lower slopes of the park lifted gradually, revealing the occasional silhouettes of oak trees and horse-chestnuts and the wooded mound below the ha-ha where he and Evelina used to have a robbers' camp. Gradually the mist changed to a fine rain; Wetherall's men put on black rubber capes, the trees set in their bare dark outlines, and the boot boy (who had also done the station work since Theresa's economies set in) led the docile pony under the nearest beech trees where the luggage cart soon received a steady dripping from the branches high above.

Charles asked Wrench what the luggage cart was for and was told that Mrs. Bitterne had ordered it to be filled with some boxes of her special carnations from the houses.

"But not driven to London?" Charles asked.

"Them was Mrs. Bitterne's orders—"

"I see."

When the stable clock chimed three-quarters Charles turned and went indoors. Evelina got up from the stone space in front of the fire where the rug had been. She gazed at Charles, her eyes like chips of blurred azure light. She said, "We'd better get ready."

They walked across the inner hall, and as they went up the staircase (still carpeted—for the Sale) they looked at each other. Then he put his arm on her shoulders and she slipped her arm about his waist; and they walked upstairs like lovers, or like children in great trouble. When they reached the landing she turned and held him very close in her arms, laying her cheek against his (they were the same height). He thought, "How cold she is," and suddenly bent his head, pressing his forehead on to her shoulder. Then they let each other go and went to their rooms for the last time, each locked in his or her own unhappiness.

At eleven o'clock they were in the hall, and with them, waiting like guests for a bride, the staff whom Theresa had been forced to leave behind. They waited in a line; Renfrew, the head gardener, and Mrs. Renfrew and their little boy standing by the open front door; Ruth the scullery maid, beetroot-colored with crying, the two young housemaids, both sniffing, the boot boy; Radnor the groom, and his fat daughter Marjorie; "The Boy," in his unchangeable smock and straw boater, a septuagenarian (who had begun as a beater in Merrick's father's time, and for the last twenty years had been supposed to be odd man, though Theresa knew well enough that he did nothing but fish for carp down in the river or hobble off to any neighboring Meet in the winter time.)

Just after eleven Vicky came down, dressed for travel in her black silk dress, her black dolman embroidered with beads, her black straw and velvet bonnet securely fastened by ribands under her chin. She wore her best button boots, and round her neck, over her dolman, a little brown mink fur collar given her for her sixtieth birthday by Charles. Her hands were covered by a new pair of gray woolen gloves. She carried her umbrella in one hand, and her traveling basket, strapped by a double strap, in the other. She came and stood by Charles and Evelina, her mouth very stubborn and her eyelids blinking as if she were in church; Storr, Theresa's maid, joined them, looking discreet and serene. (She had disliked the country for the last twelve years.)

The snuffling and uncomfortable breathing ceased when Theresa stopped for a moment in the inner doorway of the hall, her sealskin coat still unfastened, her black *tricorne* set forward oddly, like a highwayman's, on her head, the tears pouring down her cheeks. Then she came forward and with a strange, guttering little smile began her good-byes to everyone in the hall, going from one to the other, speaking huskily, emphasizing her words to each with the grasp of her hand, and making no effort to stem her tears.

Charles and Theresa followed, with their good-byes, in her wake.

When she got to Renfrew by the door, she lingered.

". . . You'll look after my flowers, Renfrew. . . . Perhaps it's a blessing you're staying here with them—they'd miss both of us after so many years. . . ."

Renfrew had his poetic impulses. "It seems as if they moight sicken and die without you, 'm." He turned his bowler hat in his hand. "The garden won't be the same, 'm, though I'm sure I shall always think of it as yours. . . ." He couldn't say any more. Theresa put her hands on his bent

thick shoulders. Behind her the scullery maid broke into a fit of sobbing—Theresa gave Renfrew's hand a last grip.

They followed her out into the drive, crowded up to the car. She made Vicky and Charles and Evelina get in. Storr climbed beside the new chauffeur, who looked grim and bewildered. . . . The boot boy ran across the drive and got into the luggage cart, now full of flat boxes, and drove it solemnly round behind the van. The black bobbing heads of spaniels rioted in the village Ford. . . .

Theresa stood outside in the rain; her face looked yellow in the damp lead-blue air.

"What is it, Vicky?" she asked, straining to catch the nurse's words through the orchestration of three different engines started together.

". . . them four hot-water bottles," Vicky repeated. "Where are they?"

But Evelina reassured her. She had seen them put in the van.

"But supposin' that great ungodly thing don't get there? . . . Beds'll be damp, sure as sure. . . ."

Theresa had one foot on the step. She lifted her hand; her tones hammered huskily, "Good-bye. . . . Don't forget us. . . ."

She got in and sank down beside Evelina. She nodded to the chauffeur. . . . The car moved off, the Ford followed, the furniture van, the lawn-mower pony with his romantic load. . . .

They passed down the avenue of beeches, then out on to the open grass-flanked drive.

Down by the bridge the four occupants of the car turned and looked back up the green rise of the park, and saw Melcombe looking like a house in a faded print, its outline minute and clear, its tanned-rose color dimmed by the rain.

PART TWO

I

The Whichfords lunched at half-past one.

Before one o'clock Jasmin came downstairs from her sitting room in case Charles Bitterne should arrive early.

She met Miss Courage, her mother's secretary, on the landing outside the drawing-room, and asked if her mother would be in for luncheon. Miss Courage was a mild energetic girl in pince-nez with stiffly waved hair who always wore yellow and practised Christian Science. She replied that Lady Whichford would be in, but Lord Whichford wouldn't, and that "Mrs. Rex" had just rung up to announce herself.

Jasmin bent her smile absently on Miss Courage, who felt its shimmering charm and went on her way up to Lady Whichford's boudoir thinking, as did almost any creature who crossed Jasmin's path, that she was "a darling."

Jasmin went on downstairs. She was relieved that Peter was coming. A luncheon alone with her mother and Charles would be fidgety. Mother had already asked her if Charles Bitterne had become one of her "young men," though she had only met him at Melcombe twice, and asked him to luncheon here because she had been unable to go to the theatre with him when he asked her for last night.

She went into the morning room, stood about by the window. The Square looked bleak, and the people who passed had reddened noses and bent their heads against the wind.

She wondered if he would walk or come in a taxi. He'd said he would come straight from his studio. She wondered what his studio was like. He had promised to take her there and show her his pictures. She tried to remember his face. But she could only see his eyes, wide apart and set in under the long eyelids and brushy eyelashes so that they looked longer and narrower than they were. . . . And the funny way his smile began, rising reluctantly from his lips to his brow, and then bursting into merriment, like colored stars from a Chinese cracker. . . . On the other hand,—perhaps it was staring at the pavement in front of the steps that suggested it,—Evan Campbell's face was distinct. She saw it whole, the kindly, stupid blue eyes, the guardsmanly "looks," square forehead, square chin, blunt nose, small close-set ears. . . . That first day at Melcombe had happened like a nod of Fate, she thought. It had made her ultimate refusal of Evan, on the next

evening, absolutely sure and simple. Sitting beside Evan at the Embassy, watching the bright, changing pattern of the dancers, noting that the magnolias he brought were already tainted brown, she had been able to say that she thought she was falling in love with someone else.

That had made an end of Evan. . . . Though he'd danced with her until two o'clock and talked on in his glib boring way. . . . He'd taken it well, of course. He was very decent and courageous—and considerate. He'd said that he hoped she would always look upon him as a friend.

. . . In love with someone else?

Peter's pale green Rolls drew up. Jasmin watched her get out. She was bareheaded, and the wind whipped the straight brown ends of her bobbed hair across her face. She pushed them back with a scarlet-gloved hand, and jumped up the steps, hugging her coat round her slight body. Jasmin heard her speaking to Miss Courage out in the hall. Her words were little streaks of sound, like silver arrows falling about the hall. She came into the morning room, pulling a comb through her hair and reeking of scent.

"Well, Jazz?"

"Well, Peter?"

Peter's smart queer dress had a stiff frill round the neck, so that her face looked like the centre of a flower. This flower-like emphasis and the childish cut of her hair, her low-heeled scarlet slippers, lent an innocence to her sensual little features, and to the expression of her eyes.

"How d'you feel after last night?"

Jasmin shrugged her shoulders. "All right. I went home early with Mummie and Daddy."

"Pity: The party got going after that. It didn't end until nearly four. By that time Miles Storrington had both the Honey Sisters on his knee and thought he'd only got one of 'em. Rex and I went back for a last drink with Jim Ray and some people. . . . A slick party, I can tell you. . . ." Peter yawned. "Who's coming to lunch?"

"Charles Bitterne. No one else."

Peter sat on the writing table and stared up at the ceiling. After a pause she asked:—

"Is he the son of the people who had Melcombe?"

"Yes."

“Nice?”

“Yes.”

Peter lit a cigarette. “You’d better marry him, my dear. Rose’ll never let you alone till she’s got you into St. George’s and well and truly in the bridal bed.”

Jasmin laughed. “I like the idea of *you* as a matchmaker, Peter.”

“Well, in your walk of life, my dear, it’s better to *start* by marrying. . . . And if he’s nice and attractive . . . Most men are such . . .” said Peter.

Jasmin remarked, going to the window once more, “You might consider the young man.”

“No difficulty there. You’re simply boiling with sex appeal and so forth.”

Jasmin flushed. “I think you’re absolutely nauseating, Peter. You’re horrible when you talk like that. I wouldn’t set out to ‘catch’ men.” She added with a spite that surprised herself, “After all, I’m not . . . semi-professional.”

Peter turned her head, stared cloudily at her sister-in-law for a second, and then said with her light jangling laugh:—

“This is rather new. You’re not usually so—prim. What about David—and Evan—and that Lanyon boy—and Cecil—and that man who sings and sends you flowers?”

“You think because I have mild flirtations that it’s all terribly important to me. . . .”

Peter said good-naturedly, “My dear, what’s the matter? It’s as natural to you to want men hanging round you as it is to me—anyone. . . . Why you should get so wrought up . . .”

Jasmin broke in, “There he is!”

Peter looked at her eager profile.

“Queer little bitch you are!” she remarked affectionately.

But Jasmin was aware that Charles Bitterne was in the hall, was being shown in. . . . She went forward, stopped within two yards of him, unable to speak. He stopped too. For a second life missed a beat.

His world came unsteadily back into focus as he held out his hand. He said that he hoped he wasn’t late. Jasmin found herself making some apt answer. Then she introduced him to Peter. Peter began talking. Then Lady

Whichford came in. Jasmin was steadier now, but glad to stand back and let her mother talk.

They went in to luncheon. Charles sat between his hostess and Jasmin, with Peter opposite. Miss Courage joined them, and a man with sticking-out ears called Nigel Skepwith, whom Charles discovered to be Lord Whichford's private secretary.

Lady Whichford described to Charles the latest improvements that Roger Mandeville had planned for Melcombe. He observed in a pause that the house would certainly be more comfortable. He had a general sense that Lady Whichford was being tactless and dull, but he had already come to accept her without active rage. He could think only of Jasmin sitting beside him. He ate perfunctorily, and noticed after a time that she was hardly eating at all. He had occasional impressions of young Mrs. Lengel sitting opposite, chiefly that she had a coarse little face, and that her nails were lacquered too red. He remembered hearing that she had been on the stage in New York. Every now and then she made a remark, and sometimes Skepwith talked with nervous arrogance. Charles couldn't speak to Jasmin at all; nor she to him. Once or twice she carried on a subdued conversation with Miss Courage, who was on her other side.

The whole luncheon seemed lengthy and oppressive and unreal. He realized towards the end that he must have been boring Lady Whichford, for she ceased to talk to him and entered into an argument with her daughter-in-law about the price of a picture that had been sold at Christie's the week before.

They adjourned for coffee to Lady Whichford's boudoir. She explained that Roger had done it up for her last year. Charles wondered if the rooms at Melcombe would be populated with steel furniture, and fish in tanks, and upholstery embroidered with dismembered pink women. . . . Jasmin spoke to him as if she had read his doubts.

"Of course he won't do Melcombe like this—Mother wanted a freak room."

"I think it's too seducing," said Peter, perching on the back of a sofa.

"You should see Peter's house," said Jasmin, feeling less strained now that she could walk about and join with Charles in a general conversation.

"Roger described it as a sort of lying-in ward for Decorative Art," said Peter complacently. "Everything that's just born."

“You should see her bath. Ten feet square, and made of lots of small diamond-shaped mirrors.”

Jasmin smiled, less at Charles’s grave “Very seducing” than at a sudden rippling of happiness in her blood. Charles saw the smile. Its remoteness hurt him, its beauty caught at his heart. What were the hidden movements of her thought?

Lady Whichford departed for a committee meeting, hoping, perfunctorily, that Charles would come again. Peter rose to her feet. Her face looked crumpled and sleepy. She said, “I must go. I’ve got a dozen appointments and we’ve got a party to-night at home. You coming, Jasmin?”

“Perhaps. I don’t know. I rather want to work.”

“Greek?” asked Peter, and shook hands with Charles.

“Yes. I’ve got a class to-morrow.”

When Peter had gone Charles said, “Well, I must go, too.”

Jasmin felt choked with shyness. He looked so composed, and was probably bored at being left. She said, “Oh, don’t go yet.”

Charles stood with his hand on one of the aquariums, as if it were a rock in the tide of his embarrassment. He said:—

“Well, I think I ought to. . . . What *is* the time, I wonder?”

“I think it’s only about quarter to three.”

“Oh, well—I must go in a minute or two.”

“Won’t you have a cigarette?” She seized the box from a table and held it out to him. He abandoned the aquarium and came and took one out. “Thank you.”

He lit it after striking three matches. There was a pause. A taxi hooted down in the square.

“I don’t feel a bit like painting,” he said.

She colored.

“Don’t then. For to-day . . .”

“If I slack I shall only be angry with myself to-morrow.”

She asked, more easily, “Are you so—so regular and hard-working?”

“I want to be. In fact, I’m not.”

"I always imagined artists worked in fits."

"I believe that's mostly a popular idea; or it ought to be. One ought to have long regular hours. . . ." He paused; reflected on a notion that had come to him. "I say—I suppose you wouldn't care to come back with me to Lowndes Street, and have tea with my mother. We could go for a walk in the Park first."

"I'd *adore* to. I'll get my things on at once."

He was puzzled, but enchanted, by the eagerness of her reply.

"This is the house."

"What a lovely door knocker!"

He smiled. "That's Mother's squirrel. She has it on everything as a crest."

They stood on the doorstep.

"Your mother fascinated me when I saw her—that second time at Melcombe."

"That's her long suit—fascinating people."

She noticed his tone, half-indulgent, half-bitter, but redeemed by a kind of awe, as if his mother were, after all, above ordinary reproach.

Starbright opened the door.

"Mrs. Bitterne has just come in from a drive with Lady Brendon," he informed Charles.

Charles took Jasmin up to the drawing-room, where they found Theresa taking off her hat in front of the glass over the mantelpiece. Jasmin met her gaze in the mirror: saw surprise, annoyance, amiability, flash across her features.

"My dear Miss Lengel." Theresa accepted Charles's explanation that he had brought Miss Lengel for tea after their walk. She glanced from one to the other, and then put on her air of reserve. Charles knew that she was withholding her judgment. He detected adverse prejudice modified by interest. As she made the girl sit down beside her on the sofa and began to talk, he saw that his mother was affected by the girl's visible admiration for herself. As she talked he saw her disarmed by Jasmin's attention, by her quick appreciations, her gay delighted smile, her easy sympathy.

By the time tea was brought in Theresa was in high spirits, telling some tale of her encounter with a shop-walker during the afternoon. “*Not* ‘Modom,’ I said, rhyming with ‘Sodom,’ but ‘Madam,’ to rhyme with ‘Adam.’ Every *time* I go there his diction annoys me. But I suppose he means well, poor fish, and one must be charitable to those who go to and fro in such very dry places of the earth. . . .”

The cocker spaniels came in and Theresa poured their tea into the nine little basins which Jasmin had noticed on an extra table. As Theresa poured out the last she remarked with a quizzical flash:—

“They mind the renunciation of Melcombe more than any of us. It hurts their Spanish pride, and I try to palliate things by having them to tea in the drawing-room every day. At Melcombe ‘The Boy’ used to give them their tea.”

Charles explained The Boy. He said, “I believe he hopes to stay on with your family.” But he saw that the question of Melcombe still made Jasmin feel guilty, and felt annoyed with Theresa for the perverse way in which she’d referred to the matter. He wondered if she’d done it deliberately. You could never tell when her remarks had a special intention.

Jasmin talked to the spaniels. Mrs. Bitterne seemed to have become abstracted. Charles got up and gave her and Jasmin some more tea. Jasmin watched him. His light movements, his concentration as he poured out the milk and put in the sugar, filled her spirit with a sharp sad longing. Her mind caught a picture of him, distinct and slender against her hazier view of the room with its creamy walls, its old linens and walnut furniture, its elegant disorder of books and flowers. As he handed her her tea, she realized that Theresa had sat upright and was speaking at her—saying something odd.

“. . . I like you, my dear. You’ve got character. You work—you seem to enjoy life—you have interests. I was like that myself as a girl.”

Jasmin’s surprise gave way to a feeling of excitement which she couldn’t understand, but which promoted the swift pleasure of her “*Do you? Do you really?*—That is lovely of you. . . .”

Charles looked from one to the other, trying to make out the quality of the relationship that had flashed into being. . . . Clearly Jasmin was charmed; clearly his mother had been attracted. But, from Theresa’s point of view, exactly why? Simply because she fancied that Jasmin had the qualities of her own girlhood? Or because some impulse of generosity, or a gust of well-being, had synchronized with Jasmin’s arrival? . . . Or was this simply another case of testing her power and being ready to cherish its victim? . . .

He walked away to the window. Their impulsive talk went on now behind his back—Jasmin’s words falling among his mother’s sentences, each cadence of her speech waking an echo in his nerves.

The window by which he stood chattered faintly against the wind outside. Theresa was quoting something or other. . . . “You should read that,” she said. Starbright came in and drew the curtains, and switched on two more lights, and cleared away the tea. “. . . he and I were great friends years ago,” Theresa said. . . . Charles walked to the fire now. Seeing them again, he had a feeling that they were the other side of a glass wall—significant but not real. The centre of reality had shifted to his inner mood. His thoughts and sensations revolved round a problem which was no longer the relation of the two women, although it derived from them in a way he couldn’t elucidate.

The problem concerned himself. He kept trying to focus it, as if his reason were a telescope searching for a ship far out to sea: whenever he got it, it moved away again.

What he made out clearly, at last, was that some real hazard prompted his impulse of self-defense. His interest in this girl threatened the integrity of his existence. (For instance, he’d missed a whole afternoon at the studio.) He perceived that she might unconsciously, as Theresa did deliberately, make demands on his time, his thoughts, his feelings.

He wouldn’t see her any more.

She was going now—saying good-bye. Theresa was asking her to come again soon. He escorted her down to the hall, shook hands. The beauty of her face under the light made him feel bitter and nervous. He left her abruptly and went upstairs, leaving Starbright to see her into a taxi.

In the taxi she burst into tears.

For what nightmare reason, from what impulse, should he have looked at her as if he hated her?

II

Charles worked steadily through March and April. He went to his studio every day,—through Pont Street, down Sloane Street, across Sloane Square, —got to his studio at half-past nine, and came back to Lowndes Street when the light had gone. He avoided seeing his friends. Sometimes he took a week-end off and went down to Northamptonshire to stay with Evelina and hunt.

Occasionally Theresa gave dinner parties which he attended. She had become social and sociable since they came to London. People came continually to the house: all the old guard,—Leroy, the Brendons, the Chelseys, George Freyne, the Delancies, and an increasing number of younger people,—artists, writers, musicians mingled with young couples whose babies she “godmothered”—girls whom she had been “nice to” at some party, young men who sat each other out in the hope of a *tête-à-tête* when they could tell her about their ambitions and interests. Often when Charles got in about six o’clock he found some such youthful worshiper seated beside Theresa on the Charles II sofa which served as her confessional—enthralled by her deep attention, or drinking in her trenchant, or irresponsible, advice.

On one occasion Theresa mentioned that Jasmin Lengel had been to luncheon. She said that the girl had had flu and looked pulled down, and that she heard that the decorations of Melcombe were getting on . . . This in an acrid tone, followed by a brooding silence.

Vicky said that she was “doing so much entertaining to keep her mind off.” But there were indications, in Theresa’s talk, that already her gusto for life was reasserting itself, and that the friendships and activities that she had sought to fill her days were now fulfilling her life. Often in the evenings, when Charles was settling down to read, Theresa would sweep off in the red velvet cloak with the yellowed ermine collar, which she had resuscitated from the “acting box,” a lace scarf shrouding her head, a pair of long kid gloves in her hand. Often she came in long after he had gone to bed, and he woke from his first uneasy dreams—to wonder if she had seen Jasmin, perhaps, at the theatre.

Charles conformed stubbornly to the unchanging rhythm of work which he had planned. He ate his luncheon every day at the Eight Bells and then went back to his studio. He smoked too much, and the warmth of the studio made him tired and often gave him a headache by the end of the day. But he

ignored his phases of tiredness, just as he ignored the disquiet of his spirit. He had moments of elation when he believed that a picture he was doing might be good. But he was always dissatisfied in the end. After a time it seemed to him that he was spending himself on work, but would never achieve a picture worth looking at.

The irony of this conviction only made him work more stubbornly. His hours in the studio became a narcotic which he couldn't do without, and there were days when he was indifferent to results and hardly paused to consider the merits of his work at all. It was as if his fine judgment were becoming dulled,—with all the rest of his susceptibilities,—by the driving monotony of effort that his will imposed.

Evelina paused, on her way to see him, to buy flowers at the corner of Manor Street.

She arrived at the studio with her arms full of tulips and mimosa.

At the sight of her Charles put down his palette.

“Oh, my *dear*, how good to see you!”

He looked so strained and nervous that she made no comment on his appearance. She said: “I thought you'd like the flowers . . .” and laid them down on a table, and pulled off her gloves. She glanced towards the back of his canvas on the easel.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing in the world. Just fiddling about with a thing I painted weeks ago; making it worse than it was before.”

Evelina went and stood before the easel. She felt him waiting for her comment. She said, startled:—

“It's incredibly good.”

“*Good?*”

“Yes.”

He came and stood beside her and looked at the picture with his head on one side.

She said: “I'd like Brancker to see that . . . It hits one—I can't explain, so soon, exactly why—It's got much more restraint . . . the tones are lovely—And the way you've made it up, with the street running away and the

shadows all diagonal, and the shape of that tree where the other street makes a corner with the main one—” She paused and stepped back, still looking. She said at last, “it gives me a sort of delicious pain; to see what a lovely thing you’ve done, and to think you’ve done it—”

He said in a strange tone: “Do you really think it’s good?”

“Don’t you *know* it is?” She faced him and saw that he was excited. The muscles round his eyes and mouth moved as if his nerves weren’t quite under his control. “Can’t you *see* it is?” she repeated.

His excitement dimmed. “I don’t think I can see anything. I might as well be blind and paint with a clothes brush.”

She looked at him, conscious that she could scan his features for an hour without his being aware. Then she went back to the table.

“Are there any vases?”

“In the kitchenette.”

She fetched them while he lounged by his easel, smoking, and staring at his picture. When she had finished arranging the flowers she asked where he wanted them put. He turned.

“Wherever you think—they *are* lovely,” he said, and came and sniffed the mimosa. “That reminds me of Italy—” His thoughts drifted off again.

He came out suddenly with, “I wonder if I was a fool to start painting—It might have been better to stick to politics.”

“I don’t think so. Not for you.”

“Why?”

“Dozens of reasons. Chiefly because you’re an artist—and you’d have had painting plaguing you like a flea for the rest of your life.”

“Pretty simile.”

She smiled. “Apt, anyway.” She put one of the vases on an oak chest at the farther end of the studio.

He asked sardonically, “You think I’m born to be an artist, then?”

“I think you’re a painter before you’re anything else.”

“How jolly!” His tone was sulky. But she perceived that in a dim way he was relieved by her words.

After a minute he said: "It was sweet of you to bring me those. I can't think why you should be so tolerant with me, Evelina."

She didn't answer.

She put a vase of mauve tulips on the mantelpiece. She noticed an invitation card.

"Are you going?" she asked.

"What?—To what?—Oh, that! No, of course not."

Evelina put the card down.

"I can't think why Lady Whichford sent me one," she said.

"Did she?" Charles began to walk up and down.

"Yes . . ."

"Are you going?"

He didn't seem to notice her long hesitation before she said, "Yes, of course. Why don't you come—with me?" She added: "I'd enjoy it more, if you came."

"No—I don't think I will . . . I'm working and I'm cutting out all social business."

Evelina said in a tone of detached but absolute decision: "I want you to come. You can't work without any relaxation."

"Why not?"

"You must come," she repeated, cool and certain.

"When is it then?"

"A fortnight on Thursday."

"—Very well."

She sat still on the divan, cupping her chin in her hands. He kept on walking to and fro.

He asked her: "Why do you want me to go, Evelina?"

She answered without moving: "You can't cut out life."

"One must cut out one's weaknesses."

"Living on a Pillar like 'Paphnuce' won't make you a better artist."

His next comment was for himself.

“Thais led him on a wild-goose chase when he did get down.”

“That was his own fault—” She saw that he was working himself into one of his quiet rages, the nervous reason to some indecision in his mind. He broke out: “How can anyone see what’s right or wrong? Or sensible or stupid?—What does it matter if I work or not? If I spend an afternoon painting a picture or seducing the nearest female?—It doesn’t matter if I stick in this studio, working twenty hours a day for twenty years, or go tearing round London, having my eyebrows plucked and talking art to a lot of intellectualized trollops.”

She made no comment.

“Does anything matter?” he insisted.

“Yes.”

“What?” The stillness of her eyes and limbs calmed him.

She said: “I think we’re the keepers of our souls.”

“Very—old-world, darling.”

“Yes.” She added, “One must feel. People grow shells so that they shan’t feel, and so escape being hurt. But they’re punished, because they escape happiness too. They die inside themselves, and only their senses and their snobbery and their self-interest go on living.”

“That doesn’t cover much ground—as a practical philosophy. Work is the thing that matters to most of us. If feeling interferes it had better be cut out right away.”

“Interesting, Charles, to see you being the ruthless careerist.”

“It isn’t that. You know quite well.” He broke out, the phrase rocketing up from the depths of his resentments and reserves: “*I want to be left alone.*”

He flung himself down beside her.

She turned slowly to meet his gaze: “I know.” A smile, gentle, distant, faintly ironical, showed at the corners of his lips and eyes—and vanished. “You want what isn’t possible.”

She got up.

“You’ll come then—on the twenty-fifth? We might dine together first.”

“Very well.”

When she was in a bus going towards Victoria she wondered if her impulse had been wrong and she'd been through the last half hour for no good.

III

He saw Jasmin across the crowd of dancers as soon as he came into the ballroom. She was wearing a white dress. Her hair looked dark gold with a rusty sheen. She looked lovely, but somehow different.

While he was dancing with Evelina he wondered about the change in Jasmin. He remembered Theresa saying that she had flu. But that was many weeks ago.

She disappeared before the end of the dance. He wondered where she had gone, and who the young man was she was dancing with. He decided not to ask her for a dance at all, and realized that he would all the same. Passing out of the doorway to the stairs, he recognized several people he knew. Various men came up and asked Evelina for dances. While she was talking to them he waited. He noticed that Evelina looked graceful and distinguished. Her black dress fitted her close and showed how soft and silvery her skin was. He saw Peter Lengel. She came up and spoke to him and he asked her for a dance. She wore a dress of stiff gold frills. He told Evelina who Peter was, and Evelina's eyebrows expressed amusement modified by disdain. They went downstairs together and through the dining room into the garden, where the fairy lights and lanterns were dimmed by the rising moon. They sat down in two chairs on the grass. Everything seemed to be happening in a dream: the couples talking in the shadows, and the mutter and buzzing of talk coming but of the topaz-lit French windows; and the laughs and exclamations that flashed here and there in the night, or fell from the balconies outside the ballroom. Evelina lay back in her chair. Charles thought he saw Jasmin up on the balcony, leaning over, but when the figure moved against the light of one of the windows he saw that it was a smaller woman. The music of the next dance flowed and throbbed out into the night, and the couples in the garden began to go indoors. Charles and Evelina went with them.

As they passed through the supper room he saw Jasmin. Her back was turned to him and she was holding a glass and listening to an elderly man. Charles let Evelina go on and waited. When Jasmin turned round she saw him at once.

He went up to her and asked for a dance. She bent her head while her fingers fumbled for her programme in her bag. She said:—

“You can have eight.”

“I’ve booked eight.”

She stared at his card.

He asked composedly, “Can I have nine?”

She nodded, putting her card away. He bowed, “Thank you,” and she went upstairs with the elderly man. He watched her go. Then he went back into the garden and walked up and down the paths and round the fountain, smoking cigarettes. Several times he decided that he would go home, and write a note afterwards to say he’d felt ill. He told himself that he had nothing to say to her. He couldn’t imagine how he would get through his dance with her at all.

During the interval before number nine he stayed in the garden. But just before the dance began he went upstairs to the door of the ballroom. Peter Lengel was sitting on one of the stairs with his cousin, Evan Campbell. He stopped and talked to them both. Peter Lengel said, “Don’t forget fifteen,” and he nodded and took the hand she held out to him, and then went on upstairs.

The music began. The crowd drifted and pushed into the ballroom. He stood leaning against the banisters and saw Jasmin coming upstairs.

She came towards him and they went in and began to dance.

After the first encore, they stopped and went out of the ballroom. They paused on the landing. Evelina caught sight of them for a moment. They were staring at each other as if they had been lost and come face to face in a deserted wood.

He said, “Shall we go downstairs?”

“Yes.”

They went out into the garden. They walked towards the fountain. He remarked:—

“Romantic, isn’t it?”

She didn’t answer. He knew he’d hurt her. He added: “Moonlight. Music. Shall we sit down?”

She said huskily, “I’d rather walk, thank you.”

“As you like.”

They paced up and down an alley at the far end of the garden.

“How well you dance,” she said.

“Thank you.”

At the far end of the alley they turned. The moonlight fell on her face. He stopped. He said:—

“You’re looking very—lovely.”

He saw a pitiable smile die on her lips.

“Thank you.”

“Have all your partners told you that this evening?”

She whispered, “No.”

“Not all.”

“Only—you.”

He turned and paced away. Then he came back and took her in his arms.

Her eyes opened, dark in the nearness of her face.

“ . . . Jasmin . . . ?”

“ . . . Darling . . . ”

“Jasmin—I’m so in love with you.”

“And I am, with you.”

The branches of the trees swayed above them so that their locked bodies seemed to move with the moving pattern of the leaves.

There was lilac in the streets. Women selling lilac at the street corners. (Was there lilac yesterday?)

Charles stopped to buy some.

“How much, sir?”

“All of it—all you’ve got.” He gave her a note. “Keep the change.” Mauve and white—just opening.

Sunshine painted the streets, painted the fruit stalls, the pavements, the people, the blinking windows of the houses. (Was there sunshine yesterday?)

He passed people by, the lilac blossom quivering in his arms. He felt as if his heart were breaking with happiness.

Even the studio had come to life. The colors and shapes in it stood out with a sort of vitality of their own, as if they had gained a soul in the night.

He went and drew up the blind over the skylight, so that the sunshine streamed down into the room, splashing the crimson edge of the divan and falling in a square on the floor.

He threw out the faded flowers that Evelina had brought a fortnight before, and put clean water in and stuffed in the huge bunches of lilac.

Would she come now? (Had he ever been alive before?) “Gayly clad in lovely white”—where did that come from? She’d said “at ten”—last night. Last night . . . (And yesterday like a dead world) . . . She must come now, any minute. (“A great flood that sweeps me to the sea”—Where—where from?—So many fragments of poetry spinning in his heart.) Now. A step?

Then he thought, “This is enough. All I need—all I can bear.” An enchanted torment between her footstep and her touch on the door.

She came in . . .

She was so lovely, now, in the daylight, that she seemed more unreal than last night. He couldn’t speak. She came towards him, the summer morning dancing in her eyes, her lips and cheeks tinted by the magnificent dawn of her happiness. She whispered, as if she were afraid to break the enchantment in the room, “Darling—” She put her hand in his. He took hold of it very slowly, like a dreamer feeling at something real.

“My dear—” His voice was hushed, husky. They stood looking into each other’s faces, holding hands.

The minutes spun past. The fragrance of the lilac drifted round them.

“I let in the sun for you,” he said, hardly aware of his own words—since no words could say what he was feeling.

“For me?”

He held both her hands now. “My darling—”

She tossed her head and held more tightly on to his hands.

“I *must* cry,” she said. “But only a little.”

He put his arms round her and held her, leaning his cheek against her forehead.

“I wish I could cry,” he whispered.

“It’s over now.” She didn’t move. “How sweet you are,” she said.

He kissed her forehead. The moment printed itself on his heart. Everything had bright poignant edges. The silence; the scent of lilac, the crimson splash of light on the divan; the square of sunshine on the floor. . . .

She lifted her face and looked into his eyes.

“Kiss me.”

He shook his head. “Soon,” he said. He laid his hand on her hair. “I’m so unspeakably happy.”

After a long silence, she asked, “When did you know?”

(He saw the pool at Melcombe . . .) “I suppose from the first minute.”

She nodded, grave, intent.

“So did I—when you looked up.” She added: “You aren’t like anyone else in the world.”

“Oh, my dear—you’ll know—later. I’m selfish, ordinary, futile—” He bent suddenly and kissed her lips.

They drew apart at last, dazed and shivering.

She drew in a sharp breath. “I’m so terribly in love with you.”

He lifted her fingers and kissed them, slowly, awed by her words.

“Strange,” she said, “to think of us marrying each other.”

“—Darling.”

The sense of what she’d said reached him after a long minute. He said:

—
“When shall we marry?”

“Soon.”

“Yes.” He added: “All my life until now seems so utterly futile—like a series of wasted canvases.—Simply attempts at living.” He felt her head rest suddenly against his cheek. “Oh, my darling, it will be lovely!”

“Lovely,” she echoed. “Lovely.”

Looking down on her features, he saw her eyelids close in two wide crescents below the delicate black line of the eyebrows. Strange eyelids: strangely moving, he thought; pale bluish brown in color, fringed by the ink-dark fans of lashes; curiously in contrast with the warm ingenuous oval of her face, giving him a sense of a hidden voluptuousness, whose influence

enriched her gayety, gave an edge to her sweetness, deepened the shadows of her light impulses and words.

She said at last: "I wonder what our families'll say?"

"I suppose they'll accept what they have to. Your mother won't be pleased."

"Will yours?"

He answered, "She likes you, my dear." (But he couldn't guess, all the same, how she'd take it—) "Anyway, nothing can interfere with us." He demanded, with an abrupt sweet vehemence: "Look at me, my darling."

She looked up. Her eyebrows drew together; a vibration of feeling arched her nostrils, stirred her lips.

He said, "I shall love you all my life; more even than I do at this moment—This is only the beginning." The phrases spun off a certainty that blazed in his mind, flaring for strange seconds over the shapes of the future.

He was so white and intent that she held close to him, as if her physical grasp might get him back within the reach of her emotions.

"Shall you love me even when I'm old?"

"All my life. Whatever you do, whatever you become—"

"Even if I become ugly?"

He took in, and then dismissed her question, a part of his mind puzzled by its irrelevance. He shook his head. "I don't know how to make you understand . . . I don't myself. . . ."

He perceived, as thought shaped itself from feeling, that his sense of her lay far below the ripple and color of her beauty, like a light moving in deep water.

She smiled, the surprising secret smile of a child asleep.

"There isn't anything to understand—except that we care for each other so much."

The blaze in his mind died down. He felt her near him again, felt the moment seize him in its new enchantment, felt the aching serenity of the sunshine on the floor.

"I don't understand why you should love me," he said.

IV

When Charles returned to Lowndes Street that afternoon he found his mother in what she called her workroom at the top of the house. She had been having lessons in sculpture lately, and used half the room for this purpose, while her immense desk, littered with papers, nearly filled the other half.

This afternoon she had been writing. She accepted Charles's entrance absently, and continued to write. He sat down on the camp stool which was the only seat other than the William and Mary chair occupied by Theresa herself. He glanced at some shape of clay hidden in a wet towel; then at the sheets of foolscap on the desk covered by his mother's small, irregular handwriting. He wondered if he'd better speak to her now, or later. But he wanted to ring up Jasmin. He asked how her Memoirs were getting on. She replied without raising her head, "Magnificently—magnificently—" She paused. "I read all the second part to Paula and John yesterday afternoon: the years in Cairo and London with my father, before I married. They thought it excellent."

"Good."

She asked: "By the way, I didn't see you this morning. How did you enjoy the Whichfords' dance last night?"

"Very much."

"Very 'well done,' I suppose! The *Times* says that the decorations were orchids and roses. Very proper." Charles got up and folded the camp stool and stood it carefully against the wall. He said, "I want to speak to you, Mother. Have you got time?"

"Of course." She leaned back and studied his face as if she were interviewing him for the first time. He saw that she was preparing to take up whatever cue he might give her. He came over and perched himself on the corner of her desk. She said in her deep abrupt way:—

"I can see that something's happened to you. You look—" her hands moved apart in a widening gesture—"transfigured. I knew as soon as you came into the room."

He perceived the inaccuracy, and the essential truth, of her words. She had felt the vibration of his state as soon as she had become interested in his presence. He said, "I'm going to marry Jasmin Lengel."

Her hands dropped into her lap. Her gaze narrowed, deepened. After a minute her tones came out profound and shaken:—

“In God’s name—why?” He looked at her now with an expression so strange to the fine cool obstinate lines of his features that she could have believed that it was Merrick speaking to her again. She saw the same generosity of soul, the same perfect integrity of feeling, the same clear-burning passion. He said, “Why do you imagine?”

She nodded swiftly, as if in apology. At the end of some long thought she said:—

“I’m very glad—!” She added, “She’s lovely and intelligent.” She stared before her across the room, her fingers playing with a pencil. She asked without looking at him, “This was—last night?”

“Yes.”

She leaned towards him now across her desk, looking at him with a sort of vehement detachment. She murmured, sudden tears in her eyes, “When Earth breaks up and Heaven expands.” She said, “If you love each other—nothing else matters—”

(Jasmin had said that last night—nothing else mattered.) He brought out, “It’s terribly good of you—to take it like this.”

“How did you expect me to take it?”

He hesitated.

She asked, “Am I so—ungenerous? Or tyrannical?”

“I—we—felt it might be a shock.”

“Nearly all the experiences worth having come to one in shocks!” She got herself up from her chair and strode, a little stiffly, across the room. (He remembered that her knee had been bothering her again lately.) “Doesn’t love itself happen to one like that? A shock! A *coup de foudre*—?” She turned her head and looked back at him over her shoulder, waiting for his reply.

“Sometimes.”

“Did it—to you?”

He answered unwillingly, “One can’t tell.” How should he say, out loud, in a conversation, that he had loved Jasmin from that first second?

She accepted, though she could never tolerate, his reticence. She said, “Merrick and I were playing croquet when I suddenly knew I was in love with him—it was very absurd—”

Then Charles went up to see Vicky in her sewing room. When he told her she wasn’t surprised. She was moved, but her words were dry.

“Did you think I shouldn’t know if you was sleeping badly? And then work, work, work—And I saw you together that second time she came down to Melcombe. I can put two and two together, even if I am an old woman—” She took off her sewing glasses. “What does your mother say?”

“She—I didn’t know how she might take it—but she must have been in a romantic mood—or something—”

Vicky put on her glasses again and resumed her darning.

“You don’t know your mother, Charles.”

“Who does? . . . Do you, Vicky?”

“I do—in part. And there was another that did.”

“Who was that?”

“That isn’t my place to say.”

“My father?”

“No. Not him.—He never saw but what he loved in her.”

“Who, then?”

“Someone that’s dead now, anyway.”

Charles’s interest ceased. Vicky had her mysteries—some of them illusory. He came back to the thing that filled his mind.

“Vicky. You met Miss Lengel?”

“Only for a moment.”

“What did you think?”

“I thought she was very pretty.”

“What else?”

“She seemed nice-mannered enough.”

“You liked her, Vicky?” With an anxiety and resentment which he felt to be absurd, he probed for the reservation in Vicky’s mind.

“I can’t judge a person seeing them for such a short time.”

“No. Of course not.—She’s such a surprising character to find—in her family.”

Vicky’s plump figure seemed to sit even more primly. “I daresay Viscount Whichford is an upright enough man. And I hear Her Ladyship gives away a lot of money to Charitable Societies.”

There were moments when Vicky’s face, with its slightly underhung jaw and stub nose, reminded him of a small dignified bulldog. She demanded:—

“What is their opinion?”

“Jasmin’s seeing them this afternoon.”

“Mm, I see. I should say they might count themselves lucky.”

“I doubt it.”

Vicky stuck her darning needle back into the emery cushion and folded up a pair of socks. She glanced at Charles, who was sitting on the fender. “I hope you’ll be happy, my dear boy,” she said.

He smiled at her from a long way off.

Rose Whichford was resting.

She always rested between six and seven, the room darkened, a pillow under her knees, her stays discarded, her face anointed with skin food, a cloth soaked in lotion spread across her forehead and eyes. She had learned this ritual from Nadine Bristow when Edgar had first introduced her, as a young, suddenly successful actress, into his household. (That summer, when she was playing lead in *The Way Home*, she had spent her Sunday to Monday week-ends with them in Sussex.) Nadine attributed both her complexion and her vitality to these practices, and Rose Whichford, in an equally strenuous career, had greatly profited by them too.

It was part of the relaxation to be alone during this hour; and to dismiss, as far as possible, her problems and responsibilities; so that she was irritated and surprised by a knock on her door. She turned her bandaged head. “Who is it?”

“Me. Jasmin.”—Jasmin opened the door and came in. “Mummie. I *must* speak to you—you were out all the afternoon—and then you’ll be dressing and—”

“Shut the door.” Rose Whichford peeled the cloth from her eyes and blinked through the dimness. “Why must you come *now*?”

“I know, Mummie. But it’s something—” she came forward to stand beside the bed, resisting the sense of oppression which seeped and clung about her as if the room, with its sombre light lapping against the silvered shapes of the furniture and the fantastic shell-formed back of the bed, were a monstrous tank where her mother lay like some piscine deity—“it’s something important.”

“Surely it could wait until seven o’clock?”

Jasmin’s fingers tightened on a fold of the coverlet. After all, she was safe enough—Mother couldn’t *do* anything—

“Mother—you *know* you’re dining out and you’ll be in a hurry.”

“Very well. What is it?”

What is it? What sentence would do best? You couldn’t say,—to Mother,—“Something unspeakably lovely has happened—” You couldn’t say,—to that obscure stare, to those features gleaming with skin food,—“I’m so terribly in love—for the first time in my life.” (Since all those others, flirtations, fragmentary interests, haphazard idling, kissing, were nothing—nothing at all; and this was as if the whole world were new and clean and dazzling!)

“My dear Jasmin, as you are here, you’d better tell me.” She could make out nothing from the girl’s face, but her manner seemed excited. Probably some new craze or phase had got hold of her (as when last year she had wired from Le Touquet for money to buy a Moth aeroplane).

“Mother. . . . Mummie—I’m going to marry Charles Bitterne.” Jasmin waited, so enchanted by the inner sense of her words that for a moment she could forget why she had spoken them. (. . . *to marry . . . Charles. . . .*)

Lady Whichford raised herself on her elbow. She peered at her daughter. Her wrapper slipped back off one shoulder. She asked in a tone whose thin smoothness didn’t conceal the stirring of her temper,—

“I should like to know exactly why?”

Jasmin crossed her arms, and looked towards the window where a chain of amber light was reflected above the pelmet from the last daylight in the Square. This morning she’d found him waiting for her—up all those steps in that untidy studio that smelled of dust and turpentine and lilac.

“Because we’re in love with each other.”

Lady Whichford propped two pillows behind her back and sat up.

“What a very characteristic answer! That seems quite enough reason to you, darling, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.” Jasmin faced her mother now, pressing her lips together. She was safe after all, whatever happened. She didn’t want to cry.

“That seems to you enough reason for going and marrying any young man without a penny,—to speak of,—who does nothing very much (one never sees his pictures anywhere), and who doesn’t seem to have any sort of future as far as one knows?”

“I don’t care about that.”

“Obviously. You like to think these things don’t matter—It’s been the same so often. You miss all your chances, you turn down the kind of man who could give you a really marvelous life—just as you turned down poor Evan, who has some sort of prospects anyway.”

“*Prospects!*” interpolated Jasmin.

Her mother ignored her, breaking into sharp rhetoric.

“What can young Bitterne give you? What sort of life can you hope for, married to an unsuccessful artist—! Of course his family’s all right, and he’s well-connected and attractive and so on—If you’d married Tony Brendon, for instance—”

Jasmin felt cold and startled. She had expected some sort of opposition, but she hadn’t foreseen that it would glare at her as a revelation of her mother’s spirit. She had always thought of her mother as worldly—neither more nor less of a snob than most people; she had often set her good qualities—her courage in physical pain, her self-discipline in small matters of appetite and comfort, her love for children, her occasional unexpected generosity to people from whom she could get no return—against her obvious faults. But she had never, in moments either of resentment or of affection towards her, got any whole impression. Now she saw that her mother was vulgar.

“Tony Brendon’s dull. I can never understand the glamour about the Foreign Office.”

“It isn’t as if we were ever very intimate with the Bitternes.”

“That’s because Mrs. Bitterne’s never wanted to be. Isn’t it?”

“Theresa Bitterne is very eccentric.”

“Is that what you’ve got against Charles?”

“Of course not—And now that we’ve got Melcombe—”

“You mean if they had Melcombe you’d think Charles more—suitable.”

“Naturally.”

“Mummie, you are—” Jasmin checked her exclamation—“blatant” was the word in her mind.

“What?”

“I don’t know.—Consistent, I suppose.”

“I hope so—Of course you’ll have all the money.”

“Exactly. That’s why I don’t see your point in thinking I need any more. After all,” Jasmin spoke with a bitter impulse (who but Mother could have so smirched the triumphant loveliness of her day, tearing down its flying beauty, making the sky seem empty)—“after all, if money isn’t our claim on—anything, everything—what is?”

“I don’t understand you. And you quite misunderstand me. It’s chiefly young Bitterne’s lack of—”

“Prospects?”

“I can’t see that he has any future!”

“And you almost wish he had a past! A really showy past like—”

“You’re being childish.”

“I suppose Daddy had a future when you married him?”

Rose Whichford hesitated, her anger checked by the unexpected question. Then she said, “Of course.”

“That’s why you married him?”

“I respected him and liked him very much.”

“Did you!”

“Of course.”

“But you weren’t in love with him.”

“I can’t see why we should discuss this.”

Jasmin turned from the bed and went to the window. "May I draw the curtains back?"

"I certainly can't rest any more."

"Oh, Mummie—*try* to understand." As she spoke, Jasmin saw that her mother wasn't merely unwilling to understand; she was emotionally color-blind. "—I think I'll go now."

"When you go down, tell your father to come up to me. Have you told him yet?"

"I haven't seen him."

"Very well."

Jasmin paused for a second at the door. But her mother's face was turned away towards the light.

A few minutes later Lord Whichford went to his wife's room. He boomed:—

"Well—well—what is this? Jasmin came down just now looking like a ghost and said you wanted to see me!"

"She's just told me that she's engaged to young Charles Bitterne—"

Lord Whichford's alert lingering glance was on his wife. He had a feminine power of comprehending a situation and gauging its consequences within a flash of time. He trod heavily to and fro before he answered her.

"My dear Rose, she'll run off with another chap in a few years, whoever she marries."

Rose Whichford's head ached. "I don't see that that affects what's happening now."

"Well—it's no good worrying, is it? The girl'll do what she likes anyway. And he's not a bad young chap. She might do worse to begin with—Quite a nice boy, I thought—"

"He's got no sort of career."

"He's a painter, isn't he? That's a career, my dear."

"He shows no sign of being successful."

Lord Whichford gave his thick chuckle and dug his hands deeper into his pockets. "Nor did Rembrandt, my dear—or a great many egzcellent

painters. . . . You've got to take a chance about that! And as I say," he chuckled again, pausing at the foot of the bed to gaze with a half-kindly, half-malevolent irony at his wife, "as I say—if you get the girl off with an 'odds-on' young man, she'd leave him for an outsider pretty soon. . . . Better do it the other way round! *Nicht?*—"

Rose Whichford was neither amused nor consoled, and the German interrogative exasperated her nerves.

"Of course you simply don't care what happens to your daughter—"

For a second he thought over the accusation, and then rumbled out that he believed he cared for the girl's happiness a good deal more than his wife!—"If she wants the young fellow she'd better have him—She's a temperamental girl and the sooner she's married the better. She'll only get one of the chauffeurs into trouble or go off with her Greek teacher otherwise."

"It amuses you to take the whole thing flippantly."

"As I pointed out to you, Rose, you can't stop it."

"You might."

"Nonsense, my dear! A girl of spirit like Jasmin would only elope half an hour later. You'd better face facts. After all, the Bitternes are very decent people."

"Oh, as far as *decency's* concerned—"

Edgar Whichford came round to the side of the bed and laid a clumsy hand on his wife's knee.

"You don't care about that, do you, old lady?" He patted her, scanning her face with his acute lingering glance. He smiled under his moustache.

"Angela Freyne's bazdard would suit your book better."

"What a ridiculous thing to say! Philip Freyne is—"

"Exactly like his father. That's where he gets his brains."

"I always thought it such a pity Jasmin never bothered about young Leckhampton—"

"Don't suppose he attracted her very much. A chap who can only think of racing cars, and has nothing but a breach of promise case and a marquisate to recommend him."

Lady Whichford looked at her watch.

“I see that you mean simply to let things slide.”

He shook his head. “I know my limitations, Rose. And I’m very busy just now. There’s that trouble up at the works. I shall probably go up again to-morrow.”

Lady Whichford got up.

“We must start at a quarter to eight.”

“—By the way, what does Mrs. Bitterne say?”

“I don’t know—”

“A clever woman, a very intelligent woman.” He gave way to one of those Jovian emphases of truth which filled his wife with rigid distaste. “She made it clear, all the same, that she didn’t want to be mixed up with us. She’s one of the gnats you can’t swallow with all the straining in the world, and the whole damned camel of London society in your stomach!—It just happens that Jasmin’s got her *for* you! *Nicht?* And I wouldn’t mind betting that she knows how to give in, when she has to, with a priddy good grace!”

Lady Whichford was silent for a few moments, observing her husband. She lay back, conscious of the old distaste which at such moments became hatred. She hated his heavy face, his uncouth body, the incalculable power of his mental machinery. She resented his knowledge of her mind, and his hypocritical detachment from its motives and activities—which profited him in the end. Her experience estimated his vulgarity and conceded his use, while the prejudice of her class despised him for being a Jew.

She said finally,—

“Well, my dear Edgar—if we’re going to change—”

“All right—” He added absently, “Don’t you worry, old girl, don’t worry.”

As he went out of his wife’s room his thoughts turned back once more to the matter of the threatened strike at Stubfield. As he plodded into his own room he wondered if Rose ever paused to realize that her activities in London depended on the consumption of coal-tar products in less glamorous quarters of the world.

V

Two days after Charles had told Theresa of his engagement she ordered her antique Fiat for half-past three, in order to pay a formal visit to Belgrave Square.

It was her official recognition of the Whichfords. She went, as Charles told Evelina afterwards, in “full dress and manner,” superbly hatted and veiled in the style of the early nineteen-hundreds, parasol and cardcase in hand, her expression of formal gravity lightened at moments—as when the car drew up before the wrought-iron portals—by a glint of the quizzical.

The chauffeur came back with a message that Lady Whichford was at home.

Theresa ascended the steps. As she crossed the hall a young woman came out of a door on the left, stared at her for a moment, and then, tossing back her bobbed hair, passed her by and went out of the front door. Theresa wondered if she was one of the secretaries, of whom Charles had spoken. (Quite conceivable that old Whichford liked his secretaries of that type.)

She was shown into the drawing-room, where she waited. She admitted to herself that it was good. A big L-shaped room, a few perfect pieces of Empire furniture, the walls and ceiling stippled a pale shining green showing up the jeweled profusion of flowers, the silks, sofas, curtains echoing rather than stressing the exotic chastity of modern influence. At one end of the room was a picture by Utrillo, on the opposite wall another street scene. A type of picture which Charles would like, she thought. Her taste for the modern stopped at Impressionism. Beyond that she was ready to admire, though seldom pleased. People like the Whichfords did a lot for the Arts, she supposed. That, indeed, was their most tolerable aspect. They did better as merchant princes than lords of the manor. (Melcombe gossip had reached her of old Whichford’s pheasant breeding begun in the woods. She imagined beaters poking up liverish birds to fly in slow parabolas to their death. Melcombe woods. . . .) She showed more reluctance than she had planned to Lady Whichford’s greeting, and redressed it quickly.

“ . . . I’ve been admiring your charming room.”

Lady Whichford’s lip framed a square thin smile.

“Of course, you’ve never been here before.”

They sat down on the Empire couch at rectangles to the fireplace. Theresa unbuttoned a glove, sighed dimly.

“I hardly see anyone except my old friends, these days. . . . Dear John Leroy told me how delightful your house was.”

“We’re *so* fond of Mr. Leroy. So much *genre*, hasn’t he? He reminds one of Whistler in some ways.”

“Did you know Whistler well?”

(Rose Whichford, once Rose Carter, remembered a walk with her uncle, the picture dealer, from Pimlico to Chelsea. “That’s where that painter fellow, Whistler, lives.” A white house in the foggy air—her uncle plodding on—a street singer at the corner: “She’s only a bi-i-ird in a gowlden cige.”)

“Only very slightly. . . . I’ve always been interested in pictures. . . . How d’you like my new one? *So* clever, I think—by quite a young man called Michael Ward who’s just had a show at the Octagon Galleries. He was dining with us last night.” Lady Whichford hesitated. The young man had emerged as a friend of Charles Bitterne—having shared a studio with him for a time in Paris. But she wasn’t yet certain if her visitor was here to discuss the obvious matter, or was, by some chance, still unaware of what had happened. As much from habit as policy, Rose Whichford refrained from giving herself away. “So attractive,” she added.

Theresa remembered the name in Charles’s letters, and again, more recently, when Charles had mentioned going to the ballet with some Michael.

“I think he’s a friend of my son’s.” She smoothed a long glove across her knee; then looked vividly up and into the eyes of her hostess.

“Now, my dear Lady Whichford, let us to the matter in hand.”

The form of sentence struck Rose Whichford as characteristic and annoying. She waited, faintly tapping her *lorgnon* against her left wrist, reserving a hope that a sufficiently embittered acquiescence on her part might intensify the various objections that would spring, she imagined, from the other side. She was realist enough to know what kind of objections those would be; though not honest enough to admit that if anything could reconcile her to the idea of Charles, it was exactly this careless “exclusiveness” in his parent. (The word “exclusive” had been often enough on her mother’s lips, and still echoed in the private recesses of her own heart.)

“Naturally,” said Theresa, “we can’t always see with our children’s eyes.”

“No,” said Rose Whichford, baffled by her visitor’s air of emotional yet bland determination. “Jasmin is young and terribly inexperienced,” she added, trying to gauge what that haze of emotion might portend. Was the young man’s mother for or against the marriage?

“—Deliciously young—enchantingly young,” said Theresa.

“—And of course one wants her to think over any sort—of decision.”

“—One wants that! Wisdom always wants that! But whoever thought over the decision that comes from falling in love? . . . My dear Lady Whichford, where does wisdom go then—except well out of sight and out of mind?”

“That’s just the point. One so dreads their doing something terribly silly.” Rose Whichford set back her slender shoulders. Apparently the objections, on Theresa Bitterne’s part, were weaker than some other interest. But what interest? Not money,—she was subtle enough to know that,—nor Melcombe (since Rex would get that, if they kept it). The desire to please her son? Or, simply, for the sake of dignity to abet what she couldn’t prevent?

“People do as foolish things from what’s called wisdom as from impulse. The heart is so often right where the head is wrong.”

“Jasmin has always had some little flirtation going. Men find her very attractive.”

“So she is! What man wouldn’t? . . . But I haven’t broken in on your afternoon to discuss a—flirtation. We’ve all had those, goodness knows. Let’s come down to facts. The two are in love; and they’ll marry. You have your doubts and fears, I expect. So have I.”

“It’s all happened completely without warning . . .”

“You had no idea?”

“Naturally not. They’ve only seen each other half a dozen times.”

“Once can be fatal enough!”

“Did you suspect, then?” Lady Whichford demanded, her nerves affected by a flashing and volatile quality in her guest’s treatment of the matter.

Theresa couldn't resist answering that she had; and as she did so, believing what she said was true, she saw her interview with Charles as a confirmation of what she had guessed—foreseen. Her last feint of truth was, "Naturally I wasn't certain. . . ." She paused, half-rapt, then broke out:—

"They'll marry anyway. As soon as they can, I imagine. There's nothing to stop them, after all, is there?"

"Of course, nothing definite . . ."

"Exactly. So that it seems to me there's nothing left for us to fulfill—except a moral obligation."

"I don't quite understand."

"A moral obligation to make them feel that we're happy in their happiness. I've thought it out. I believe one has no right to any other attitude. We don't want to be responsible for—for tarnishing the thing that's anyway so easily dimmed. There's a kind of sacredness about a first passion which older people profane too easily. They read triviality into a great feeling, and belittle what's probably the most profound power in two young people's lives. One knows too many cases! The older generation belching experience and caution, and skepticism and worldliness like a sky line of chimneys into that magnificent heaven of young feeling. . . ."

Theresa's words hovered, husky and rhetorical, in the pellucid room. She asked, rather of the high ceiling than of the chilled woman beside her, "D'you know that thing?—I can't remember who it's by—an Elizabethan thing:—

"There are two births; the one when light
First strikes the new awakened sense;
The other when two souls unite
And we must count our life from thence;
When you loved me, and I loved you,
Then both of us were born anew . . ."

She paused; waited. . . .

Rose Whichford acknowledged a necessity which she had accepted some time before Mrs. Bitterne began quoting poetry.

"It's very comforting that you feel so optimistic about it all. Possibly,"—she let herself down gradually, from irony to discouragement (which she really felt), from discouragement to self-pity, from self-pity to the speciously sentimental,—“possibly I've been wrong—to be so doubtful. . . . It seems so

strange to think of both of our children married. It seems only yesterday that Jasmin was a little girl.”

“A trick of memory, dear Lady Whichford. . . . The girl’s the perfect age for marrying, the perfect age for childbearing. I was too old. You get ‘set’ after thirty and then it’s the devil of a business.”

“You’ll stay and have tea?”

“No, thank you very much. I can’t stay. As for practical matters, they can all be discussed in due course. I’ve no doubt Charles and Jasmin have got it all cut and dried already. I’ve promised them a house and a dog and the beginnings of a good cellar. . . .”

“Naturally, one has hardly had time to think—”

“Of course not.”

“And with all my engagements for the season arranged, and all that work at Melcombe—”

“I’ve no doubt they’ll be glad to escape the tumult and shouting of a big wedding.” Theresa began to draw on her glove.

“Of course, if they marry so soon, I shall get the wedding arranged. Only both St. George’s *and* St. Margaret’s are terribly booked up—”

Theresa buttoned slowly. “The Almighty has other houses—”

“Well, we can see.” Rose Whichford managed a smile. The last twenty years had taught her to parody graciousness when she was hurt.

Theresa got up. She took Lady Whichford’s hand. She had an impulse, at the last, to be sanctimonious, thus emphasizing the fact that she was leaving the matter between them just where it should be. But her humor was checked by a sensation of pity. Whatever the woman’s hopes were, they had been betrayed; whatever her values were, this marriage of her daughter’s discounted them. Theresa clasped the hand she’d taken with sudden warmth.

“I hope we shall be friends—” She saw a glint of astonishment in the chill handsome eyes.

“*Dear Mrs. Bitterne.*” Rose Whichford escorted her guest into the hall. The butler witnessed an admirable cordiality. Theresa went out, handing him her cards.

Miss Courage emerged. Could Lady Whichford speak to Lady Brendon, who was on the phone?

Rose Whichford went into her secretary's room. "Hello."

Paula Brendon's voice made some perfunctory introduction. Then, "I hear Jasmin is engaged to Charles Bitterne."

"Who told you that?" (Tense but noncommittal.)

"Theresa herself dined here last night!"

"Oh . . . of course. She told me. How *absurd* of me! . . . Of course we're *terribly* pleased."

Paula Brendon was congratulating. "He's a dear boy. Of course I've known him since he was born."

"So clever. Brancker thinks he's marvelous (the critic, you know). Of course Jasmin always adored pictures! But it breaks my heart to think of *both* my children married."

Paula Brendon was congratulatory about Jasmin.

". . . And when's the wedding?"

"Not settled *yet*, of course. Theresa's giving them their house. . . . So *terribly* happy. . . . It's quite romantic to see two modern young people so *absolutely* blissful."

". . . glad you're pleased. I had an impression Theresa was *just* a weeny bit depressed about it all. Of course he's an only child, and she'll miss him, I expect, poor dear."

"Of course. . . . And rather highly strung, I expect."

"She always was—artistic. All the Bitternes . . . Well, once more, many *many* congratulations, Rose. Bless that dear Jasmin for me. . . ."

Rose Whichford put down the receiver. She rang and ordered her tea to be sent up on a tray to her bedroom. She was very tired.

VI

Press Cuttings

The Times (May 20)

MR. CHARLES M. BITTERNE AND
THE HON. JASMIN LENGEL

A marriage has been arranged and will shortly take place between Mr. Charles Bitterne, only son of the Hon. Mrs. Merrick Bitterne, of 38 Lowndes Street, S.W.1, and the Hon. Jasmin Margaret Lengel, only daughter of Viscount and Viscountess Whichford of 108 Belgrave Square, S.W.1, and Melcombe, Warwickshire.

The Daily Post

VISCOUNT'S DAUGHTER TO WED

The engagement was announced yesterday of the Hon. Jasmin Lengel, daughter of Lord and Lady Whichford, to Mr. Charles Bitterne, the young Society Portrait Painter. Miss Lengel is very keen on sport and the couple met in the hunting field last winter.

The Evening Mail (Woman's Page, with photograph)

The Hon. Jasmin Lengel, whose engagement to the young painter, Charles Bitterne, was the topic of the moment yesterday. Miss Lengel, who is Lady Whichford's lovely daughter and is keenly interested in Art, will probably be among the many June Brides of this year. Both she and her fiancé (who, by the way, is great-nephew of that well-known figure at the Bachelors' Club, Mr. Gavin Bitterne), are popular figures both in fashionable and Bohemian circles, and their many friends will welcome the lovely bride to the ranks of our prettiest young married women.

Paragraph from "Yesterday & To-morrow" in *Chic* (May 27)

. . . Lapsing into Lady Whichford's At Home at 108 Belgrave Square, I had one breathless word with her daughter, whose engagement was announced last week to young Charles Bitterne (whose work belongs to the Advanced Guard). He was there, of course, standing beside his fiancée, and everyone was saying what

a terribly good-looking couple they are! Apparently the wedding is to be in June, and the honeymoon will be spent in England. There seems to be a vogue for quiet honeymoons just now, “far from the maddening crowd!” . . .

The Morning Sketch (June 15), “Pam’s Corner”

The Hon. Jasmin Lengel, like so many modern brides, is choosing a very “sensible” trousseau, and like her mother, the beautiful Viscountess Whichford, is well-known for the simplicity as well as the chic of her clothes. . . . Her favorite colors are cyclamen pinks and reds, and brown for country wear, and she is having several washing-silk dresses in pale shades, which are always so useful, aren’t they? . . .

The *Chronicler* (June 21), above a photograph of a man with a bowler and dark moustache accompanying a thin girl in horn-rimmed glasses.

The Hon. Jasmin Lengel and her fiancé Mr. Charles Bitterne, whose wedding takes place at St. George’s, Hanover Square, next week, snapped in the Park.

The Evening Mail (Woman’s Page, with photograph)

TO-MORROW’S BRIDE

The Hon. Jasmin Lengel, the daughter of Viscount Whichford (who, besides being one of our leading Business Magnates, is a keen rider to hounds!), is having several pretty children, besides her grown-up bridesmaids, to follow her to the altar to-morrow. She has chosen a pale flame color for the bridesmaids’ dresses, which will show up her own very simple and elegant dress of silver *lamé* embroidered with pearls. . . .

The Morning Sketch (June 27), “Pam’s Corner”

My “little bird” has told me that the Hon. Jasmin Lengel, to-morrow’s bride, is going to show that she isn’t superstitious by wearing bright green satin shoes with her silver dress. A novel idea! The young couple are being lent a cottage “somewhere in the country” by Lady Campbell, who is related to the bridegroom and is the wife of Sir Harold Campbell.

Talking of green shoes, some of our smartest hostesses are introducing a green “sorbet” (water ice!) made with *crème de menthe* at their lunch parties. . . . Lovely Mrs. “Ronnie” Friskett . . .

The Times, Announcements for To-day

Marriages:—

Mr. Charles Bitterne and the Hon. Jasmin Lengel. St. George’s, Hanover Square. 2.30.

Evelina arrived at St. George’s early. There was a crowd waiting outside, and press photographers lined up on each side of the path of red carpet. A woman in a beret stopped Evelina and asked her her name.

“What relation to the bridegroom?”

“Cousin.”

“Thank you *so* much.” The woman made hieroglyphics in a notebook.

Evelina went into the church. A young man asked her, “Bride or Bridegroom?” As she replied, Evan Campbell came up. “Hello, Evelina. How’s life? Let me put you in your proper pew.” He spoke in a resonant whisper. “Great talent of mine—pew opening. Done it five times in the last year. Hopin’ for a medal or something soon.” He put her in the front pew, which was empty. “There’ll only be Aunt Theresa, and one or two others, I s’pose, in here—” She remembered hearing from someone that he had wanted to marry Jasmin Lengel. He went off with a quick bend of his head. He looked thinner, and in the chill light of the church older than his thirty years. She saw him escort Rex and Peter Lengel and Roger Mandeville into the opposite pew. (There was something fusty about Rex Lengel’s curly straw-colored hair.)

The pews were filling. There were a great many women, smart, overdressed, or well dressed. They preened themselves when they first sat down, slipping back a wrap or light fur from their shoulders and looking around as who should say their dressmaker was worthy of his hire, and the dress of its wearer. Then they began observing and staring, recognizing friends, whispering to their neighbors, turning back or craning forward to make a remark or listen to a confidence. The men joined in this gossiping and looking, but with restraint. One or two of them put their silk hats under the seats and sat still.

Leroy came up the aisle looking like the cartoon of himself by "Spy," wearing an orchid in his buttonhole, fingering his monocle with a lavender-gloved hand. He came into the front pew beside Evelina and whispered as he knelt down, "I'm sure Theresa would like me to be with her." . . . Lady Brendon swept into the pew behind, accompanied by her daughter Pam, who walked like a mannequin.

The music shuddered in the heavily scented air. Evelina looked up and saw that the gallery was full. She recognized old Renfrew and his wife, and the kitchen-maid from Melcombe. A young man with a head like a gold hawk walked up towards the altar and stood waiting. Evelina remembered Charles saying that Michael Ward, with whom he had shared a studio for a time in Paris, was going to be best man. (An interesting face, she thought, with that unseeing translucent glance.) She saw Miles Storrington and his wife come up the aisle, recognized Nadine Bristow, the actress. Leroy began long, discreet whispering. "There's Bernhard Schön,—Whichford's partner, you know,—and that little man with the horn-rimmed spectacles is Pondworth, the Shakespeare critic (Nadine Bristow's husband, you know!). Ah, there's George Freyne—dear old George; looking rather old . . . The woman with the pretty girl is Mrs. Rupert Lane—her husband used to come to Melcombe in the old days before he went to Canada. . . . Died a few years ago. Ah, here's dear old Vicky—"

Vicky came up the aisle, looking straight in front of her. She wore her black silk dolman, and a veil over her bonnet, and carried her best, ivory-bound prayer book. (Evelina remembered how she and Charles used to admire that prayer book with its silver cross and gilt-edged pages, and the pressed forget-me-not inside that Vicky had picked from her mother's grave.) Vicky came into the front pew, ignored Leroy, passed Evelina, and sat down on her other side. She put down her prayer book and knelt forward on the hassock and began to pray. Her lips moved. She was wearing white spun-silk gloves, and her gold chain with the swastika and locket. When she sat up again she gave Evelina a look of grave and intimate recognition. Leroy said, "Here She is!" and Evelina turned to see Theresa coming up the aisle, walking a little lame and carrying carnations. She bent her head to acknowledge Lady Whichford's smile, and took Leroy's outstretched hand and sat down between him and Evelina. She knelt down to pray. When she sat back she whispered to Evelina that she had forgotten her handkerchief. Vicky had an extra one in her bag. Evelina looked up and saw Charles was waiting now beside his best man. He kept looking down the aisle and then turning again to talk to Michael Ward. Vicky muttered, "I wish she'd be quick and come."

The music changed and grew louder. The crowd stood up. Now they turned like grasses veered by a gust of wind, and Jasmin came up the aisle looking to where Charles stood, and holding her father's arm. Leroy murmured, "Europa and the Bull."

Evelina saw Charles's expression, and remembered that she had made him go to the Whichford's dance. Couldn't she feel at least that she had done that for him—pushed him, against his struggling judgment, so deep into life? . . . But he'd have been dragged in anyway, she thought. For nothing saved you—if you had the dreadful power to feel. Nothing saved you from passions, sacrifices, sentimentalities; from the disasters of impulse, the futilities of rebellion; from the shape of a moment, a trick of beauty, a cadence of thought. . . .

She watched his back. Why had she pushed him?

Because he was in danger of saving himself? In danger of getting through, to the end of life, with a glowing mind—and that chill quizzical innocence of heart? . . . She felt Vicky's hand in hers.

Theresa joined in the responses. Across the aisle Lady Whichford joined in too; and young Mrs. Lengel stared before her, presenting her little-boy profile and small high bust of a *primitif* for straying glances; and Rex, next to her, wiped his eyes behind his horn-rimmed glasses, because his hay fever had been started again by the lilies. . . . Leroy cleared his throat, adjusted his buttonhole, remembered a blur of weddings, a succession of brides. Evan Campbell stood beside his mother, a sunburned woman under an osprey-trimmed hat, who glanced at him once or twice during the service. A few prayer books were rustled, laid down again. Nadine Bristow fixed her horse's eyes on the couple at the altar and occasionally shrugged the shoulders that had given so many millionaires repose. . . .

Evelina listened to Charles's voice . . . *to have and to hold . . . for better or for worse* . . . She listened to Jasmin's velvety hesitant tones . . . And does she love him? she wondered, without malice, almost without pain. . . . Does she know the impulse that's in her, from the particular thing that he wants? . . . that he needs? . . . Wasn't she simply gay and sensual and sweet, her mind lying no deeper than honey in a flower?

But what did he want—beyond that? Since he'd create emotion from her, and get what he needed that way? Why pretend that he needed what she, Evelina, could give him? She watched them turn and come down to the aisle and go into the vestry, a look flashing between them, Jasmin smiling, Charles grave. . . .

The congregation rustled, breathed, coughed, whispered, broke from whispering to murmuring, and from murmuring to talk. . . . *Dress . . . handsome . . . bridesmaids . . . lovely . . . absolutely . . . good-looking . . . perfect . . .*

The Wedding March was like white arches flung up suddenly. . . . They passed under, the columns still quivering; passed under followed by their ridiculous rose-loaded procession; passed slowly, then more rapidly, out into the sunlight, leaving the congregation to press and grope after them.

At Belgrave Square there were more roses; orchids on the mantelpieces; too much good champagne in rooms full of drowned light that came through the sun blinds. Too many scents and shoulders and eyes and mouths, and in each doorway a new impact of roaring talk. . . .

Charles and Jasmin stood under a cupola of flowers. Evelina, standing behind little Pondworth, agreed with him about something or other, watched Jasmin's new response to each guest, kissing or smiling or clasping hands. And now, "Evelina darling," and a kiss on each cheek. (Spontaneous enough—simplicity was part of that charm. . . . And if Charles were happy. . . ?) Charles kissed her too, holding her by the shoulders. She asked:—

"You're staying at Lady Campbell's cottage?"

"Yes. At Little Aston. Very kind of her."

"All the world loves a honeymoon couple."

He smiled. "This is frightful. . . . But I liked the church. . . . (Queer . . .) Bless you, darling—" He turned to accept yet another kid-gloved hand.

Evelina met Evan Campbell at the top of the stairs. He said, "Come down and have some bubbly." She noted automatically that "bubbly" dated him. All war people . . . He led her through the crowd, making way for her to pass. He said:—

"Show seemed to go off all right, didn't it?"

"Beautifully."

"No hitch as far as I could see. The ring there at the proper moment and so on. Who's that chap Ward—Charles's best man?"

"A painter, I believe—"

"Jasmin looked jolly. Didn't she?"

“Yes.”

“Have some more?”

“No, thanks.”

“A sandwich? Or one of those little fellows with frills on?”

“No, thanks.”

He gave her a cigarette. Lit hers and his own. He said:—

“Charles is a good-looking chap.”

“Yes.”

“Nice fellow, too. Haven’t seen him much lately. Since he’s been abroad and painting. But we always get on. . . . Jolly party we all had at Melcombe, two or three years ago, d’you remember?”

“Yes.”

He said, “Let’s move out into the garden.”

They stepped out of the French windows, under the awnings, across the flagged paths. There were chairs on the further side under the trees. He said:

“Funny thing, you know. I’d no idea that Charles knew Jasmin.”

“He hasn’t, long.”

“He was at that dance they had here, wasn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“Funny thing that—funny thing—” He spoke vaguely, gazing at the house, straightening his tie. Then “. . . And what have you been doing with yourself this summer? Been up in town much. . . .?”

She stared. “What? . . .” Then, “Oh, no, I haven’t at all. I’ve been at home. . . .”

Two women lingered by the sundial under parasols. “. . . So delightful having a garden in the heart of London . . .” Three more came out dipping under the awning. One of them said, “The bride’s gone to dress. . . .”

Evelina found Vicky sitting in the hall. She said, “I’m staying here so that I shall get a good view of them coming down the staircase.” Vicky’s feelings had been merged into her respect for pageantry. Evelina asked, “But have you had anything to eat or drink, darling?”

“Thank you, I had a glass of champagne and a piece of cake. A beautiful cake. He had to help her cut it. . . .”

Evelina heard Theresa taking her leave of someone “. . . You must come and see me. I shall be all alone now. . . .” She saw her turn, and light up again to greet a rusty-complexioned man accompanied by a tall woman with a flat little face. “My dear Mr. Chantrey. . . . How are you, Mrs. Chantrey?” Theresa always knew everybody. . . . Evelina watched her, throwing off her light penetrating questions, making the man smile, wakening an expression of pleasure on the woman’s features. She saw Evelina now and called her across the hall, introduced her. “My niece, Evelina Bitterne.” Evelina began a conversation with the wife, while she glanced up the staircase to see if Charles and Jasmin were coming. . . .

When they came the crowd pushed towards the staircase. They came down, each effusive but a little awkward, kissing and shaking hands right and left until they reached the foot of the stairs, where Charles gripped Jasmin’s arm and hurried her with a movement of annoyance toward the front door, bending his head and frowning under the showers of confetti.

Lady Whichford came downstairs holding herself upright and gazing towards the final silhouette of her daughter at the open door. She turned, *svelte* and sentimental, to Theresa:—

“My *dear* Theresa . . .”

Theresa, chin lifted, chose to be indifferent, amused, debonair. . . .

“How *glad* they must be to get away.” She turned to Mr. Chantrey. “Come and stay me with flagons in another room. Comfort me with aphorisms. Go on explaining your wrong-headed politics. . . .” She preceded him through a surprised group of people, turned imperiously to beckon him on, swept across to the deserted buffet, and struck up a friendship with one of the footmen, asking him if he were going to Melcombe with the family? whether he liked the country? whether he was married? She declared, “This boy tells me he isn’t married and isn’t in love.”

Chantrey laughed. “Sensible fellow.”

Theresa said: “Now amuse me. . . . If you’re half as amusing as your father was, I shall forget that I’m alone in the world with nine cocker spaniels and gout in one knee. . . .”

VII

Marlowe Cottage was built of stone and set on a hill among trees. When Charles and Jasmin arrived, its façade was gilded by the late sunshine, and the shadows of the tallest trees lay across the lawn in front of the house and climbed over the steep roof.

Charles drove the car into the stable yard at the back. Then they walked round to the lawn without seeing anyone. Charles felt as if he could drink the silence. The air was full of country scents and there was a heap of new-mown grass under an apple tree, and under a cherry tree next to it a table and two chairs. The table was spread with a white cloth and two places were laid and a bowl of roses set in the centre. Jasmin said, "It's uncanny. A feast spread by invisible hands."

Charles nodded. He thought he had never felt such peace or been so happy.

A puckered, soft-eyed woman in a big apron came out suddenly and welcomed them, and led them in. Her manner was full of shy delight as she showed them each room in turn. The paneled living room, the drawing-room with its prim chintzes, the dressing room for Mr. Bitterne, the (best) bedroom with its thick green carpet and enormous Victorian bed, and the brocade curtains that must once have been yellow and had faded to the color of peaches in the south sun. Every room was lit up with flowers; and round the mirror on the dressing table was a trail of jasmin, which Mrs. Thursby admitted she had thought of herself, as they knew of Mrs. Bitterne's having that name!

Jasmin thought how deliciously queer it was to be "Mrs. Bitterne" and to be going to live alone here with Charles, and sleep with him in this white and green room with the sloping ceiling and floor and the lovely countryside outside the window. . . .

They had dinner at the table under the cherry tree. It was late when they dined, and by the time Mrs. Thursby brought coffee the dusk was coming down over the garden and the flowers glowed as if they had light in their petals.

Charles got up.

"Come and walk down that grass path."

She went beside him, the darkness falling veil by veil, while Mrs. Thursby's white apron hastened to and fro between the table and the house.

They walked to the end of the path and stopped near the form of a sundial. Jasmin touched it—it was still warm from the day. She said:—

“The wedding seems like something that happened in another life. . . .”

He trod out a cigarette end in a flower bed. Peered at her. In the dimness she looked like someone else. He said:—

“I don't feel it ever happened. And being here is unreal, too. Lovely, but unreal.” He came near to her. After a long silence he said, “I suppose one hasn't got the imaginative digestion for what's perfect. . . . I feel choked. . . . I don't know what to say to you, and yet I want dreadfully to say something. . . .”

She said, “I know. . . . I want to say ‘I love you’ over and over again. . . .”

He said, “Darling, you're shivering.”

“. . . Yes.”

A breath of wind touched their faces. She said:—

“The stars are coming out. Will there be a moon?”

VIII

The second week, Lady Campbell rode over from Long Aston to visit them. Jasmin was out before breakfast in the lower garden when she heard the sound of horse's hoofs in the stable yard at the side of the house and large tones shouting, "Charles! Are you about, Charles?"

Jasmin went back towards the cottage. Over the low wall which divided the yard from the garden she saw Lady Campbell, in panama hat and an old-fashioned blue habit, dismounting, and Thursby taking her horse.

"Well, my dear—I caught a glimpse of you in the garden and thought I'd just call in and ask if everything was all right for you. Take him into the stable for a few minutes, Thursby."

"How nice of you to come in."

The tanned face under the gray hair was lit by a schoolboy smile.

"I've been wanting to come and see you, but left you alone on purpose. Is Mrs. Thursby doing you well? She's a good cook, really, if she'd only leave the pepper pot alone. Still, some of them are the other way. . . . You're looking very well, Jasmin. (I must call you Jasmin, now you're Charles's wife.) You looked pale at the wedding." They strolled into the garden in front of the house. "Weddings are terrible things." She laughed, straightening her tie, glancing over the flower beds. "What a heavy dew for July. You're sensibly dressed without any stockings on. I wish I could follow your example. But at my age you must be conventional. Here's Charles. My curiosity got the better of me, Charles, and I stopped to have a look at you both." She took him by the arm. "You made a very handsome bridegroom, Charles. You're a lucky girl, Jasmin, though not all handsome husbands are worth having! I don't like handsome men as a rule. The plain ones treat their wives better. Just as the plain women make the best wives." She chuckled, pulled off her gloves. "I expect my husband had the sense to see that! But I'll make an exception for you both—bless you. I'm glad you're all right here. My husband bought this land and cottage in 1914 and did it all up when we thought our boy Hugo was coming to live here and farm. Then when he was killed we let it for a time. (Awful people who spilled whiskey all over the carpets.) After that I wouldn't let it, and we kept it on to lend to different friends. . . ."

Jasmin asked her if she wouldn't stay to breakfast with them, but she was sorry she couldn't stay. Her husband breakfasted at nine and she always

sat by him and then read to him during the morning. Charles asked her what she read to him. She grinned.

“John Mytton—or Dickens. We’re reading *Nicholas Nickleby* for the fourth time in three years.” She talked on for a few minutes about her husband, about the books she liked and hadn’t time to read, about the garden, the weather, the new fox terrier she’d got. Jasmin, watching her, felt her peculiar charm; something you found only in a certain class of Englishwoman—or countrywoman perhaps? For she had met it abroad in women whose life was centred in their own family and countryside. The mixture of tradition and freedom, of gayety and wisdom, of an immense tolerance with a definite code of behavior. A fine judgment behind that easy talk; and kindness but no sentimentality in those clear glances. She said: “You must come to lunch before you go—if you care to. . . . Why not come next Sunday when I’ve got the young Vernons coming? You know them already, and you, Charles,—and Jasmin,—ought to meet them as they’ll be near your family when they’re at Melcombe. Evan may be here, too, for the week-end. You can all have some tennis!”

They strolled back to the stable yard. Before she mounted, Lady Campbell put her hand on Jasmin’s shoulder.

“I’m very glad to have seen you both. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to think of you being here. Stay as long as you like—When are you going back to London?”

Charles said they were going in September if they had found a house by then.

“Well, then, stay here until you’re settled. . . .”

She was up in the saddle, nodded, gave them each a quick steady look, waved her hand and was off. Her horses’ hoofs echoed back to them down the village street. As they went in to breakfast Jasmin asked:—

“Is she your father’s cousin or your mother’s?”

“Both, I believe. I never grasp relationships. I know Evan’s several removed from me.” He smiled. “She’s got the family ‘definiteness’ anyway. I believe Theresa and my father, who both had it so much, used to have awful fights (what Vicky calls ‘very strong disagreements’). I remember as a small boy seeing Theresa throw a cigar box at Father, and he lost his temper and seized her by the shoulders and shook her; and she kept saying, ‘You devil—you pig-headed devil—’ and looking like a she-devil herself, showing her teeth and with her black hair coming down over her shoulders.”

Jasmin poured out coffee.

“I can’t imagine Theresa furious.”

“She seldom is now. Either she’s mellowed or else she always gets her own way. Scrambled egg, darling.”

“No, getting too fat.”

“Nonsense, you’re exactly right.”

“Darling! Egg, then. Are you ever furious, Charles?”

“Quite often.”

He put the plate in front of her, helped himself, and sat down opposite her.

She said, “I can’t imagine our quarreling like that, though.”

He looked at her without answering.

She asked, “Can you?”

He said, “I don’t know.” He added, “I can’t imagine it.” Then he changed the subject and asked her if she would come with him for the day, as he wanted to do a sketch.

After a moment’s hesitation she said, “Yes—I’d love to. I’ll bring a book.” This was the first day he had wanted to do anything but sit and talk to her, or go for idling walks, or lie in the orchard and watch the leaves and sky. She got up and came and sat on the arm of his chair.

“Darling?”

“Yes?” He wiped his mouth.

“You do love me?”

He looked up into her face, perceived her thought, teased, “Are you going to imagine that I betray you with every new canvas?”

She colored, laughed, grew serious again.

He put his cup down and slipped his arm round her. “Absurd darling.” The scent of her body gave him the remembered sweetness of the night. He said, “What a stupid thing to ask.”

When he had kissed her she was satisfied and went back to her breakfast. He watched her movements; nodded to some murmurous talk about the loveliness of the day. A remark of Evelina’s shot obliquely into his mind,

annoying him. A remark that most women couldn't leave the edges of passion clean—they slopped them over into sentimentality. . . . (He saw the scene now, himself and Theresa and Evelina on the deck, coming back from New York. And Theresa's rejoinder, "Ah yes, there's a lot to be said for the brimstone without the treacle.")

"Your service, Mrs. Vernon!"

Jasmin shouted across the net, and Evan Campbell said, "That was a jolly good service of yours, Jasmin," and she smiled, pleased by his praise, satisfied by his accustomed admiration.

"Games two—four," said Charles. "Jasmin and Evan leading."

"You two must play up," said Lady Campbell, and resumed her talk with Dr. Vernon under the trees.

Mrs. Vernon was quick, though she seemed so lazy. Jasmin thought that she was lovely—but puzzling. Charles said she was an artist—(and artists *were* different; although people said so, you only began when you lived with one to see that it was true).

"*Thirty all*," called Mrs. Vernon's deep voice.

And, "Played, Jasmin," Charles said.

"Played, partner!" said Evan.

(But the actual difference, thought Jasmin, was difficult to put your finger on.)

There was a rally now. Charles and Mrs. Vernon won it. The clouds moved; blue gulfs showed in the sky, and light was switched on to the court and gardens.

What were the Vernons like, Jasmin wondered. One never knew the off-stage life of "nice couples"—"young married couples" who were invited together. Mrs. Vernon looked discontented—and he? Jasmin dismissed him as the kind of man who bored her.

"—and when you've done this set, come in for tea," said Lady Campbell.

They played hard. Evan and Jasmin won. "Good for you, partner," he said. And Mrs. Vernon apologized to Charles. "My playing's rotten. The 'sere and yellow' begins to tell on me." She turned to Jasmin. "Mrs.

Bitterne, you're awfully good. . . ." They walked together back to the house, the two men behind them, putting on sweaters and talking about their racquets. "I hear you're staying at Marlowe Cottage," said Mrs. Vernon. "Are you enjoying it?" she asked, turning an obscure look on the girl beside her. And Jasmin nodded.

"It's lovely. Perfect . . ."

Mrs. Vernon rubbed a powder puff across her face. She said, looking at the house as they approached it, "When life is perfect, everything's perfect."

Jasmin brought out her own powder puff (and wondered, "Do they love each other?").

"Charles is a dear," said Mrs. Vernon.

Jasmin flushed. "I'm very lucky." But the woman beside her gave her again that look that seemed to see and think and hide so much. She stated, "I hope you are—" and added, "we all want some luck. Luck is like luxury, the superfluous thing that we all need. . . ."

At tea the talk was mostly of flying and stunt flying and the future of aviation. Lady Campbell, turning to Jasmin, said, "I hear your sister-in-law, young Mrs. Lengel, has taken to flying." And Jasmin said yes, that her sister-in-law was getting her own machine (thinking that dear old Peter would rather die in a crash in public headlines than live unmentioned). And Charles said that he had been up twice, and hated it—and added that Icarus was an example, and Lady Campbell nodded, "Yes indeed"—vague as to Icarus but observing who had and hadn't tea, and who was ready for a cigarette.

When they went back to the court, Jasmin sat with Evan's mother. The Vernons challenged Evan and Charles.

"—And so your plan is to live in London?"

Jasmin explained that they had just heard of a house—in Westminster, with a studio at the back. Not that Charles minded where they lived, she said, as long as he had a studio and could work.

Lady Campbell said that was natural, and that nothing was so important in marriage as the woman's admitting that the man's work was important. "Even if it isn't," she added.

Jasmin said, "But if the man's in love with his wife, then he may feel that his work is important, but that she's even more so."

“But she mustn’t allow that. If she doesn’t put his work and interests before herself she either loses him—or ruins him. . . .”

“What about *her*?”

Lady Campbell chuckled. “Oh, women are the tough sex. They look after themselves.”

When Charles and Jasmin got back they found a note from Lady Whichford saying she had called on them on her way to Melcombe.

Charles was relieved at missing her. Her voice and manner got on his nerves. And the idea that his parent-in-law would soon be living at Melcombe was so unpleasant that he never spoke to Jasmin about Melcombe at all.

She went to rest before dinner. He took up a book, but Melcombe kept getting into his mind. He went up to Jasmin’s room. She was lying wrapped in a thin white and lace dressing gown, her arms crossed on her breast, like a crusader, her hair curling back from her brow and ears. She smiled at him as he came in. He came and sat on the edge of the bed. He felt curiously sad; and her beauty and the touch of her hand and the sunlight coming between half-drawn curtains on to the quiet walls of the room seemed only to make his senses share the sadness of his mind.

He bent down suddenly and put his arms about her body and laid his head on her shoulder. She asked, “What is it?” and kissed his forehead. Repeated, “What is it?” in a whisper, feeling something of his mood steal from his sense to hers. He shut his eyes. “Nothing—everything—let me lie here . . .”

She wondered, “What’s happened, since we came in?” She felt as if he had been seized, for no reason, by a force which she couldn’t move.

He lay still, holding her hard in his arms, pressing his forehead against her body. She thought that she had never loved him so much as at this moment—when she understood him so little, yet felt her heart beating against his shoulder.

After a long time he raised his head and leaned up, looking at her with a slow darkened sweetness—Then slowly bent down to kiss her mouth, to lock her in his arms again, kissing her drowsily, relentlessly, while the sunlight moved an inch across the wall, as if his senses might get his spirit peace. . . .

The sunlight left the room. The walls were cool. She asked, sleepily, “Are you happier?”

He yawned, closed his eyes again. He murmured, “Darling . . .” smiling faintly with a sense of well-being.

She stirred, sniffed. “I smell roast duck.” She raised herself on her elbow, smiled down at him.

He murmured, laughing, kissing her finger tips, “I do love you, my sweet. . . .”

IX

They took a house in Westminster at the corner of two quiet streets. It was an old house and they emphasized its beauty. Charles became absorbed by the achievement of effects and harmonies. Jasmin devoted herself to details of color and comfort. She hung one of Charles's pictures in her dressing room because he wouldn't allow it anywhere else in the house. She accused him of modesty, but he said that he had the opposite quality: his pride couldn't face his productions. She said, "When you can face them, we shall have the house thick with your works."

He answered, "Studios and dustbins are the place for pictures."

"Why paint them, then?"

He smiled, looking over her head at nothingness. "Lack of inhibition — 'Can't he-elp it,' as the song says."

She suspected him of paradox—a form of cleverness she was used to. She said:—

"But if I had a baby I should be proud to wheel it in the Park."

His attention came back from the nothingness. "You aren't going to, are you?"

"Oh no."

Relieved, he went on thinking about pictures. Why indeed? Why paint them? This "bug" about getting the result that you had in you. Probably you hadn't; and so never got it. (He remembered going from field to field to get hold of a rainbow and Vicky after him—"Silly boy you are . . .") But get it . . . how? He came back to his practical problems.

They gave their first dinner party at the end of September. They asked Rex and Peter, Evelina, Evan Campbell, Michael Ward, and Caroline and Maurice Vernon, and Benita Dane, a pretty girl who had been at a finishing school with Jasmin.

While they were waiting for their guests to arrive and Charles was shaking cocktails, Jasmin said:—

"Young couples in novels always give a 'first dinner party.'"

"M'mm. And the young wife feels very nervous and wonders if the soup will be spoiled. Do you?"

"No. It's oysters."

"Not any flutters of misgiving, darling?"

"None."

"Darling . . . kiss me."

"Dear—now your lips are red."

"Wipe them."

"Now my kerchief's bloody."

"You look too lovely."

"Always say that when you think it."

"You'd get very bored."

"No . . . you're not so loquacious, about me or anything else."

"Strong and silent?"

"Not that, either." She smiled. "That's more like dear old Evan."

"Poor Evan. He'll be the only man to-night who doesn't paint."

"Maurice Vernon doesn't."

"She does, so he almost does. However, Maurice has his Philistine side. He can support Evan." He glanced at her profile turned to a dark mirror. "Evan was in love with you, wasn't he?"

"How did you know?"

"I forget . . . I think I noticed the once or twice I've seen you together."

She said, surprised, "Yes, he was for years."

He asked, feeling anyone would be in love with her, with the lift of her arm, that curve of her waist as she stood back before the glass, "Isn't it hard on him, your asking him here to-night?"

"Oh no." She spoke casually, sweetly, preoccupied with something else, something about the way the white chrysanthemums were arranged. The bell rang.

It was Benita Dane: smart and so pretty. The kind of girl, Charles thought, who bored him. But Jasmin kissed her and they talked an easy

exclamatory jargon together. (“—*too* this and *utterly* that, and *quite*—”)

Michael Ward came in, not bothering to say anything introductory, although he hadn’t seen them since the wedding. He talked to Charles. Jasmin liked the way his smile swooped out from his eyes like a swallow from the eaves. Benita had seen one of his pictures and thought emphatically well of it.

Evan came in, taut and cheerful; took a cocktail. The Vernons followed. Mrs. Vernon was attractive, Jasmin thought, but more aloof than at their first meeting. She saw her laugh and grow easier with Charles, and wondered lightly that he hadn’t fallen in love with her. Benita began managing Dr. Vernon and giving him a cocktail. Jasmin thought he looked preoccupied and found poor Benita stupid—which of course she was, poor darling! Evelina was late, and Rex.

Evan said: “Well, you’re both looking remarkably fit.”

“D’you think I look well?”

He nodded. She had expected him to say that she looked pretty, but now she was married he wouldn’t say so. She asked:—“How’s your mother? She was so sweet to us.”

“Oh, she’s very fit, thanks.”

“And your father?”

“Well, I’m afraid he’s not so fit. As a matter of fact, he isn’t at all fit. They don’t seem absolutely certain what it is, but . . .”

Evelina apologized slowly. She kissed Jasmin and then Charles. Rex and Peter came in directly after her, and Peter, without saying “how d’you do” to anyone, began to talk to Michael Ward about her portrait.

At dinner Jasmin had Maurice Vernon on her right, Michael Ward on her left.

Evelina watched her, saw the way her intelligence woke Maurice Vernon’s interest, the way her voice and appearance pleased young Ward.

Evelina, listening to Rex Lengel’s dissertation on tariffs, realized that she thought of Michael Ward as “young” because she herself felt so unimpassioned and outside life. She had often wondered what it would be like visiting Charles and Jasmin together. She looked at Charles and felt that her molten emotions had been beaten out to a thin shining substance that

couldn't break. She foresaw herself visiting the orbit of his life—like a threepenny moon. And between those phases? (*With how sad steps . . .*) She saw him look down the table at Jasmin, a look quick, sweet, intent. He was changed, she thought. In some way more sure, but easier to wound. He'd gained heat, developed a warm nervous complexity, such as women get from the time they've had a child. He was talking again to Mrs. Vernon now—and Evelina answered Rex Lengel politely.

"No, indeed," she said, and entirely agreed, thinking that it was as if Charles's feelings (so long locked behind his stubborn lips and opaque glances) had begun to flow through the delicate violent richness of his mind . . . And . . .

"Human nature doesn't change," Rex Lengel was saying, to which, suddenly, she couldn't agree.

"You're quite wrong."

"—but from the point of view of mass-psychology," he said, and she lost interest again.

Charles now left Caroline Vernon to Evan and turned to deal with Benita Dane. She had just come back from Scotland. Did he know the St. Clairs? She cited a list of hostesses. And what an *adorable* house this was! . . . Darling Jasmin—*so* clever! . . . He glanced round the table, thought Evelina looked bored by Evan, perceived that Michael Ward liked Jasmin (Michael, who classified women as either "instrumental or detrimental"); noticed with annoyance that "Peter" was already rather drunk. Jasmin had insisted on asking them, and he wondered if she saw that Rex was impossible and Peter tiresomely outrageous. She had "blind spots" about people, just as she had funny lapses of taste, and acceptances of vulgarity.

Jasmin became aware of his look across the flowers.

Bending towards Michael Ward (who was oddly fascinating, she thought), she felt that Charles was watching her with some special intention. He was wondering something—but what? She'd ask him later. . . . For he was puzzling. He had cloudy phases. She'd ask him later, though, for she was too happy to bother; she was enjoying their party; she felt gay, delicious, amused. And now he was out of his mood (if it had been a mood at all, for she was never sure) and was talking to Mrs. Vernon again. Later she'd ask him, "what were you thinking about at dinner?" And he—wouldn't remember, or smile and start a discussion about something else, or come into her bed and take her in his arms and tell her that she was lovely,

or murmur, "What a lovely scent you use!" since that was one of his ways of saying that he wanted her.

Michael Ward, answering her question, said that models were as good in London as in Paris—but more expensive, he said, and reflected that Charles's wife was more intelligent than she had seemed on the few occasions when he'd talked to her before.

After dinner they all went to the studio at the back of the house. Peter sat on the piano and Rex accompanied her while she sang. Jasmin encouraged her, and Charles, annoyed by the songs, took Michael Ward off into a corner and showed him some drawings he had been doing. Soon they were rapt in discussion while Peter taught the others a chorus called "My Baby's in Her Bath."

Evelina came over and joined Charles and Michael. Charles was condemning the influences of Impressionism. After a time Michael began to talk about sculpture. He said it was the only satisfying way of expressing form, and that color, comparatively, mattered very little to him. (Peter was singing "Frankie and Johnnie." Every now and then she glanced towards the group in the corner and Evelina saw that she was annoyed. And Jasmin called out, "You are unsociable!" She was sitting next to Evan Campbell on the edge of the model throne. She slipped her arm through his—"Oh, Peter, *do* sing the 'Hot Water Bottle Blues'!" Peter sang it.)

Charles put down the drawings and came back to the piano. Jasmin, laughing, beckoned him to come and sit the other side of her. He came, noticing, vaguely, that Evan looked uncomfortable. He was still thinking of Michael's remarks about sculpture. . . . Possible, of course, that one would get something out of it even if it were only as an exercise. Jasmin murmured:—

"What are you brooding about, darling?"

He said, "Clay. About getting clay."

"Now someone else be amusing," said Peter, and jumped off the piano and came and sat on the other side of Charles. "Why didn't you listen to my songs?" she asked. "Light my cigarette."

He looked at her. "But I did. I was enjoying them . . ." (He would get some clay to-morrow.) He wanted to go back and talk to Michael, but the latter had settled down with the Vernons on the sofa. Evelina sat down at the piano. He said, "What are you going to play?"

Her hands lay in her lap. "I don't know." Then, "D'you remember . . . ? We heard it together in New York. . . ."

He got up and felt freed from the nearness of Jasmin and Peter. He leaned on the piano. Evelina played, her jeweled blue stare fixed on the lamp at the far end of the room. He watched her hands. The temper that had been in him since dinner—a temper half casual, half nervous—left him. He felt the music changing his blood to light. Jasmin came and stood beside him, leaning on the piano too. He glanced at her profile, bent gravely above her leaning arms, and felt happy that she had come.

When Evelina stopped, Jasmin raised her head. She said slowly, "That was heavenly." She looked at Charles. She wished she was alone with him and Evelina, and that her guests were gone. Benita Dane was exclaiming, "How marvelously you play, Miss Bitterne!" And they were all chattering and crowding round. And Evan Campbell said, "That was jolly—I enjoyed that! There's something about good music that always gets me."

Evelina rose and shut the piano. They all broke into groups now and talked. Michael Ward told Charles and Evelina of his plan to go and paint in the South of France for the spring, and Charles said he was going to work this winter and probably go abroad the following year. . . .

When Charles and Jasmin were left alone she ran upstairs to fetch the Aberdeen puppy, who had been shut in her bedroom. She came back laughing and struggling with the plump black creature in her arms.

". . . One glove, one satin slipper, quarter of a Persian rug, and a corner of the eiderdown, Carlos has eaten. . . . Put him out, darling."

Charles took Carlos out, enticing him as far as Smith Square, while Jasmin stood on the doorstep laughing at the pert blob receding along the moonlit pavement. Big Ben chimed one and Carlos barked high and frantically.

"Funny how he hates Big Ben," said Jasmin as he and Charles entered after a useless expedition. Charles shut the door and bolted it. "He thinks mealtimes are the only significant records of the hour." They went upstairs. Jasmin put Carlos in his basket.

"How did you enjoy it, darling?"

He smiled at her, "Very much." He wondered if he had. Looking back, it seemed a silly evening, with everyone talking nonsense.

"It *was* fun." She slipped out of her dress. "I think it was rather a success. We must have more parties. I want to get the Chantreys (he's rather a darling) and Pam and Rex and Claud. . . ."

"I wish Peter wouldn't get drunk."

"Oh, poor darling, she can't get going without it. . . . I thought Rex was rather depressed this evening."

"It must be rather depressing to be a model cuckold."

"Oh, he doesn't mind that. . . ." She put her pearls on to the dressing table, looked up and saw him looking at her in the glass. "Darling." She smiled. She asked, teasing, "You'd mind?"

His expression became indifferent. He sat down on the bed. "I suppose so," he said.

"Would you stop caring for me?" She slipped off her underclothes.

"I should never do that."

"Would you be jealous?"

He looked at her. In the shaded lights of the room her body was strong and lovely. She repeated, "Would you?" as if she had suddenly had a feeling that she must be answered. She took her nightdress off the chair and put it on.

He said, "I might be." He thought. He said, "Come here, my dear. . . ." She came eagerly and curled up against him on the bed.

He touched her cheek with his hand, said, gentle, unsmiling, "What a silly subject." She nodded. "All lovers say to each other, 'Would you mind if —' 'Would you be jealous—' Discussing it is just a sensation really." She broke off, took his hand and pressed it to her lips. "Sweetheart." Her look glimmered to a smile, half-tender, half-impudent. "You flirted with Benita Dane this evening."

"What else could one do with her?"

She sat up, tossing back her hair; asked, "How did you think Evan looked?"

"Very well. No cracks on the surface."

She flushed. "There wouldn't be. I like the Vernons. Only she makes me feel undignified and noisy. . . . What are you smiling at?"

He sprang up, stretched, began to undress. "We can't gossip until dawn."

“But what were you . . .?”

“I was smiling because, my angel, you sometimes *are*!”

“Noisy?”

“M’mm.”

“And undignified?”

“Darling, sometimes. Never mind, I like it.” He stopped, waistcoat half off, to kiss away her troubled expression.

“But, Charles . . .”

“My dearest, I was only teasing.”

“I suppose you’d like me to be grave and mysterious. . . .”

“My dear, you’re mysterious enough to me.” He looked at her as he spoke, and reflecting on his own words, aptly rather than profoundly spoken, he thought that they were true. . . . What did he know of this girl, curled up on the eiderdown, but the enchantment of her features, the cadences of her voice, the curves of her body . . .

She saw his altered look.

“What is it?”

He knelt down suddenly so that his face was level with hers. “Darling, I hope I shall make you happy.” He added, “I’ve hardly thought. I’ve simply been in love with you, and wanted you, and been quite simply and sufficiently happy because we were together.”

“But you’ve been angelic. My dear, you mustn’t probe when there’s nothing wrong. . . .”

“No, but it mustn’t even be negative. There mustn’t be just nothing wrong; there must be everything *right*. Because we love each other so, my dear, we can’t be just lovers.” He asked, “Do you understand?”

She nodded, tears in her eyes. “But how can we be *better* than lovers?”

He saw that she couldn’t realize his meaning and perceived an innocence of emotion which touched him strangely. He said, “Darling, when I saw you, that night, at your dance, I hadn’t meant to speak to you. You remember? I didn’t see you for a long time.”

“I used to walk up and down outside your mother’s house hoping you’d come out.”

“My dear! When I saw you again (doesn’t it seem long ago?—already) I knew that I couldn’t ‘undo’ you, so to speak. I didn’t want to marry. I wanted to be free to work. Only I needed you as much as I needed my work. . . .” He added ironically, smoothing her hair back from her forehead, “More, by this time. . . . I wanted you, I want you, for all my life. It seemed as if at first, when we were married, that everything was settled. . . .” He broke off, puzzled by conflicting views in his own mind. “—I must understand you better,” he said.

She put her arms round his neck. “Stop thinking and kiss me,” she demanded. (Which was easy enough, sweet enough, he thought. Too easy . . . too sweet . . .)

X

Lady Whichford invited Charles and Jasmin to Melcombe for the second week-end in October.

Charles hadn't been to Melcombe since the day that he and Theresa and Evelina and Vicky drove away. But he thought Jasmin looked tired and would enjoy three days in the country. And he knew that he must go sooner or later.

He was preoccupied as he motored Jasmin down on the Friday afternoon. As they got near, Jasmin slipped her arm through his and he knew that she saw he dreaded getting there. As they got to the gates he said, "Darling, you mustn't take any notice of my sentimentality." They crossed the bridge, the car giving that familiar jolt, and he had a sidelong glimpse of the two swans by the boathouse.

On the upward sloping park, the horse-chestnuts still kept their leaves, flecked green and yellow by the turn of the year; only the two Spanish chestnuts remained green. In the higher distance the house, roseate and serene, accepted his return as it accepted, with the dreamy yet formal indifference of age, the unrelenting seasons.

They drew near, passing through the nearer gate between the stained stone pillars, and slowing under the vaulted beeches. He wondered which room was Lady Whichford's—and which room he'd have ('allotted' to him by Miss Courage). . . .

They came into the open drive before the house. The front door had been repainted, and the frames of all the windows had a new coat of white paint. Jasmin said, "You know I've only been here once, since they took it. . . ." He felt her hand on his before she got out.

The butler said that her ladyship was resting, but Miss Courage would give them tea.

The hall was painted a lovely yellow and the furniture was dark green lacquer. A log fire crackled, and Miss Courage came out of the library, gasping a little. Charles found her such a bore (though Jasmin said she was "so unselfish and Mummie was so awful to her"). She said, "I'm sure you're both just dying for tea." He smiled. He stared through the open door down the vista of the library, observing the sofas in damson plush with silver braid and fringes, the curtains and covers of silvery linen with a quaint pattern of animals in purples and creams and blues. . . . He saw the creamy paneling

and the blue-gray ceiling, the fantastic chandelier with colored glass and wax candles. . . . He followed Jasmin into the room. . . . It was as if Mandeville's perverse fingers had painted over the essential beauty of the rooms with an exquisite and yet distorting *maquillage*. . . . (Like wakening the Sleeping Beauty with a lipstick . . . or setting out, wittily enough, to pluck the eyebrows of tradition and set a patch at the corner of Helen's eyes. . . .)

Miss Courage introduced them. Half-a-dozen people. Jasmin seemed to know them all. She sat down and began talking. Charles moved away for one minute to a window. The lawns were just the same. And the distant pavilion, and the trees. . . .

"Sugar, Mr. Bitterne?" Miss Courage asked.

"No, thank you."

She brought him his cup, and stood it on the low wide sill of the window. She said, "I expect it feels rather queer—coming back," and blushed and went back to her place at the table. He was thinking of the afternoon, nearly a year ago, when Evelina had arrived, and Theresa had told them that she expected Ledbury. . . .

He looked across at Jasmin. She was laughing at something that the man in plus-fours had said. She seemed to be grimacing far away, although her laughter was tinkling and bubbling through the room. He drank his tea, looking out of the window again.

As he did so he saw his father-in-law come through the arch in the privet hedge on the left of the lawn. He was followed by three other men and a woman in a tweed coat. All the men were in shooting jackets; Lord Whichford himself was wearing leather gaiters. He looked bulky and was talking with animation to his companions. Charles saw that the woman was Nadine Bristow. He remembered seeing her once as Cleopatra and once as Oberon, and once as Mrs. Tanqueray in a revival, and he thought that she had been at his wedding. He recognized one of the men as Bernhard Schön, —Whichford's partner,—and another, as the group came near the house, as De Sabra, the publicist. They all entered by the billiard room door, and in a few minutes came into the library.

Lord Whichford kissed Jasmin on both cheeks. And, "Well, Charles? Hello, Charles! How's life?" He sprawled, filling an armchair. Nadine Bristow hovered by him. He patted her hand. "Sit down, my dear, and have some tea. . . ." His glance followed her. Jasmin ran to meet her mother. "Hello, darling!" Charles followed, receiving a pecking kiss. "Dear

Charles,” she said, and went and sat among her guests. They chattered, exclaimed. . . .

“—fifteen brace since lunch time . . .”

Lord Whichford said, “We’re leaving the coverts by Snade Farm until tomorrow.”

“—but of course they say that she wants the children . . .”

“—not since Goodwood. They’ve taken a place near Cirencester, I believe . . .”

Charles went out of the room. He paused in the inner hall, at the foot of the staircase. He didn’t know which room. (The yellow stair carpets that matched the walls were “rather effective.”) Miss Courage had followed him out. She said, “You and Mrs. Bitterne have the ‘Addison suite.’” She followed, explained, “You know, Lady Whichford has had all the rooms named after well-known people in the period of the house.”

He said, “What a cultured idea.”

“*Yes!* Isn’t it?” She was about to lead him upstairs, but he prevented her. “All right. I’ll find it—I should like to read the doors. . . .”

He went upstairs. The unfamiliar air of each familiar aspect made him feel as if he were having an hallucination. On Theresa’s door was painted in black letters “Marlborough”; her boudoir was labeled “Queen Anne”; the bedroom that Evelina always had, “Sheridan.” . . .

He found “Addison”—with “Steele” (the dressing room) next door—The rooms Theresa always said were haunted. The accustomed ghost must find all this refurnishing a little strange, he thought. He felt like a ghost himself. . . .

Jasmin found him in their room when she came to dress. She went up to him.

“My angel, I’m *so* sorry.”

He looked at her.

She asked, “Does it seem so—bad?” (She didn’t think herself that it was so bad. In fact, save for a too “new” look in everything, a lack of wear and custom, rather lovely.)

He said, “I must go and change.”

She followed him into the dressing room.

“Charles.”

He said, “Darling, do go and dress.”

She turned away, leaving the door open. He said: “Painted . . . veneered . . . made a show for the bawdy scum of London. . . .” He wanted to hurt her.

She shut the door between them. Later, when she was putting on her dress, she heard him go out of his dressing room and along the passage.

She was late for dinner, and Charles (sitting between Nadine Bristow, all bosom, and a Mrs. Kenrick, all eyelashes) saw that she had been crying. He felt a momentary pleasure that changed gradually to a sense of futility in himself, in her, in all the movement and change that made up life.

He played billiards most of the evening with Mrs. Kenrick’s husband, while she hung around and made exclamations on their play.

It was late when he went upstairs. He found Jasmin in bed. She stared at him. He came and knelt down beside her and took her hand. She opened her lips, as if she were going to speak, and then shut them again. Two tears rolled out of her eyes and ran sideways on to the pillow. He felt a wrench of pity. “Darling, I feel such a brute. I don’t know what got hold of me. . . .”

She said, “Put your arms round me and kiss me.”

Soon she was happy again, talking, laughing, caressing, until she fell asleep.

He lay awake, brooding on the swiftness and lightness of her forgiving. Its ease gave him a sense of unfulfillment.

He heard the stable clock chime two—three. . . . The chimes, coming to him through the unpainted darkness, conjured so many “three o’clocks.” . . . Nights with the book’s page growing blurred with sleep . . . afternoons in summer . . . winter days with only an hour of daylight left. . . .

A sense of losing, slipping Time beset him suddenly (those chimes, like silver fangs, delicately, mythically devouring the hours, days, nights . . . the years, the whole of life). . . .

Jasmin breathed beside him.

He lay over on his side and, slowly stretching out his arm, laid his hand against her heart. . . . She stirred, and was quiet again.

Nothing was certain. (The sweet and certain beat beneath his hand could be stopped—by an impact, a microbe, a change of chemistry. . . .) Nothing in life was certain, except waste. . . . Waste of time . . . of mind . . . of happiness . . . of Love itself. . . .

He fell asleep lying close to her in the dark.

In the morning he got up soon after seven, and went out leaving her still drowsy.

The garden was unchanged. The October roses starred the raw air, breathing their dew-chilled fragrance into the mist. . . . The stone benches and parapet were wet, the grass sodden, the swimming pool a veiled mirror, reflecting its own edges and lichenized steps and the tamarisk branches that bent near the water. The herbaceous borders seemed in two minds, to bloom or shiver. The greenhouses, as usual, locked (Charles tried each one). The orchard full of scents, the trees loaded, the grass bent in thick green plumes. . . .

He came back through the farmyard. He didn't recognize any of the "hands." The electric engine was chuffing away next to the stables. He saw that the garage had been enlarged. He crossed the stable yard and went through the door and the privet hedge back on to the lawn. The mist was lifting, but there was no sunshine. A pale sky and stillness in the air.

He thought of the night, and of his feelings yesterday when he arrived, and of Jasmin. He had reasoned away his bitterness, but he felt sad, as if the quiet autumn morning were stifling his heart.

He went in to breakfast and found his father-in-law eating porridge. The paneling in here hadn't been touched, and the table and chairs which had been bought from Theresa were the same. Miss Courage poured out his coffee at the sideboard.

"Well," sounded Lord Whichford, "I expect you feel pretty queer being here again? Don't you?"

"Yes," said Charles. "Very."

He helped himself to kidneys and bacon and mushrooms and took a boiled egg out of the plated box. The egg had "3½ minutes" penciled on it. He put it back and took out a brown egg inscribed "4 minutes." He sat halfway down the long table. Bernard Schön came in, followed by two more of the guests. Charles gathered from the talk that they were all going to

shoot, and that several neighbors were expected. Lord Whichford said, "Young Campbell's coming—and his mother's joining us for lunch. Old Campbell doesn't shoot any more. He's too ill, poor fellow. . . ."

Charles was glad that Evan was coming, and liked the idea of seeing Lady Campbell again. When Jasmin came down he got her some breakfast and told her that Evan and his mother were coming. She said, "How lovely! I think she's such a darling!"

There were nine guns altogether, including Charles. He hadn't meant to shoot, but Jasmin had brought his gun and persuaded him. As they all started off down the back drive he said, "Your father'll be more dangerous than ever with Nadine beside him. Do try and stand with whoever is farthest off." She laughed and promised. Evan came up and she walked between them until they got to the copse on the rise of ground above Snade Farm. Lord Whichford and Nadine Bristow were posted at the far corner of the little wood. Jasmin stood with Charles and Evan next to them. Jasmin sat on a fallen tree trunk. She said, "Oh, it is stuffy to-day."

He asked, "Are you tired?"

"A little."

On the other side of them stood Bernard Schön with his chauffeur to load for him. Beyond him, De Sabra with Mrs. Kenrick; beyond them another man. Charles couldn't remember the names of all the party, and wasn't interested enough to find out. There was a nice American, a Southerner, and a youth who was "in politics." Charles thought how odd it was that "field sports" were considered a sign that you had, socially, arrived. He wondered if Lord Whichford really liked killing his own food, or whether he would play hopscotch with just as much zest if hopscotch were a traditional "gentleman's" sport.

He heard the distant tapping of the beaters coming through the trees. After a few minutes a bird rose, then two more, and sailed rather high, over Lord Whichford. He shot, too late, and the birds sailed in a low steady flight down the stubble field towards the railway. A covey followed, passing low overhead. Charles muttered, "Too low down"—but everyone else seemed to be shooting. . . . Evan was finishing a bird that Bernhard Schön had begun.

The drive produced three and a half brace and an atmosphere of zest and satisfaction. They moved on to another covert. Next time Jasmin stood with

Evan, and Mrs. Kenrick said, "I think I must come and be a *porte-bonheur* for you, Mr. Bitterne." Charles thanked her.

Luncheon was set in a clearing of the woods near the gravel pits. Lady Whichford and the rest of the women arrived. Everyone sat at the long trestle table and became very animated as the game pies, and casseroles and bottles were set out on the table by the chauffeur and footmen.

Charles sat by Lady Campbell. He thought that she too seemed diverted by the details of the occasion. He wished Theresa and Evelina were here to see this revel of elderly nymphs and satyrs. But the mulled claret was good, and by the end of luncheon he felt tolerant, even of Mrs. Kenrick's eyelashes. Jasmin talked all through luncheon to Evan. It struck Charles that there must be some odd insensitiveness in her, for each of her sentences and movements played on Evan's feelings, and anyone could discern his devotion. He saw that Lady Campbell looked several times at her son, and then at Jasmin. But he couldn't read her thoughts. After luncheon Jasmin came up to him and said that she was going back with the other women as she felt tired. She said good-bye to Evan and told him to come and see them in London.

When the women had gone, and the men moved off again, Evan came and walked beside Charles. After a silence he said:—

"Jasmin doesn't look awfully fit, does she? Not quite her usual self."

Charles said he hadn't noticed until just now—it was a stuffy sort of day.

Evan said, "I thought perhaps . . ." He flushed.

Charles said, "D'you mean she's going to have a baby?"

"Well, I . . ."

"Perhaps she is." He thought how funny it was that Evan should be more aware of such a possibility than himself. He felt exasperated with himself, and annoyed with Evan. . . .

When he got in he found Jasmin writing letters in her bedroom. He said:

—
"Evan tells me you're going to have a baby."

She colored suddenly and paled again, asked half laughing, half crying:

—

“*Evan* told you?”

“M’mm. He noticed you weren’t looking well and concluded that. An obvious idea to anyone but me, I suppose.”

She sat turning her penholder in her fingers. He asked, “Is it true?”

She said, “You look so angry. Why?”

“Is it true!”

“Yes, I think so . . .”

“I see—I suppose you want one.”

She said, “Yes . . . I do. Darling . . . why are you dreary about it?”

He sat down on the chaise longue and crossed his arms and stared at the floor. “What a bore Nature is,” he said.

“Oh—darling—*please!* . . .”

He looked up at her. “My sweetheart—I’m sorry. I’m ridiculously knocked out, for the moment. . . . I suppose I feel as if someone had come and told me that you’d been arrested—”

She laughed. “—arrested by that old bore, Nature?”

“Darling . . .” He got up and began to walk about. “I suppose the gist of my feeling is that I don’t want you to be—hurt.”

“That’s sentimental.”

“Possibly. True, all the same.” He paused. He said, “I have no virile and Elizabethan desire to breed by you. I want your loveliness ‘unthrifty.’”

“Charles . . .”

“What?”

“Why are you so horrible about it?”

He came and took her hands in his and looked down into her face without speaking. Then he said, “I don’t know. I won’t be any more. . . .” He smiled, absurdly wanting to weep. “I wish I could produce all the right feelings and think tenderly of our ‘little one.’ . . . All I feel is that I hate your being in the power of a horrid little embryo in your inside. . . .” He lit a cigarette.

She said, “You are sweet and absurd.” She felt indefinitely ill and nauseated, but content in spirit. She reflected that she would have liked him

to have the “right feelings.” She thought, with a mixture of mockery and dissatisfaction, that Evan would have had them. (Evan had been very gentle and serious this morning. Now she understood why.) She said:—

“Do be pleased . . . because I am. . . . Would you like a boy?”

“I don’t mind. Darling—I can’t get used to the idea.” His mind took an impression of her as she looked at this moment, her hands crossed on her lap, her coloring drained to a golden pallor that emphasized her shadowy eyelids and the reddened shape of her mouth. She said, “You are queer—” and he caught the note of chagrin and bewilderment. He whispered: “Come here.”

She got up and came to where he stood. He said, “I expect I shall be very pleased later on.” (He thought, How queer to have to pretend to her, to reassure her.)

She began to cry, easily and naturally, resting her head against his shoulder. She said, “Don’t bother about my crying. . . . I just feel rather beastly.”

“But—” He stopped himself. She wanted him to accept her “feeling beastly.” He made her lie down. His face was as pallid as her own. He asked, “Will you feel like this all the time?” She stopped crying. She smiled, laughed unsteadily. “Oh no! I’ve got an awful little book that says, ‘The nausea that may be experienced in the first weeks passes off, and the mother may then expect to live a normal, healthy, and cheerful life.’ . . . It says, by the way, that she should have the companionship on her walks of a Cheerful Female Friend.”

“Miss Courage, exactly.”

“And,” Jasmin continued, “that the Husband must be consistently cheerful and matter-of-fact.”

“I’ll try.”

“There’s a chapter at the end about the Father.”

“I must read it.”

“It says ‘The Father is as important as the Mother.’”

“Good.”

“He must not pick up the child, except at the proper times.”

“God forbid.”

“He can help to form ‘the little character.’” She laughed and lay back limp. “Oh, damn! . . .”

“D’you feel beastly again?”

“A little.”

“My dear, isn’t there anything . . .”

“Go down and tell Miss Courage to have my tea sent up here. It’s better after eating.”

Charles went down. He told Miss Courage that Jasmin had a headache. She said, “You look awfully queer, Mr. Bitterne.”

He said, “I’ve got rather a headache myself.” He left Miss Courage and went into the men’s cloakroom and was sick. Coming out he met the youthful politician, who said:—

“You’re looking awfully rotten, Bitterne. What’s the matter?”

Charles said deprecatingly, “Oh, nothing much. I’m expecting a headache.”

The youth stared after him.

XI

Every day Charles went to the studio before ten, came into the house for luncheon, and went to the studio again until dinner. After the light went he did drawings, sometimes of models,—which he shared with Michael Ward,—sometimes of still life. Sometimes he copied the drawings of old masters out of a portfolio lent him by his father-in-law.

When Michael Ward came they worked together in silence. Sometimes Jasmin came in and sat and read. At the end of the day she came to look at his work. But she often had people to luncheon and tea and would spend her time with them or go out to their houses. These luncheons and teas became her routine. She felt well and looked lovely enough to enjoy meeting people. In the evening at dinner she gave Charles an account of the people she'd seen and the matters she had talked of during the day. He enjoyed hearing these descriptions and he was glad to feel that the time passed easily for her. He tried not to think about the coming June. Sometimes he felt as though they were estranged by their different anticipations. She was so gay and matter-of-fact (and her friends were so talkative about the child). He felt that at best he would learn to tolerate it.

As the weeks passed, Jasmin's contentment seemed to make a cocoon round their whole life. He felt that they were shut close together into an intimacy of a special and finite kind. He felt her closer and closer in his affections, but farther in mind. Her vitality became deep and quiet, as if it were locked in her child; and her sensitiveness to life—which made her so eager a companion—seemed to broaden into phases of contemplation. Physically she seemed less changed than in spirit.

Changed in spirit, he thought—not in intellect. For, since they stayed at home many evenings, they talked and read and talked again, and he found her mind good; her knowledge sound, her judgment uneven in its pace, but quick and fearless.

It was her facile fulfillment of soul which made him feel alone.

When the spring came they often motored into the country and he worked out of doors. Several times they went to Melcombe and stayed a night. Once, coming back, she said that she was glad the child would so often be in the place where Charles had lived as a child. And for a moment Charles's imagination had a shock of pleasure. He saw a sailing boat launched, unsteadily, from the steps of the swimming pool. . . .

Evelina often came to see them. She and Jasmin took Carlos for walks along the Embankment or in St. James's Park. Charles wondered what they talked about. Jasmin seemed to grow fond of Evelina, but he could never make out what Evelina thought of Jasmin. "Sweet" and "lovely" were the words she used about her, and once she said to him that Jasmin was much simpler and more feminine than he supposed. He asked her what she meant. Evelina said, "Her independence doesn't go very far. When she does enterprising or unconventional things, it's just unused high spirits. In her heart she's 'clinging' and easily influenced. She'd really love it if you ordered her about and 'beat her when she sneezes.' . . . You can see already that she's adopted half your ideas and points of view. . . ."

Charles was disconcerted by these remarks because he felt they were true. He didn't like the idea of influencing Jasmin. He felt that they ought to be equal in mind and independent in behavior. Yet he knew that, in fact, if Jasmin held an opinion that seemed false he took great trouble to put it right. Once when she refused to agree they had lapsed into a hostile silence which lasted until bedtime. In the night he woke her to tell her that he was sorry he'd been rude. She cried sleepily and then laughed a little and said, "I suppose I was wrong."

"But you have every right to your own opinion."

She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder and said, "I'd rather have yours," and fell asleep again. Her former certainty and sudden concession puzzled him. She seemed neither to disagree from conviction nor to agree by policy. Her inconsistencies sometimes annoyed him. They had a kind of pattern beginning always with an excited "But, *darling*, I simply don't agree," and ending with some delicious and indifferent admission of defeat. One manner being, in the midst of his argument, a grave "Darling, I adore you to talk to me"—and then a chuckle—a caress—a change of subject. . . .

During that long winter and bright sudden April, Jasmin was conscious of being in love and at peace. She said to Charles that she thought that waiting for a baby must be rather like old age—one felt at rest because everything was predestined and natural. He said quickly, "You wait for very different things."

She changed the subject. Whenever she assured him that she was well and cited the doctor, he said, "I hate obstetrics."

She spoke to Evelina about Charles's queerness about the child. Evelina said, "Isn't it quite natural? His life depends on your living, and everything

you feel he must feel for you. . . .”

Jasmin felt that Evelina understood Charles in a way that she couldn't. There was a curious mix-up in them both of sensitiveness and acrid common sense. They had prejudices in common of which they were quite unconscious, just as they had all sorts of references and half jokes which they never bothered to explain. Sometimes their oneness of spirit made her feel shut out. She saw that Evelina had something of Charles that she would never get, and somehow didn't deserve. Some quality in Evelina was allied with the quality in Charles which isolated them from her family. The quality (in Evelina as in him) held assurance, gentleness, fastidiousness—a set of absolute standards, allied, by their sense of humor, with an acceptance of standards that they despised. It was this quality, unnameable and complex, which gave Charles his ascendancy over her mind, and made her seek Evelina's company, and then, in reaction, find a kind of relief in the society of her usual friends. Charles called these returns to the fold “Belgravian debauches.” Sometimes he went with her and drank a great deal and enjoyed himself. But afterwards he was irritable and said that no one in the room would have been bearable in sober daylight. In the spring she began to give up going out, and only had people occasionally to luncheon or tea.

One morning in June he woke up to see Jasmin looking down at him and smiling. He rubbed his eyes. “What is it?”

She said, “I do believe at *last* it's going to begin.” He sat up suddenly, staring at her. She laughed at his expression and then held out her hand. He looked at the clock and saw it was twenty-five minutes past seven. A hot day had begun. He caught her hand in his. He felt that the last weeks of waiting had made her preoccupied, and this touch of her hand brought her back to him with a jolt of emotion. He bent towards her and kissed her, and then got up hurriedly, putting on his dressing gown.

She said, “Tell Nurse.”

“Tell her what?”

She hesitated, chuckled. “Choose your own words. . . . My sweet, *don't* look like that! . . . Darling! Say, ‘Nurse, unaccustomed as I am to public speaking . . .’”

“Idiot! . . .”

He went out. Jasmin looked round the early-sunlit bedroom and thought how exciting and queer it was that there would be a live baby in the cradle in

the corner. The unassuming little pain came again. Odd to think of the baby waiting to be pushed headfirst into life. How strange to launch a whole person into a whole life! . . .

Nurse came in. "I've just had a little talk with Doctor, and he says you're not to worry and he's coming along about nine o'clock. Just to see how you are. . . ." Charles hovered in the doorway. Nurse said they would all have a nice cup of tea. . . . The patients' husbands were always glad of a cup of tea, she said . . . and hurried across the landing to her room.

Charles sat on the edge of the bed. "Oh, damn!"

"Darling, they give one heaps of anæsthetic. It's no worse than a tooth, and much nicer in a cradle. . . ."

The pain came again and she stared at the toes of his red dressing slippers. When it had gone she looked up and he looked away at the window. "It's going to be such a lovely day."

She fingered the cuff of his dressing gown.

"You go for a walk in the Park and when you come back there'll be a dear little—What's the betting now? What's the starting price for a boy?"

Nurse brought in the tray. "Now, Mrs. Bitterne, this'll do you all the good in the world. And Hubby, too. . . . Then Doctor wants you to have a little sleep, and later on you shall have a nice little something. . . ."

The curtains were drawn and Charles went to dress. After breakfast he went into the studio, and looked at his half-finished still-life on the easel. It wasn't bad, so far. He started—the front door bell. . . . But it was only a parcel from the cleaners.

He went upstairs and looked into their bedroom. His own bed had been pushed into the corner and a white sheet put over it. Jasmin was lying still, her face turned away. Nurse came up behind him. "I've just given her an injection. She'll sleep a bit now."

He went downstairs.

Jasmin heard him go, but she was too drowsy to move. She felt passive and the pain seemed to have nothing to do with her. Her business, as Nurse had said, was to sleep. . . . She closed her eyes again.

The doctor came and went. He told Charles he would come back in the afternoon. Charles answered Theresa and Lady Whichford on the telephone and went upstairs several times to see Jasmin. The third time she was more

awake. She said she'd had a heavenly sleep, but Nurse was a brute and wouldn't give her any more dope, and laughed and said, "If the whiskey doesn't get you, then the cocaine must" . . . and turned suddenly on her face and gripped her pillow.

When she looked up again Charles said, "I'd better telephone." But Nurse said, "It's no good yet, I'm afraid," and outside the bedroom door she told him that "Mrs. Bitterne was really wonderfully bright."

Downstairs he found Evelina. She asked, "How is she?"

"Wonderfully bright."

Evelina sat and smoked in the studio with him.

They had luncheon together.

In the afternoon the doctor came. He telephoned from the library for an anæsthetist. Charles went up to the landing outside their bedroom. When Nurse came out of the room he had a glimpse of Jasmin clutching the top of the bed, heard a drawn-out "Oh—*hell!*" and then, a minute after, a muttered half-weeping, half-impudent "The—Olympic Games must—be—much easier—going! . . ."

The door was shut. He ran downstairs. The anæsthetist was in the hall—a little man who put yellow gloves down on the table. Evelina took him upstairs and then joined Charles in the library. She said, "It won't hurt her any more now. . . ."

They sat on opposite chairs. Tea was brought in. Charles reflected that they had just finished luncheon. But it was half-past four now, and the telephone rang again, and he thought it must be to tell him that Jasmin . . .

Jasmin breathed and sank again. . . . Wave after wave; but now there was a saving darkness, a coiling, throttling blankness, that nearly annihilated—nearly—but now uncoiled, cleared, left a cloudy space where voices fell to and fro above one's head like white comets in a gray universe. . . . (Not altogether gray), for the man's face was pink and the thing he held black, and Nurse bobbed somewhere over a horizon and the voice said—she struggled for the words—"Now!" But she was sinking, and the thick pale coil of relief, coming slow, slowly, but sure, more surely, choked that viper of agony that tore and dragged—stifled it. The voice made words in Huge Letters: "A LITTLE MORE" and thin letters, "YES, DOCTOR." Now blank . . . now clearing again. . . . But hardly clear, for once again, down, down,

strangling, thank goodness. The letters: “COMPLETELY NOW” . . . and swiftly grayness, dark grayness, far, small sounds, and—a stopped clock; blackness; no more. . . .

“Modern science,” said the anæsthetist to Evelina, who gave him a whiskey and soda, “has divested childbirth of many of its terrors.”

“For *women*,” she said.

“Ah yes—naturally, naturally for women.”

He went away carrying a bag with R.H. stamped on it—Royal Highness, thought Evelina, as his back view got into a taxi. The telephone rang. She answered. It was Theresa.

“A girl,” said Evelina. . . . “Half an hour ago. . . . Not very bad. . . . She’s very pleased. . . . Charles is with her now. . . .”

Evelina put down the receiver and poured herself out a whiskey and soda. She remembered that she was dining with the Chantreys and must go back to her flat and change.

The doctor came in. He said:—

“Well, Miss Bitterne, you can tell your brother that there’s nothing whatever to worry about. He’s got a splendid child, and Mrs. Bitterne has come through excellently. Plenty of pluck.” He drank some water.

When he had gone, Evelina powdered her face and put on her hat.

Charles came in. “Are you going?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll drive you back.” He came and stood by her. “I’m glad it’s over,” he said.

She could feel him like a wire that had been twanged. She put her arms round him and he held her with a close, unquestioning relief. She said, “There’s nothing to worry about now.”

XII

September.

Theresa sat by the window. A taxi drew up outside the door. Jasmin had written that she would come when they got back.

Starbright showed her in. Theresa embraced her.

"You're looking very well."

"I am."

"And Charles?"

"He's splendid. He's been painting out of doors for the last six weeks. We came back yesterday."

"And the prodigious daughter?"

"Very prodigious. And thrives on her bottles. . . . You must come and see her."

"I'll see her in a month or two. I don't like little babies. They always make me feel how chancy it is that we aren't apes."

"—But *she's lovely!*"

"Nonsense, my dear. Sit down. How old is she? Three months! And that absurd charming name! You and Charles are both romantics, under your tough modern skins. . . . You shall have a glass of sherry. That's my concession to London habits. Starbright, some sherry, please, for Mrs. Charles. Tell me about yourself. That's pleasant talk for both of us. I'm past telling about these days, except that I've started to embroider some curtains for this room—and I'm writing a novel when I get the time. A slight thing, really. (The autobiography's gone to the publishers, you know!) Still, that's neither here nor there. Tell me about yourself."

Jasmin hesitated. "There's much less to tell."

Theresa glanced at her. "Come, come—there must be. Who have you met? Where have you been? What have you been reading? What new clothes have you got? What new plans, new friends, new interests?"

Jasmin laughed. "You *are* a darling!"

She had left Charles gloomy, staring at each of his pictures in turn and damning each of them with careful criticism. Theresa was a relief; a change

—like clean air. She had none of Charles's acrid vein. (Where did he get that from?)

Theresa asked: "What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"There is. I've a nose for states of soul. Yours has changed."

Jasmin drew off her gloves, crossed her hands on her lap. Theresa watched her features change in expression; soften and grow hard and then melancholy. The girl said at last: —

"I'm restless. I don't know why. It's funny. Perhaps it's this lovely crisp sunshine. . . . I feel all bottled up—I can't settle." She pulled her hat off. Her hair shone in the room, shadowing the bronzed texture of her skin.

"You've enjoyed your holiday?"

"Oh yes." Jasmin wondered if she had. Charles and her mother had been in a state of restrained enmity. And towards the end of their visit the baby had failed to save her from the dissatisfaction that blew about Charles like a perpetual February. There had been times, in the last few weeks, when her rides with Evan had been a relief from some half-conscious vigilance.

Theresa thought, "Every marriage has its growing pains. Possibly theirs . . ." She asked: —

"You'll be in London, then—in the autumn?"

"I think so."

"What do you think of this pattern? D'you like it? Dear John Leroy designed it with me."

Jasmin admired.

"I think those greens and that cyclamen go so well together."

"Yes."

"Have a cigarette? They're in that box."

"Thank you."

"What a pity you couldn't escape for a time together! Domestic life is apt to make such an undergrowth about one. . . . Servants, bills, and what not. . . . And then you can't see the trees."

Jasmin pondered.

"I don't know if Charles would want—"

"Nonsense. Men want what you want them to want."

"Perhaps what *you*—"

"My dear, a woman's strength is in her little finger. I'm not exceptional—"

She spoke trenchantly. (But doubted: "Possibly I am . . . and the girl, for all her charm, lacks purpose.") She said:—

"*Want* him to come, my dear."

"But I don't—if he doesn't want to."

Theresa's glance flashed up from her embroidery.

"Ah well, it's your affair." She asked: "Have you seen Evelina?"

"She came once to Melcombe while we were there. . . . I gather she's in London—at her flat."

"M'mm—"

"What does 'M'mm' mean?"

"I've seen her once. She lunched here last week. I hear she goes about with the Chantreys a good deal."

"Why not?"

"He's attractive."

"And Mrs. Chantrey isn't."

"Exactly."

"But Evelina—"

"Has a wild streak in her, although she's quiet. The Bitternes all have. Not that that matters in itself . . . but . . ."

"But what?"

"Simply that whatever's happening isn't doing her good. She looks strained and ill and is more in debt than ever . . . or so I gather from Vicky."

Jasmin was troubled, but made no comment.

Before she went she visited Vicky upstairs. Vicky asked her about Perdita's looks and hair and weight. She said a little eau de Cologne and olive oil rubbed into her scalp every day would help the curl. Jasmin

answered her questions a little shyly. She always had a feeling that Vicky detected silliness in her. Before she went Jasmin said:—

“Theresa says that Evelina isn’t looking well.”

Vicky’s underlip pressed upward, rounding the top lip and deepening the furrows beside her nose.

“No more she is.”

“D’you think she’s—unhappy about anything?”

“I dare say she is.”

Jasmin felt that there was an implacable quality in Vicky. All attempts at friendliness fell on barren ground. Vicky regarded her as not only new, but alien. She said diffidently, “I wish I could do something for her.”

Vicky threaded a needle. “You can’t.”

When Jasmin got back she found Michael Ward in the studio with Charles.

Charles turned to her and said, “We’ve been making a plan.”

“Oh—what?”

“Michael’s going South to paint and I think it would be fun if we all went together. My work is futile—weary, stale, flat, and damnably unprofitable!”

Michael Ward sat on the model throne and clasped his knees. He looked at Jasmin with a preoccupied air. He said, “I want some nice pink and yellow sugar houses and ridiculous rows of palm trees.”

“—And sun,” said Charles.

Jasmin said, “Daddy could lend us the villa. All that bit is exactly what you want. They come back at the end of September, but there’s always a staff there, of sorts.”

Charles’s vision of a “fishing hamlet” faded out into an enormous Villa Lengel. Jasmin saw his expression. “We can treat it like a bathing hut!” she said.

He put his hand on her shoulder. “My dear—I think the notion’s very good. I believe the place is lovely.” He thought, “She’d hate a picnic. It’ll be much better for her.” He asked: “What d’you think, Michael?”

Michael yawned, smiled, looked at them from the obscure inimical distance that held his spirit.

“I’m all for battening,” he said.

Jasmin went upstairs to the telephone and sent a telegram to her father:

DARLING DADDY CHARLES SELF AND MICHAEL WARD WANT TERRIBLY
TO GO SOUTH FOR THE AUTUMN FOR THEM TO PAINT WILL YOU BE AN
ABSOLUTE ANGEL AND LEND US THE VILLA YOUR EVER DUTIFUL DAUGHTER
JASMIN

She put down the receiver and walked over to the window. She thought, “What fun it’ll be—going off with Charles!” And the idea of Michael’s company pleased her. She’d read and bathe and perhaps try her hand at writing short stories. (Theresa was infectious . . . the idea that one could do anything.) This plan coincided with Theresa’s advice this afternoon.

What fun! The restlessness of the last weeks, the sense of returning strength, became focused in a conscious need of light and change. She smiled down suddenly at the familiar vista of the street.

Big Ben struck a quarter.

Charles decided to go South at the end of October. Jasmin was to follow, as she had promised to spend the week-end of November 2 with the Campbells.

But Evan’s father died on the twenty-eighth. Jasmin had a letter from him saying he felt very much cut up, although they’d known for some time that there was no chance of recovery.

Lady Whichford was lunching with Jasmin the day they heard. She said during luncheon, “Of course Evan will have the Place now.”

Jasmin perceived the nature of her mother’s regrets.

XIII

Michael Ward got a telegram from Charles from Antibes telling him to come out with Jasmin on the thirtieth. The same evening, when he came in from a party, he found a telephone message saying: "Mrs. Bitterne is leaving on Thursday. She will meet you at the train and to ring her at Lady Whichford's if any message." He was annoyed at having to travel first-class, but pleased by the prospect of staying with Jasmin and Charles. Charles interested him. He felt that he knew the top layer of Charles's character, and couldn't see what was underneath. He could never make out if he was essentially cold, or sensitive. As for Jasmin, he thought he read her clearly. Intelligent, sensual, high-spirited. He thought her charm obvious—even banal.

He'd always supposed that Charles, if he married at all, would choose his cousin, the tall Bitterne girl who used to come to his studio and arrange the flowers.

On Thursday he arrived at Victoria at half-past ten. A man in a bowler, whom he recognized as the Whichfords' butler, came up to him as he got out of his taxi and relieved him of his book and newspapers and explained that Mrs. Bitterne would arrive at any moment. He escorted Michael to the Pullman and pointed out the seat which he said had been reserved for him. He arranged Michael's papers on the table and gave directions to the porter about his small luggage and went off to register his trunk.

Michael got out on the platform again, and in a few minutes saw Jasmin hurrying through the crowd, accompanied by the man with a moustache whom he remembered meeting at the Bitternes' at dinner.

"My *dear* Michael—how clever of you to be early! You know Evan? Don't you? Evan, you remember Michael? . . . Evan's brought me the most lovely roses. Evan, be an angel and put them in the train for me—which's my seat? You show him, Michael. I must look out for Miss Courage. She's bringing a lot of books for me. . . ."

Michael thought that she had a delicious way of speaking, but talked too much; as if she were always a little excited. Evan came out of the Pullman again and stood by her, squaring his shoulders and looking down at her with quick blank glances.

She hugged her fur coat round herself and smiled at Michael. Her cheeks were pink from the frost. He noticed the sudden dimple near the left corner

of her mouth. He asked her how the daughter was. She said:—

“She’s lovely. Very fat, but beginning to look like Charles. She’s staying with Charles’s mother just now. *Here’s* Miss Courage. Dear Miss Courage!”

Her mother’s secretary was breathless, apologetic. She had had to wait. But the books, she thought, were the ones Mrs. Bitterne wanted. And here was that note of introduction from Lady Whichford, and here—she produced a small parcel—a very tiny present, for the journey, from herself.

Jasmin opened the little package. “Oh, you *darling*! How too sweet of you! How perfect! Just what one always wants after a ‘trainy’ night.” She put the bottle of eau de Cologne into her bag and kissed Miss Courage, who pecked back and blushed and nearly dropped the books. And, “How I envy you—going away to the lovely sunshine!” she said.

Jasmin turned to Michael. “Charles writes that it’s really hot.”

Evan escorted her into the train, helped her off with her coat. She took the cigarettes he’d bought for her. “I shall be caught smuggling”—thanked him, laying her hand on his arm, laughing easily, casually, and saying, “Write to me, Evan.” And he began a sentence, checked himself, muttered: “I’m no good at writing—I dare say I shall be going away with Mother for a longish trip now.”

But she had turned from him and was giving Miss Courage last messages: “. . . thank Daddy again for lending us the villa . . . tell Mummie I’ll try to stop freckling if I can. Bless Perdita for me when you see her . . .”

Miss Courage got herself out of the train. Evan went, too. He said, “Look after yourself. If there’s any way I can be useful let me know. Remember me to Charles.”

The train moved off.

Michael and Jasmin sat face to face. She leaned back. “Now what about a glass of sherry?” He ordered one, and wished he were alone. He remembered a journey from Paris to Avignon with Charles, third-class . . . the man with Royalist sympathies who kept scratching and the woman who got out at Lyons to have a baby. He said:—

“I hate travel *de luxe*.”

She was amused by his rudeness.

“I’m sorry.” She laughed, that soft sudden light in her face.

He asked, “D’you like it? Charles was always—” He broke off.

“Was what?”

He felt embarrassed now. “Well—simple.”

She became quiet, turning the glass in her fingers, looking out of the window. Then she asked, her gaze on a tree, a fence, a row of villas:—

“Do you think I’m spoiling him?”

“No.”

“You do think so,” she asserted.

He said, “Excuse me. I can’t say what I think.”

She felt his pellucid stare. He was thinking, detached but intent, that she would be good as a mistress but tiresome as a wife.

She said, “He doesn’t like my family and their milieu.”

Michael didn’t answer. He wanted to read. He hoped she wouldn’t become confidential about her feelings and her marriage. Too many women dramatized their lives as a form of conversation, and adorned themselves with imaginary emotional situations. It was a way of being provocative, he thought. But she had taken up a book herself, and was, apparently, absorbed in it. She sat back. The title was *Scientific Management in British Industry*. He noticed her hand as she turned the page—manicured, but thickly shaped. He thought that he could never fall in love with a woman whose hands weren’t beautiful. Not that he could fall in love again. *Expense of Spirit* . . . He took up his book. Hazlitt pleased him. Thought grew from bad patches of life like mushrooms. (The savor got from something rotten.)

They didn’t speak until they got to Dover. On the boat she went below to the ladies’ cabin and he stayed on deck and felt ill during the whole crossing. They had no more conversation until they had luncheon in the train.

He was amused at being with a woman whom other men so obviously admired. It reminded him of an occasion when he had taken a guinea pig into class at school. She asked him what he was smiling at, and he said he was thinking about guinea pigs; and she asked, “Do you like animals?” Which seemed to him so oddly simple—in contrast with her sophisticated clothes and the gay, gossiping chatter with which she’d been diverting him—that he burst out laughing. She stared, smiled, and began to laugh too, an easy, bubbling mirth which seemed to spring from some depth in her being where she was still a child. And “Do you like them?” she insisted, laughing at herself now, but anxious, all the same, to know.

“They don’t interest me.”

“I thought not.”

“Why did you think so?”

(Café, madame? Café, m’sieur? . . . Deux Cafés . . .)

She said, “You’ve got the artist thing even worse than Charles has. You’re not quite human. The other day I was driving with Charles and we ran over a dog. Five minutes later when we went in he was talking about the Reform of the House of Lords.”

Michael lit her cigarette. “That only proves that there’s more hope for a live peer than a dead dog.”

She looked him full in the eyes, her lips half smiling. It was her trick, but he felt its charm.

“You’re both heartless.”

Her words meant nothing. Their nothingness, and her glance, so automatically but so powerfully charming, annoyed him.

They went back to their compartment, and he settled down to read. She sat down in the corner opposite him and thought how lovely it would be to see Charles again.

Charles was waiting for them on the platform. He stood among the white-clad group that awaited the dark passengers from the North.

Jasmin ran to him, dropping a book and gloves. Michael picked them up. He had an impression that Charles had forgotten his arrival. And it was Jasmin who said, “Here’s Michael. . . .”

Charles said, “A very lavish car has been ordained for us.” Jasmin clung to his arm, laughing and talking. A blue Packard waited for them, Lord Whichford’s crest adorning its doors.

They got in. Michael said, “This is like a story by Michael Arlen—driving through a Fashionable Resort with an elegant girl beside one and so much upholstery under one’s behind.”

Charles laughed. “I like the carnations in the little holder being real—not ‘taxi’ ones.” The houses were dazzling, the sea looked like itself in colored postcards.

Jasmin said, “I like being thought of as an elegant girl.”

Charles said, “Smart Matron is the proper term.”

Jasmin tasted the tang of the golden air. “Look at those sails catching the light!”

Charles felt her happiness. He found himself wishing that Michael weren’t here. He would have liked to be alone with Jasmin, and have her beside him while he worked, and sit with her in the evenings on the terrace of the fantastic villa and watch the sea, and talk, and watch the sky, and, talking, get to know the new Jasmin that had emerged, vivid and restless (a little discontented?) from the phase of motherhood. . . . He’d loved that, too, in her, yet he didn’t want her, even at the sacrifice of his own peace, eternally gentle, a perpetual Madonna. . . .

A vista of palm trees revealed the Villa Lengel, Mandeville’s interpretation of modern exotic—modern in the bareness of its structure, the flat roof, the three tiers of windows set like parallel smiles across the façade of the house, the balconies built the whole way round the house; exotic in its color, pink as the flesh of a cantaloupe, the shutters lime-green, the rails of the balcony and window frames of steel. . . .

As they drew up, Charles asked Jasmin if she liked it. She thought she did. The front door in the centre of the verandah was made of two panels of green glass framed in steel. They revealed a translucent vista, through the house, to gardens on the farther side.

Jasmin exclaimed with pleasure at their room. Charles admitted he thought it good. The walls and floor and ceiling all of the same opaque greenish-blue glass. Silver and green rugs with designs of curious fishes. “It’s like the Blue Grotto,” Jasmin said. The sun, between the half-opened shutters, made a shimmering path across the floor. She thought the dull-gilded furniture—modern in baroque mood, with its irrepressible twists and curves and shells—seemed like the submerged treasure of a ship. She said so. Charles nodded. “And that divan with tortoises for feet looks like the lair of some very debauched Siren.”

Jasmin kicked off her shoes. “This particular Siren is going to have a debauch of washing. . . . Is the bathroom ravishing?”

Charles opened a door in the wall.

“Completely. Peter herself couldn’t better it. And every sort of scent, perfume, essence, fragrance, and stink in gold-topped bottles!” He stood in the doorway. “Positively Hollywood. Mandeville has let himself go and been gloriously vulgar. And the towels have crests on. . . . The whole thing

epitomizes the business man's idea of a Good Time for a Bad Girl. No gin laid on; otherwise perfect. Even the plumbing. . . ."

The three of them met for tea on the south verandah. At the foot of the verandah steps a broad terrace stretched to the edge of the cliff. The sound of the sea deepened the brilliant torpor of the afternoon. They talked and smoked, lounging back in their chairs; yawned, smiled vaguely at each other, moved lazily to take a sandwich, lift a cup, light a cigarette. A slender man with sad eyes and blue lounge suit fetched away the tea. Charles said his name was Auguste, and that he'd told him that "Milord" had taken him on the recommendation of another "Milord Anglais" who had been, in some way, unlucky. As far as Charles could see, the entire villa was being run by Auguste and a Basque peasant woman who hid when one met her in the corridors.

Auguste brought in a tray of glasses and bottles. He consulted them gravely in turn, and then made a cocktail. He asked if dinner would suit them at eight. He informed Jasmin that he had taken the liberty to unpack her trunks as Françoise was occupied with the cooking. Would Madame change for dinner? Jasmin said yes, the black dress. He bowed, departed.

"The perfect man," said Michael. "He asked me if a white room or a gray room were more *sympathique* to me. He said he understood artists, as he was one himself." Charles murmured, amused, observing how Jasmin's white dress caught pink and lilac reflections from the house and gold lights from the terrace, "He didn't tell me that."

Michael sipped. "He added that, alas for an artist, there was no money to be made. While he was running on my bath he said that all unhappiness came from Poverty and Love—he had known both. I asked him where. He said everywhere, but principally in Paris and Bognor!"

He came out again carrying a coat for Jasmin. He said the nights came suddenly now. Soon they went indoors and explored the rooms, all divided by opaque glass walls which made curious effects of lights and shadow and reflected colors. Charles thought of the works at Stubfield. A curious bubble, this—to be blown off (to the edge of the Mediterranean) by their grinding vitality.

Michael was pleased; the ingenious luxury and sub-beauty diverted him. He observed his senses respond to the place. At dinner the wine and food and curious lighting and Jasmin's gay fragrant mood got hold of him. Charles's talk of painting seemed out of keeping with their fantastic

surroundings. After dinner they strolled across the terrace to the balustrade on the cliff. The coast line glittered as if the stars had been scattered from the sky, the sea below boomed under its breath. Jasmin shivered and drew close to Charles. Michael felt sobered by the night, but irritated by some sense or sensation too obscure to explain. He looked at Jasmin's dim profile. At Charles's above hers. He found himself wishing he hadn't come. He went up to bed early. They seemed relieved to be left alone together.

His pyjamas looked matter-of-fact laid out on the mauve sheets. (Auguste had said, "I have thought *les draps roses* for M'sieu and Madame Bitterne—and for M'sieu the lilac. . . .")

Michael undressed gloomily. He wondered how much he'd really see of Charles, with his wife about. She was quite clever, but she spoiled conversation. He rubbed himself down with a green lotion smelling of carnations. He thought how pleasantly low it was to stay in the mansions of the rich and despise them. People were too squeamish. (One didn't speak well of sturgeons every time one ate caviare. . . .) Though—like Charles—to have the sturgeon as a father-in-law might be trying.

He took a cigarette out of the box by his bed and felt more cheerful. He got a pencil and block off the writing table and leaped into bed. Then he sat up and began to write some verses which began:—

Oh magnificent old Sturgeon,
How benign of you to burgeon!
I delight to think you are
Mother of my Caviare.

Oh adorable old Oyster—

But he felt sleepy and put out the light. Vaguely he heard Jasmin and Charles talking as they went into their room next door.

XIV

Michael and Charles found the light and the place good for painting. Michael did several water colors to work from in his studio in London. Charles began working on two different canvases, one in the morning light in the steep gardens above the villa, one in the afternoon down in the harbor of St. Jean. He was pleased with the morning one and thought it might work out well—the rock and the flowers and bench and fountain making an attractive design with pinkish and silvery and gold color. He agreed with Michael that blue sky was difficult to deal with, and put it in his harbor picture, and took it out again half-a-dozen times.

Jasmin went sometimes with Charles and sometimes with Michael. Neither of them took any notice of her while they were working. Sometimes she took a book; but often she lay in the sun and watched the sky and sea.

Twice she went in the car with Michael and they took luncheon. They talked while they picnicked. She had an impression that he was being deliberately impersonal. But she wasn't sure. Once at dinner she felt him look at her.

On the fifth day she announced at dinner that she wanted to go over to Monte Carlo to the Rooms. She felt it would be fun to see people and gamble. Charles's head ached from sitting in the sun, and his afternoon picture, which he had just finished, seemed bad. He felt disinclined to go and said so. He saw that Michael agreed. Jasmin said, half annoyed, that after all she had done nothing but watch them both paint for the last week. Charles said mildly that that was what he was here for. She said, "But, darling, I do want to go."

He looked at her and saw that she was trying to coax him. He said, "I want to go to bed early. I want to start on a picture to-morrow."

She colored, turning to Michael. "Will you take me?"

Charles said, "Yes. You take her, Michael."

Michael hesitated. He felt exasperated by Charles's cool assumption that it would be "nice" if he took Jasmin. He wanted to go with her. Her glance challenged him. He felt an undercurrent of angry excitement in her repeated "Well, will you?"

"I should love to."

They got back after two o'clock. The wide hall was greenish—with a dim light. Michael stopped her at the foot of the staircase.

“Jasmin . . .?”

She turned and looked steadily up into his face. She was thinking—her blood warm and angry with the champagne she'd had—that Charles must care very little if he preferred to stay at home and sleep. She whispered, “Yes?”

“I've lost my head about you . . .”

“I know.” Her smile was dim, enigmatical.

“Jasmin.”

“ . . . Yes?”

“What do you mean me to feel, exactly?”

Her fingers moved up and down the steel rail of the banisters. She shook her head; looked past him. Then she said, “I'm going up now.”

He seized her shoulder. “What d'you want?”

She hesitated, her lips parted, her gaze searching his face. Her soft speech caught at his senses. “To-morrow, Michael, we'll think of something. . . .” She waited for a second, then turned and went upstairs.

He heard her cross the landing and go into her room.

Half an hour later he came up to his room. He threw himself down on the end of his bed without switching on the light. The long windows were open on to the balcony. He could see the lights in the bay.

He heard Charles step on to the balcony next door. Jasmin's voice following him . . . “I must have life, and if Michael amuses me—”

“Don't talk so loud! Be quiet—”

Michael got up, closed his windows. A minute later he heard a door shut, Charles's footsteps crossing the landing and going downstairs.

When Charles came back to the villa soon after ten, Auguste told him that Monsieur Ward had left early to catch the train. Auguste asked whether M'sieur would like his breakfast now, out of doors? Madame had had hers early and gone into the garden. Charles said he didn't want any breakfast, and sat down on one of the verandah chairs, thinking that he must have been walking for a good many hours. Auguste brought out coffee and a box of cigarettes, and put them down beside Charles. He said, “M'sieur will drink

some coffee all the same.” He added that Madame was on the far terrace, at the end of the garden.

Charles was relieved that Michael had gone. He supposed that Michael, feminine in his perception of feminine motives and intentions, had made off to escape a situation. Possibly there’d been some scene between him and Jasmin last night. . . . A comprehension of possible heroics about his “best friend and his wife” flitted through his mind, leaving him ironical. He felt that he disliked Michael and didn’t want to see him again. But the significance of the matter concerned Jasmin.

For the last six hours he’d tried to make out what lay behind her exasperating and pitiful “I must have life! . . .”

What did she mean? And need?

It seemed to him that “life” was made by your own feeling of the hours (some colored and some plain, but all matter to feed the sense and senses). Even one’s discontents were “living.”

Michael often said (funny he should be involved in this), “Women are quite differently satisfied. What makes them happy would bore us and vice versa. It’s the difference between biscuits and birdseed.” Charles got up and strolled through the gardens. He saw her far off, leaning on the balustrade. He reflected that he’d been stupid and he’d assumed that his feeling for her, which lit his life, must be so clear to her.

He’d never tried to amuse her—if that was what she wanted.

But did she want that? It seemed so strangely outside his knowledge of her. Could all her eagerness for life, that gayety of soul that made her waken a room as she came in, be satisfied by a visit to the Casino, a little cut-and-dried Amusement? . . .

When he came up to her she said, “Michael’s gone.”

“I know.” He leaned on the balustrade beside her. A sailing boat passed below and out to sea. Its winged and scudding flight caught some strand in his fancy after it (a nostalgia for strange harbors and a hard casual freedom). She said, “I didn’t see him, either.”

She looked shamefaced and harassed. He thought, the look of a child caught at a rotten trick. He laid his hand over hers. The touch choked her. He stared after the sail. He said, “Michael isn’t a bit important. . . . You mustn’t be—silly about that.”

She turned her head away; waited, trying to speak. She managed:—

“I’m a fool.”

He didn’t move his hand.

She said, “I’m so ashamed.”

He checked her: “Don’t be stupid. It’s my fault. I hadn’t the sense to see. I’ve shut myself away. You need—more variety than I do. Things to do. People to see. I’ve got my work.”

An agonizing sadness moved in her veins. But some perception forced out, “It *isn’t* that . . .”

“What then?”

The same perception framed, “It’s something wrong—with me. Not *you*, my sweet—” She couldn’t speak. The sense of wrongness blurred out. She couldn’t explain.

He said, “Don’t let’s talk about it any more.”

She bent her head and clutched on to the edge of the balustrade. He put his arm round her and felt her wrenched by sobs that she couldn’t control. He said at last, “You must come indoors,” and led her across the brilliant gardens into the house. In their room she sat down on the end of the bed pressing at her throat with her hands, the tears pouring out of her eyes. He gave her a glass of water. She sipped, bent her head in acknowledgement, sipped again. . . . Her tears came more easily, more slowly. He sat down beside her and wiped her face with his handkerchief.

She handed him back the glass. He said, “Now you must have a rest.” He pulled off the coverlet of the bed, and she lay down without speaking. He closed the shutters, then came and bent over her. At his nearness a sob shook her again. He said:—

“No, now, my darling, you must rest.”

She stared up at him from the pillow. He said, “Darling . . . now rest.”

“Yes.” Suddenly she smiled, then turned over on her side.

Charles went through to his dressing room. When he had sponged his face he looked in again. She was asleep. He went downstairs.

Outside on the verandah the glare was tiring. He sank down on the step.

A minute later Auguste’s voice inquired, “M’sieur would like an *apéritif*?”

“Yes, please.”

PART THREE

I

(Letter from Theresa Bitterne to Evelina Bitterne.)

MELCOMBE, WARWICKSHIRE
Boxing Day

MY DEAR EVELINA,

You see the address. Possibly Charles told you what, this Xmas, it was to be.

Here, in fact and at last (against all my vows and to the detriment of every heartstring), I am. My head indeed “unbowed” (I carry it high enough, to their faces)—but, my dear, very “bloody”!

That final adjective, in Merrick’s mouth, might describe two thirds of the company! Among the “white” I number Charles, Jasmin, myself (and the small Perdita, of course); Leroy too (asked to mollify me, I think), and the Brendons, and one or two nice young people who have no surnames.

“Among those present”—Nadine Bristow; with that execrable little Pondworth, her husband. (He discoursed learnedly to me last evening on the theme that Shakespeare is best translated, quoting the Bard in three languages. He has a phosphorous erudition—the brain beneath it as malodorous as rotten fish. He has a sentimental eye and a lewd heart—a mixture that I can’t endure, though it’s common enough in the male.) Miles Storrington, forever living the heroes of his novels, is much to the fore. On Xmas Eve he sat with glittering rings telling bad ghost stories in a sepulchral voice—his pulpy yet cadaverous countenance sticking up out of that black stock of his. He “carries on”—I must borrow from below stairs—with “Peter,” as they call her. His wife cares for nothing but bridge, which we play a good deal. She avers there is no place like Monte Carlo. I asked her, “Ah, but have you ever been to Wigan?”

The Schöns are here. And Lester Midge. And a lady of uneasy virtue and middle years who has a Dress Shop. Pam Brendon has a young man with her. Mandeville—their architect—is here; a scented but sapless creature, like a pressed flower dropped from the Yellow Book! There is also an element of the tweedy-financial masculine. The women are all eclipsed by Jasmin, who walks in

beauty and gets gayety from the air. Charles a little preoccupied. He played squash with Evan Campbell, who came over to luncheon on Xmas Eve, and was temporarily more cheerful. But I think her spirits please him.

Given the “Cast,” would that you could have seen the whole Pageantry of our Yuletide.

By tea time on Xmas Eve, the entire party was assembled. (To me, who had had so many Xmas parties here), the effect was dreadfully poignant, and yet (since the gods give us humor, I think to lighten our worst darkness) irresistible in its absurdity.

The “Seigneur” himself had been hunting—and several of the men. They came in demanding boiled eggs and stamping about in their muddy boots, while the arrivals from London, making up in dash what they lacked in distinction, made an antistrophe of sophistication. No film producer in Los Angeles could have produced a more characteristic picture of English Country Life. In the evening, after dinner, the excellent Miss Courage distributed to each lady a pair of silk stockings with instructions to hang one of them on her door (all excellently organized—mine being black). The men received socks for the same purpose. My co-grandmother (we get on somehow—though I perceive *he* made her ask me here) was pleased to exercise her wit on the theme of what “Father Xmas” might find going on, were he to enter the rooms. I saw Charles irritated and Jasmin exasperated by this. . . . (But it roused general applause and not a little coquetry in the elderly members of the party.)

On Xmas morning—over an apotheosis of all the breakfasts ever designed to make a sideboard groan—there was much discussion of the gifts put in the stockings. I fancy Carder himself paraded the corridors in the conventional white beard and scarlet hood. Nadine Bristow had a cigarette case of indescribable elegance, Jasmin a brooch, Charles cuff links, and even myself (I really don’t know how to evade keeping it) two gold menu holders with my initials and crest on (whether to hold a card inscribed “Humble Pie,” I don’t know).

Later many of us set out for church, some walking, the rest in motors. I walked with Mrs. Storrington there (her talk of Spas and prices). After a Christmas Service (which made me remember you

and Charles three feet high and Vicky caroling “Once in Royal David’s City,” and got me too near tears), I walked back with Old W. himself. We had some lively talk. I begin to like him. A human old cynic. (I like her no better! All saccharine and snobbery!) He is content to be himself, which is a First Quality. She is pretentious—which, for me, condemns anyone to the lowest purgatory.

At tea time the small Perdita was brought into the drawing-room to see the Xmas tree lit for her benefit. She gurgled and blinked with delight and would have the whole tree to hold. I confess Lady W. is better at handling her than I am. (But I am dutiful. I see her bathed every night and she laughs at my face and grasps my chain, with the trinkets on it, in her fingers.) Christmas Night we were all magnificently dressed (except myself, I hasten to add). Lady W. commemorated Anno Domini in a tiara while her daughter-in-law was “so grand”—as Charles, at seven years old, once said of a guest here—“that she was undressed right down to her tummy.” The dinner table was a “snow scene”—glittering and most effective. The turkeys like mammoths, the plum puddings, mince pies, etc., magnificent. The stage management as by Charles Dickens and Fortnum and Mason. “*Kolossal*,” as Charles’s German tutor used to say. “*Prachtvoll*”—I should have liked to have all the children of East London round that table.

After dinner a somewhat Bacchanalian spirit prevailed. Jasmin, of course, is used to this type of party, and Charles too grows accustomed to it. I went to bed early, feeling that there was something to be said for the distinction (so dear to the outdated Society Novelist) between High and Low Life. (Whether this instance was the Low living High, or the High Low, would be a nice point to decide.)

To-day most of the party have what Pam Brendon explained to me as a “hang-over,” and seek regeneration through golf or hunting. The Meet this morning was at Ditch Edge. Jasmin and Charles both went out. She looks well on a horse. Evan Campbell out, too—but not his mother. I hear she has given up since her husband died. Late this afternoon a lot of the young people left by motor for London—where Mr. Mandeville is giving, apparently, a Boxing Night Party. Jasmin went, but Charles came in after hunting complaining that he was too tired to go. (I think, in fact, these parties bore him, but he won’t spoil her pleasure in going by

saying so.) He seems to make a policy of urging her to go out. But I think he ought to pick the crew. She will drift into any “crowd.” He’s got enough sense, if he’d use it, to find a better lot of people (who would please her just as well—possibly better).

How are you, my dear? I hear you are involving yourself in politics. A magnificent game—but too full of ruffraff these days. I return to London to-morrow. Remember, there is always a meal for you when you want it. Melcombe remembers you in its heart—which is unchanged. I walked in the woods this morning, and could feel Merrick still here. I am growing old enough to see how little small or superficial changes matter. Melcombe is a state in my own spirit. Just as people we love are in our spirits and remain with us as long as we will to make them live (so, in lovers, the senses reach out for what the soul must hold in the end).

You see—I am growing both tolerant and didactic. Grandmotherhood grows on me. A blessed New Year to you.

THERESA

I hope your father got the smoked salmon I sent him as a Seasonable offering? You must change the gloves if they aren’t the right shade.

II

When Jasmin had left for London, Charles spent an hour playing with Perdita in the nursery. She lay on her back on some cushions and gurgled and curled up when he poked her, and rewarded his dangling of a silver rattle above her head by a series of fat enchanted smiles. He was surprised to find so much pleasure in her company. It occurred to him that she was unusually attractive for a baby. Her eyes shone black in the delicate tints of her round face, her hair crowned her forehead in pale bronze curls, and curved in a gold close sheen behind her pink ear, and curled again above the fragile stem of her neck. He imagined her as the star turn on a baroque ceiling of cherubs. He was sorry when Nurse came to fetch her for her bath.

“She is getting big, Nurse.”

“Yes, sir—and she’s just got another tooth through. Come along, my darling—say good-night to your Daddy.” She picked up the eager Perdita, who gravely blew Charles a kiss and was then borne away to the bathroom, staring at him until the door was shut.

Charles went downstairs. The butler was crossing the inner hall with a tray of cocktails. As the anteroom door opened he heard voices in the drawing-room beyond: Evan Campbell’s laugh, exclamations, Pam Brendon’s “Darling, how perfect!” Someone turned on the gramophone. . . .

The door shut.

He went into the outer hall. He looked where the clock used to be; then at the clock belonging to the set on the writing table. Six. He opened the library door and looked in. Three tables of bridge. At the nearest, Lady Whichford and Leroy playing against Bernard Schön and Mrs. Storrington. . . . Beyond, Lady Schön and Rex Lengel—and Lester Midge and Theresa. At the farthest table (beneath the presiding bust of Lord Whichford as a young man) Lady Brendon playing with Pondworth against Nadine Bristow and a young man. Charles took them in—a rich recession of groups bathed in alabaster tones of light. Lady Whichford’s pearls, Lady Brendon’s satiny white hair, Nadine Bristow’s vermilion under lip, gleaming like bright special blooms in a herbaceous border—‘All silent and all damned.’ . . . He shut the door and decided to go and read in the billiard room. He took up a book from a side table which was always admirably stocked with books recently published and well reviewed. He chose a book on Russia, reflecting that Russia was becoming for the politician what its literature had once been for the intellectual—a caviare to be digested in view

of the “general” (with belchings to warn the common stomach against such a taste).

In the billiard room he found Miles Storrington and Peter on the sofa. He apologized curtly. (*L’Après-midi d’un Satyre!*)

Odd, to think he’d spent his childhood in this house.

He went up to bed early. When he went from his dressing room into Jasmin’s room he felt its strange tidiness. The fire hadn’t been lit and her bottles and jars and brushes were arranged neatly on the dressing table. Only her scents haunted the air.

He sat down on his side of the bed.

He leaned across and touched her pillow. What was she doing now? (Jasmin—and her parties!) A sharp vehement tenderness for her possessed his mind. He could accept so easily now her frivolous energy, her sensuous idleness of soul. It seemed to him that there was something disarming, almost pitiful, in the indulgence she found—her dancing, parties, gambling, young men. As if she said, “I want lots of flowers, blue and red and white and yellow, and some cakes with green icing, and a doll that talks and a cage of singing birds—at once . . .” If there was anyone to blame, he thought, it must be himself—if all her coming and going and giving and taking meant that she was unhappy. But it wasn’t, he believed, dissatisfaction; rather that essential need in her character (that he’d perceived at Antibes) to, be always—he found the two words—warm and alight.

He pressed his cheek against her pillow. (What was she doing now? He saw her, in that new silver dress, the centre of a group in Mandeville’s fantastic room; saw her turning from one to the other, her glance half mysterious, half-impudent; her eager gestures, her wild soft gusts of laughter. . . .) He shut his eyes. To-morrow she would come back—to-morrow she would be here, changing the room, changing the air he breathed; here beside him, for him to look at, to touch, to speak to. . . .

He lay still. He reflected that there was no moment in the day when the thought of her couldn’t tug at his heart. When she was away, as on this evening, he wanted her physical presence, as if a turn of her head, a word spoken casually across the room, a kiss—given suddenly between one thing and another—might bring fulfillment. Yet, when he was with her, there were moments when he was tormented by a sense of her isolation, perceiving that the beauty that he possessed, the body that gave her to him, would keep her from him always.

A knock at the door.

He sat up. "Yes."

Peter came in in her pyjamas. She smiled. "Hello, darling. I came to see if you had any cigarettes."

"Yes. Plenty." He handed her his case. "Take some."

She came and sat down beside him.

"Feeling blue without Jasmin?"

He smiled. "I'm really too sleepy to feel anything." He yawned.

"What a ravishing bed, isn't it?" She lay back, settling her shoulders against the pillow.

He said gallantly, "You look very ravishing in it."

He wished she would go.

"D'you like my pyjamas?"

"They look rather thin."

"They are. Feel—" she extended her ankle. He felt. He remarked, "They won't last, I should think."

"They aren't meant to."

He asked, "Well, have you enjoyed your Christmas?"

"M'mm." She grimaced, shrugged her shoulders. "A bit stuffy."

He asked, "Why didn't you go up to Mandeville's party to-night?"

"Feeling tired. Didn't want to."

He asked her when she and Rex were returning to London, and what their plans were for the spring. She interrupted: "Charles. Are you one of those people who must always make conversation when one's alone with them?"

He lit a cigarette. "What would you like me to do?"

She leaned her head back among the pillows and watched him from under her eyelids.

"I'd like you to do whatever you'd like to do."

"I'm afraid it would be impolite to say."

“I’d adore you to be impolite.”

He remarked, “My dear, you wouldn’t.”

“I would. What were you going to say?”

“. . . that I should like to go to sleep.”

She sat up. He saw her color seep under her make-up to her ears. She got off the bed. Her remark before she went amused but didn’t surprise him.

He undressed slowly, thinking over Jasmin’s plan that they should take Marlow Cottage for the summer. He liked the plan. He could do a lot of work there, in the neighboring villages. . . . Jolly gray and gold stone and steep green distances. . . .

Jasmin came back the next day. Evan motored her down. He left her at Melcombe and went home. Jasmin thought, watching him drive away, that there was something very pleasant about his company—like having a large dog with you.

Miss Courage told her that Charles and her father were in the library. She found them looking at books. Charles sprang up and came towards her. But she saw that he was excited and preoccupied. He explained that her father wanted him to do frescoes for the ballroom in London. The latter patted her shoulder and said, “The boy’s got talent and I’m going to give it a decent chance. . . . He ought to make a good thing of it. I’m going to let him have carte blanche and go ahead, once we’ve got the technicalities settled.”

Jasmin saw that they had several books on fresco painting. Charles said that he had studied it in Paris during his six months there and then thrown it over, as there seemed so little chance of getting that sort of work. Her father said that he thought people made a mistake in having a few square feet of an artist’s work on their wall, instead of letting him say what he would with the whole room.

She left them and went up to see Perdita. When she came down, Miss Courage told her that tea was in the morning room, as Lord Whichford had roared when the footman tried to lay it in the library. She said that most of the guests had left after luncheon and Lady Whichford was out. While Jasmin was having tea, Peter came in. She flung herself into an armchair and asked Miss Courage why the devil no one thought of putting any cigarettes in her room—Miss Courage was flustered and apologized. Peter asked Jasmin if she’d enjoyed Mandeville’s party.

Jasmin said, “Yes, fairly. . . . Evan made me come away early. He thought it was getting disreputable.”

Peter swung her legs and said, “I should have thought it was just as disreputable for you to go off with Evan.”

Jasmin flushed. “We didn’t ‘go off.’”

“Pity your worthy husband doesn’t go about with you more.”

“He does a lot. But he doesn’t always want to.”

“No. His tastes seem quiet . . .” Peter added, as Miss Courage went out of the room to answer the telephone, “I should have thought you’d get rather bored. . . . He doesn’t ever seem very interested in what you’re doing. Of course, artists are odd . . .”

Jasmin said, “I don’t want to discuss Charles.”

“You needn’t get wild, darling.”

“Don’t be a fool, Peter. I’m not.”

Peter looked at her and smiled. After a moment she remarked, “I saw your other ‘beau’ bring you here, anyway.”

Jasmin got up. “You’ve got the mind of a street urchin.”

Peter laughed.

“What did the bus conductor say to the girl?”

Jasmin frowned. “Don’t be a bore.”

“You’re getting smug. It’s the Bitterne refinement.”

“Oh, *go* to hell!”

Charles met Jasmin on the stairs. “What’s the matter?” She looked angry. She said, “I’m bored with Peter.”

“Why, what’s she been saying?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“Tell me at once.”

Jasmin shook her head and went on to her bedroom. He followed her. “Please tell me at once.”

She brought out at last: “Peter thinks you don’t care for me.”

“Why?”

“Because you don’t run round after me every minute of the day.”

“Is that all?” He added, amused, “I can’t see why anything your sister-in-law says should matter.”

“It doesn’t.” She changed the subject, asked him what conclusion he and her father had come to about the frescoes. He explained, with a new eagerness, that he was to work out some drawings and designs, but not to begin on the room until the middle of July, when Lady Whichford would relinquish the house. He said that meanwhile they would go ahead with their plan of taking Marlowe Cottage for the summer. Then in July and August he could work in London and come down for week-ends.

Jasmin listened and agreed. A little later she said:—

“That means you’ll be in London five days in the week.”

“I shall have to be.”

“Will you mind?”

“Mind what?”

“Leaving me in the country.”

“I should hate the idea of dragging you to London.”

“Will you mind being away?”

“Darling—I shall have my work.”

“Of course.”

He looked at her—puzzled. It seemed incredible that some remark of Peter’s (simple spitefulness) should trouble her. He went suddenly out of the room.

When she came down he was parading the hall with her father. They were both talking, and Jasmin had an impression that neither listened to the other. Her father’s gong-like tones, and Charles’s hesitant yet crystallly formed sentences, followed her into the morning room, where she found her mother and a bishop and an Airedale having a late tea.

III

Summer at Marlowe Cottage.

In May and June, Charles worked on his design for the ballroom. He was excited, and content. In July he would begin on the walls.

The final cartoons pleased his father-in-law. A panorama of curious bright cities set on hills; flowers and weeds in the foreground. But the sketches, Charles said, could only give a vague notion of how coloring would work out.

Lord Whichford slapped his shoulder. "All right, I truzd you, my boy. I don't run after my foremen to see if they're doing their chob right. . . ."

Perdita learned to crawl—to stand. . . .

Jasmin arranged flowers for the cottage; made omelettes when Mrs. Thursby was out, played tennis in the neighborhood, and began to read the plays of Shakespeare, beginning with *Love's Labour's Lost*. . . .

Occasionally the Vernons came to dinner. Sometimes she went to see Lady Campbell. During the early part of the summer Evan was away in Canada, where his father had some property. He was expected back early in July.

In the mornings before breakfast they went for long rides. One morning, as they were coming back, Charles said, "I shall miss these rides when I begin work in London."

Jasmin felt the brightness ebb from the morning. "I *wish* you weren't going."

"My *dear*—"

"I shall hate being here alone."

"It won't be for long."

"I know. It's absurd—really."

They came into breakfast, hot and tired.

She was silent at breakfast. Finally she said, "I hate the idea of your being away. And yet I *know* its silly. . . ."

But afterwards, when she'd had a bath and changed into a fresh cool dress, she seemed happy again.

Evan came back to London on July 10. He found an invitation from Peter Lengel inviting him to a party on the eleventh. He went, hoping to see Jasmin.

She wasn't there. Peter came over to him early in the evening and explained that Jasmin was down at the cottage. She added:—

“Jasmin hardly comes near us these days. I expect Charles disapproves.” She added, “Poor Jasmin . . .”

“Oh, I say. I should think she had a good time.”

“She used to. But he's grim to her. Terribly selfish.”

“But they're awfully devoted and all that?”

“I suppose *he* is . . . in his way.” Peter considered Evan with her fragile stare. “Personally I think she'd give a good deal already to get out. . . .”

Evan left the party early. He disliked Peter Lengel.

Theresa came to stay late in July. She brought two of the cockers, and her half-finished novel.

She was full of stories about the people she'd been seeing in London, and spent the first evening making Charles and Jasmin laugh over her accounts of various literary parties she'd been to. She said the literary party had quite changed since she was young; that then it had been the fashion for writers to be earnest and grubby, and now they were flippant and scented. Charles protested against the generalization, but Theresa said it was better to be inaccurate than dull.

She had planned a series of visits. In October she was going to the Langridges at Fiesole. She urged Charles and Jasmin to come too. But Charles said he would be too busy at his frescoes.

Theresa asked if he was pleased with the way they were going. He said:

—
“I only began last week. I'm very excited about them.”

“And you, Jasmin? Have you seen the beginning?”

Jasmin said no, she hadn't been to London at all. She added, “Daddy's fearfully interested and pleased by the designs.”

Theresa said, “I think I must try painting the dining room at Lowndes Street. . . .”

Charles smiled. "You'd better finish your novel first."

"I shall. It's far from bad, you know. I'm enjoying doing it."

"What's it about?"

"It's about—" she laughed. "I thought I'd told you."

"No."

"It's the life of a butler—I've called it 'They Also Serve.'"

"—who only stand and wait? Starbright, I suppose?"

"Slightly."

Jasmin said, "I wish you'd read it to us."

Theresa swept up from the sofa. "Very well, I will. I'll fetch it. Put the lamp by my chair, Charles." She returned in a minute, sat down, her black laces swirling round her.

Jasmin said, "You should have met Auguste,—the butler at the villa,—shouldn't she, Charles?"

"Yes." They looked at each other for a moment. While Theresa was arranging her manuscript Jasmin came over and sat on the arm of Charles's chair, and sat holding his hand.

Theresa began.

"A young man advanced with measured gait down an echoing stone corridor, and passed, grave beyond the occasion, portly beyond his years, through a baize door.

"The door, indeed, seemed to share something of his own character, having in its aspect a certain formality and discretion mingled with solid usefulness; and in its air and behavior a silent, muffled habit, a power to divide the unseeable from what should be seen, things which should not be heard from the properly audible; to separate, impeccably and absolutely, the vulgar or unmentionable from those matters of grave or elegant import which belonged to the foreground of society.

"Clad in the dark and seal-like uniform of his calling, he crossed the hall and entered the carpeted morning room, where he proceeded to rearrange on the centre table a sheaf of illustrated papers. The housemaids, thorough in most ways, had no appreciation of such subtleties as led him to grade the papers from the Political, through Sport and Stage, to the bright and glossy inanities of Fashion. . . ."

Lady Whichford came on from Melcombe to stay the week-end after Theresa had gone. Charles had hoped she would come during the week when he was in London, but she said on the telephone, when Jasmin suggested this, that she wanted to be with her daughter *and* son.

Charles tried to hide his annoyance. Jasmin criticized her mother, and saw her faults, but seemed, all the same, to be influenced by her. Jasmin said that her mother had “run” her for so many years that even now, when she disagreed or did something her mother disapproved of, she felt it was a kind of rebellion. Charles said:—

“But you rebelled to marry *me*.”

Jasmin answered that, looking back, she saw how near her mother had been to spoiling it. She said, “I never told you how beastly she was during those weeks before the wedding. Even two nights before, she came into my room and cried, and argued, and scolded. . . .”

When Lady Whichford came she was enthusiastic about the sweetness of the cottage. She said it was “ducky” and arranged for her maid to sleep out with the Thursbys. She said at dinner that she felt like Marie-Antoinette at the Trianon. Charles said he hoped she’d be comfortable in the small spare room, and she said she adored a picnic.

She was amiable all the evening, and said that she was terribly pleased about the ballroom. She asked Charles if he saw anyone during the week when he was in town. He said no; he was too busy. She said, “Peter’s in town. I wondered if you saw anything of her and Rex.” She added, “I rather thought from something Peter said that you *had* been there.”

Charles repeated that he had been too busy. And Jasmin tried to understand her mother’s tone and expression. She knew her well enough to feel that there was some reservation in her mind. She was puzzled. But her mother changed the subject.

Next morning Evan came over early for a ride with her and Charles and stayed to breakfast. After breakfast Lady Whichford came down, smiling, but with pinched lips. Jasmin asked her if she had slept well. She said not terribly. Jasmin caught sight of a pink mark on her arm and said:—

“Oh, Mummie, I’m afraid you’ve had one of Carlos’s fleas. He keeps getting them.”

Lady Whichford said, “On the contrary,” and Evan looked uncomfortable, until Jasmin’s laughter got him near smiling. Charles

wondered what the “contrary” of a flea was, and explained politely that they had had some trouble, but Theresa had discovered a special powder . . .

Lady Whichford went out with Evan into the garden. Jasmin kept lapsing into laughter. She said. “It’s *so* awful, because Mummie has all the prejudices of her upbringing against fleas. No one in Putney ever has them.”

Charles said, “I’m afraid she’s been bitten to the quick, and won’t stay.”

Carlos came in and they reproached him, and he wagged his tail and shook his ears and smiled.

Lady Whichford decided to go after dinner that evening. She had rung up Melcombe and heard that one of her guests was coming a day earlier than she’d supposed. While she was putting on her hat and gloves she called Jasmin into her room to say good-bye. She said: “Darling, I *do* so hate to feel that you’re living in this—rather poky way. You *know* that if you want to come to Melcombe at any time—”

But Jasmin said she was enjoying her summer here. Lady Whichford bent close to the glass and smoothed in the red of her lipstick.

“I expect you enjoy your rides with Evan. He tells me he rides with you in the mornings, now Charles is away.”

Jasmin said, “Yes. It’s nice having him.”

IV

The furniture was piled in the centre of the ballroom under white dust sheets. Evelina sat on one of its peaks. She looked at the end wall where Charles had begun painting, then again at the designs and drawings littered face upward on the floor.

Charles asked her what she thought.

She said, "I've always thought you'd be good. And now I'm certain about it."

He asked her if she liked the color as far as he'd got. He added that it was tiresome working by electric light, but as the room was hardly used by day . . .

She said, "That's one of the clever things. You've thought out these odd towers and trees and hills that one would like at night, because they're like places you go to when you dream. . . . It wouldn't do for a daylight room." After a minute she said, "Go on working. I only came in on condition I don't interrupt."

He said, "I'm glad you rang me up. How did you know I was in London?"

"Funnily enough, your sister-in-law told me. We met at Leon's, having our hair done, yesterday afternoon. She told me you were working for old Whichford and had renounced the world."

Charles rubbed his brushes on a rag.

"You get all our news, then."

"Yes."

Evelina re-coiled herself on her summit. Her dress threw up blue shadows round her neck and eyes.

Charles said, "You look like an Ice Maiden."

"Icily regular? Splendidly null?"

"Neither. But chill and rather wraithlike. You're frightfully thin."

"Slender, darling."

He smiled absently, with a gleam of gratitude for her familiar presence. He said:—

“She’s a poisonous little thing.”

“Peter Lengel, you mean?”

“Yes.”

Evelina remarked, “I most distinctly had that impression yesterday.” She hesitated, then decided not to comment on Peter’s chatter.

Charles said, “It’s important, of course, not to be monotonous. I don’t want to repeat any part of the panorama.”

He began painting again. Evelina watched. He became intent on his work. She thought he looked tired. But perhaps that was the effect of the electric light. . . . (Odd, sitting here in this empty grandiose room with the blinds drawn, and the summer rain hissing down the windows and an occasional squawk of a taxi passing across the square.) He seemed fascinated by this job (clever of old Whichford to give it to him). But there was a lack of—vivacity in his voice, his movements. How much sense lay behind Peter Lengel’s chatter? She asked:—

“How’s Jasmin?”

He looked round. “What?—Jasmin?” and said, “She’s well. She likes the country.”

He began painting again. Later he remarked, “She wanted to come up and stay in London with me this week. But I wouldn’t let her. There’d be nothing for her to do.” (He remembered her on Sunday evening, teasing but oddly intent: “*Let* me come—I could hold your palette! . . . Many a good man would be glad to have me. Oh, Charles, do *let* me! . . .”)

Evelina said, “I think you often give her the wrong kind of consideration.” She smiled; added, “That’s typically masculine in you.”

But he wasn’t interested; perhaps deliberately, she thought. She climbed down on to the floor. She was meeting John Chantrey at quarter to one. She stood for a minute watching Charles. She thought painfully, “Jasmin’s a fool,” and then, “But perhaps *he* is?” And then, “Who isn’t?” (Paying in disillusion for one’s impulses, stupidities.)

She looked at her watch. Quarter to one. John would be waiting. . . .

When she’d gone Charles stopped painting. A cigarette end lay on the floor. Her presence stayed in the room. He glanced towards the open door as though she were coming back again. He wished he’d spoken to her; since

she seemed as if her mind were of the same stuff as his—to feel his oppression.

But what could he have said? Since the thing that troubled him was like a shadow without substance: haunted him, and had no reality. The first three months of the summer had been good. A live delicious contentment.

And then . . . when he'd begun working here . . .

Theresa said, "Your generation have no faith and no gusto. You reduce all life to a drama in a toy theatre."

Easier, he thought, if you could make yourself see it on that scale. A pretty scene—a curtain. . . . A child's theatre—inexpert curtains and haphazard action . . .

Undoubtedly they must have been happier—Theresa and her magniloquent generation: magnifying life, Wagnerizing incident, sitting in their boxes! And if the drama was poignant, there were always the People One Knew—when the lights went up. (And broughams and gilt-edged securities and Broken Hearts locked away in the Strong Room. . . .)

He thought, "But perhaps I exaggerate incident, too."

He would see Jasmin again at the week-end. . . .

V

Jasmin went out to the stables. Thursby was waiting, holding Empress. She asked, "Post come yet this morning, Thursby?"

"Yes, 'm. There warn't nothing furr you."

He mounted her, snorting a little through his nose. "I think I hear Sir Evan now, 'm."

(Jasmin thought, "Charles might have written. . . .")

Evan reined up in the yard.

"Morning. Not too good a day, is it?"

Jasmin looked at the damp gray sky.

"Not very."

A spot of rain fell on her glove. Evan said, "D'you mind getting wet?"

She shook her head. She wanted a gallop. She'd slept badly.

They went off along the grass track at the roadside towards the open country beyond Long Aston.

Evan looked at her several times. As they crossed the main road he said, "You're not looking awfully fit."

She shook her head. "I'm all right."

Farther on he said, "Are you certain you ought to be out in the rain like this?"

"My habit's fairly waterproof. Anyway, it's only a drizzle." She pulled the brim of her felt hat farther down over her eyes and turned up her collar. As she did so she smiled at him. He said abruptly, "Would you like a canter?"

"Yes." His expression had startled her. She'd managed to persuade herself that he could enjoy her company philosophically . . . as if Evan were likely to be philosophical about anything. . . .

They reined up at a gate which led through to a steep grass lane. Evan went forward to open the gate. As she went through he said, "Do you like being down at the cottage? Country life and no shops and all that?"

It was a surprisingly general question—from him. She answered that she was quite happy there. She liked being with the baby.

He said, “I do admire that most awfully about you. Such a lot of modern women don’t care a bit about their children.”

She flushed. She did care. But her remark had been prompted by a dim resentment against Charles. Although Perdita was enchanting . . . (But Charles had been enchanting, last Sunday); been at his best—amusing, talkative, alternately gentle and trenchant. . . . He’d said, “If we could always feel like this!” And then gone off in a temper on Monday morning because he’d overslept and couldn’t get to London until the afternoon. And hadn’t written . . .

From the high ridge of country they looked westward over hills and plains, pasture and ripe cornfields, blurred with rain and intersected by hedges and trees that looked as if they had been cut out of lead.

“Shall we go?”

She nodded.

They galloped, the rain chilling their faces. Once she looked at him and wondered what her life would be like now if she’d married him instead of Charles. . . . (A sort of repose about him. They’d have had square, reliable children, and gone abroad when the hunting was over.)

On the way back he said:—

“Look here. D’you mind if I ask you something?”

She shook her head. She felt suddenly tired. He was riding close beside her and she found herself liking him for his solidness of body and careful weightiness of mind. He said, “Jasmin—I’m an awfully old friend—”

She couldn’t resist a smile. “Go on.”

“Well. Look here. Your sister-in-law told me that you aren’t exactly—exactly happy.” He paused, meeting her look with anxious eyes.

“What did she say?”

“Well, just that, you know—not exactly hitting things off.”

When she didn’t answer he said:—

“I say—I didn’t mean to be—”

“It’s all right.” She felt humiliated: and then angry with herself—angry with Charles for making it possible that Peter could say . . .

“Jasmin, you know me well enough, don’t you, to know that I don’t mean to be—interfering and all that?”

She bent her head. They got on to the grass track by the Aston road. She said:—

“You’re very nice—I know—”

She turned her head away. She thought of Charles; angrily, then with a bright poignant affection, then resentfully again. . . .

He was watching her lost profile. He saw a tear run down her cheek.

“Jasmin!” He put his hand on her shoulder. “My dear—I simply can’t stand the idea that you aren’t happy! . . . Why any man . . .”

She shrugged him off and said as steadily as she could, “I’m absolutely all right. Peter’s idiotic. It wasn’t that I was—depressed about.”

“What was it, then?”

She saw that he didn’t believe her. She said, “Oh, I’m just tired. . . .” She shook her head and turned to him, pale, half-laughing, half-irritated. “You can wipe my tears if that’s any consolation to you.”

He produced a large white handkerchief and leaned towards her. Her horse shied away. Jasmin laughed and pulled her close again. “You can’t tell which is rain and which is tears, I expect.” She felt his hand shake as he dabbed at her eyes.

“You *are* clumsy. Let me have it.” She rubbed her cheeks and gave it back to him. He thanked her; rode farther off.

He didn’t speak until they got near the cottage. Then he said: “I swear I won’t mention this business again; unless you do. . . . Only I do want to say this, Jasmin. If there’s ever anything you want done or you’re in any sort of a fix you must let me know. . . . You know already that there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.”

She’d expected some assurance of this kind; and meant to laugh it off. But his voice and look touched her.

She said, “Thank you very much, Evan.” When he’d ridden away she went into the house.

Later the rain cleared and she went out and cut some roses and posted them to Charles in London, with a note saying that they were to put on the table to cheer his monastic meals.

The next morning she got a letter from him chiefly about his work, and telling her that he had seen Evelina.

VI

Charles and Jasmin gave up Marlowe Cottage in September and went to stay at Melcombe. Lady Whichford sent over an extra car to fetch Perdita and Nannie and their luggage.

Charles hadn't wanted to go. But Jasmin pointed out that it would be less lonely for her to be left at Melcombe during the week than at the cottage. He thought she had a kind of obsession about this "being alone." She had been strangely quiet and strangely uncertain in temper during the last weeks. When he wasn't working he was troubled by a feeling that something was wrong in the machinery of their life. But he told himself that anyway at Melcombe she would have more company. There was something stupid—or else deliberately frivolous—in the way she allowed Evan to spend his time with her at the cottage.

The second day that they were at Melcombe they were sitting side by side at the tennis courts watching other people play. He said:—

"I hope you'll be happier here than at the cottage."

She turned her head and looked at him. She said:—

"Charles, what's really the matter?"

"I don't—"

"The way you said that?"

He didn't answer. Then he said:—

"You're very odd, darling."

"Why? How? It's you—" She broke off; stared unhappily at her racket. "What's in your mind?" she asked.

He said, "I think you've been treating Evan very badly." He saw her swift color—then.

"I don't see . . . He likes being with me."

"Exactly."

"Oh, darling—don't be so romantic in your outlook."

He saw she was embarrassed. He said:—

"He isn't in love with you any more?"

She ran her finger over the gut of her racket; saw Evan, standing and holding his horse in the rain, last week. She said:—

“I don’t think so. Anyway, he enjoys my company more than you do. Having no frescoes to distract him, he—”

Charles got up. “You’re unjust.”

She murmured, “And—you’re—utterly stupid and unperceptive and—”

He was halfway across the lawn.

She got up, wondering whether to follow him.

“Will you play now, Jasmin?”

“No, thanks.”

She turned and followed Charles indoors. He was standing in the hall looking liverish against the yellow walls.

“Charles—darling—”

He glanced at her, seeing how lovely she was and feeling suddenly that he disliked her. He didn’t answer. He went across the inner hall to the library and shut the door after him.

Jasmin stood still, watching the shut door. It seemed unreal that Charles could look at her like that. She remembered the weeks after they first met, when he avoided her—and felt again a defensive element in him easily turned to resentment, and changed again from resentment to cruelty.

She noticed some letters on the table. Two for her—she took them up mechanically. (But what exactly made him defensive? What was there to defend? . . .)

She looked at the letters. One was from Evan. Why should he write?

MY DEAR JASMIN,

This is just to repeat what I said a fortnight ago. If you’re really feeling wretched you know there’s absolutely nothing I wouldn’t do for you and that you can always rely on me. I can’t stand seeing you upset, so if there’s anything I can do you just let me know. You know what I’ve always felt about you.

Yours,

EVAN

She crumpled the letter and threw it into the wastepaper basket. She went to the library and opened the door quietly. Charles was at the far end, with his back to her, surveying the books.

“Charles.”

He didn’t hear.

“*Charles—?*”

He turned. “What is it?”

She shut the door behind her.

She said, “Darling. Please forget what I said.”

“About what?”

“About the frescoes.”

“Oh, *that—*” He looked at the books again.

“Darling. We make each other so wretched.” The tones were cloudy yet iridescent (like bubbles filled with smoke). “Charles—please . . .”

He said, “My dear. Of course those things don’t matter.” He let her come and hold on to his arm, leaning her head against his shoulder.

But her nearness, her renewed gentleness, seemed only to emphasize his sense of wrong.

He felt he was always “forgetting” things and that each forgetting was a false step—though in what direction, or to what end, he couldn’t see. . . .

A large party came down the following Saturday.

Charles motored down with his father-in-law, who had been staying in London for the night. As they passed out of London, Lord Whichford began to talk of the industrial situation in general, and its effect on United Tar Products. He said, “Everyone’s talking about Rationalization as if it were a new kind of Health Food. In fact we’ve been rationalized for years. . . . That’s why other people are suffering and we aren’t. . . .” He told Charles that he’d only had one strike in thirty years, and on that occasion he’d gone up himself to Stubfield and spoken to the men and had a hand-to-hand fight with one of them. Charles asked who’d won. Lord Whichford said that he had, and raised the man’s wages soon afterwards. He said, “It’s no use being consistent. You’ve got to be opportunist (in life and in business). The British

have an ideal of consistency. Luckily they're inconsistent in character, and that's what's got them where they are. . . ."

They stopped for luncheon at Aylesbury. Lord Whichford spoke about the ballroom, and said how interested he was by the work. He said, "Most people, including my wife, look upon artists as either jugglers or failures. I had a brother who painted. But he went off to the South Sea Islands and I don't know now if he's alive or dead. Not a bad life, anyway!"

Charles asked him if he would rather have had his brother's life.

Lord Whichford sipped his port and said he didn't know. He said, "For all I know, my brother may have become a king, and done better than I have." He added, "Anyway, there's one thing I'm certain about: that it must be better to have a dozen brown concubines than one white wife. They know what they're there for. Marriage goes to a woman's head and makes her ambitious. A damned bore—ambition in a woman. D'you know the story about Schön's wife, who's always talking about her 'position'?"

Charles said he didn't.

Lord Whichford told it.

After luncheon they were both drowsy, and nodded from Aylesbury to Bicester. Charles thought his father-in-law had gone to sleep. But he boomed out suddenly:—

"How are you and Jasmin getting on?"

Charles said, "Excellently." It was impossible to be annoyed by old Whichford; his directness saved him from vulgarity; his subtlety redeemed his grossness.

"I expect she's a bit of a handful. When she first got it into her head to marry you I thought the thing wouldn't last. Now I'm not sure. She needs a whip every now and then. Most women with warm blood do; they're all the better for it. Of course if they're like my wife—" he broke off; chuckled. "You can thank God the girl isn't like her mother."

Charles said, "I'm no wife-beater, I'm afraid."

"All the worse for your wife. Have a cigar?"

The party consisted of a usual Whichford "crowd": Stage, Racing, Literature, Army, Art, "County," all represented by not quite creditable

specimens. Their parties always seemed to Charles like a first-class musical comedy played by a second-rate company.

Sunday morning was hot and everybody bathed in the swimming pool. Lady Whichford wore a black bathing dress and a tight black cap which made her face look bleak. Nadine Bristow posed her serpentine beauty under the tamarisk tree; a large man with a grunting voice who bred Sealyhams bobbed about trying to duck the prettier women; Roger Mandeville danced round the pool posing people and taking photographs. A female novelist sat on the diving board in a white *maillot* waving her legs and saying, "I *know* I shall have a tummy-ache if I *do* bathe. . . ." A general who had written Memoirs and married three times swam length after length of the pool. Each time he touched the steps at the deep end he choked out, ". . . two lengths . . . four lengths . . . six lengths . . ."

Jasmin dived in and out of the water in an ecstasy of enjoyment. Charles, watching her, remembered how they'd sat on the bank here and she'd made that revealing remark about hangers-on. She seemed to mind them very little now. She was running from one person to another challenging them to a race.

". . . *You* race me then, Ducky?"

"Ducky" was a youth who dressed well and often stayed with the Whichfords. He had an upright, nicely browned body, and good manners and a lazy smile. (His name was Duckworth.) He accepted Jasmin's challenge. She called across the pool, "You start us, Charles."

"All right."

They stood side by side above the deep end. "There and back," said Jasmin. The large man shouted, "Nine to two on the Bitterne filly!" Lady Whichford clapped. Nadine Bristow looked up at Charles and said in a voluptuous voice, "She looks like a nymph."

"Yes," said Charles. "Now. One, two, three . . ."

Jasmin and the young man reached the far end abreast, turned. . . . Coming back, she got ahead of him. Everyone clapped. "Come on, Jasmin! . . . Come on, Mrs. Bitterne! . . ."

She won by a few feet and turned laughing and spluttering to the young man. He laughed back. "I'll have my revenge!" Swam at her, ducked her; she clung to him and came up, still laughing. Charles dived in; caught her by the shoulders. The young man let go of her, staring at Charles's face. Charles said, "Come out." She looked at him, stopped laughing. "All right." The

young man got out first. The incident had happened so quickly that no one on the bank realized it. The General exclaimed, "That's right, Starter. No bumping and boring!" Someone else: "Good for your wife, Bitterne. . . ." "Well done, Jasmin."

Jasmin said, "I'm cold now. I'm going indoors to dress." She ran after Charles and caught him up as he crossed the rose garden. She asked, breathing quickly:—

"Why did you do that?"

He answered after a moment:—

"I'm sorry. I lost my temper."

They walked across the lawn to the house. She didn't speak. They stopped on the edge of the lawn, as if they were afraid of leaving the sunlight and going into the house. He sat down on a deck chair, slipping his bathrobe off his shoulders. She sat down on the grass beside him, looking at him, trying to make out his expression. He said:—

"Darling, I'm sorry about just now. It was idiotic." He added, "I'm not coming here again."

She waited. The sunlight was drying her bathing dress against her skin. She felt imprisoned in her own lassitude. What was all this about?—another fuss. A new resentment?

He said, "That young man was merely an example. The whole lot's so futile." He looked down at her, a narrowed glance that committed him to nothing. "Curious that you should enjoy it all."

"But . . . darling. . . . Darling, you're so unreasonable. It's simply that we're different. I enjoy *everything*. . . ."

"And I enjoy nothing?"

"No—no. . . . But—you're more eclectic—more critical, less easy—"

"Considerably."

She seized his hand. "Darling—don't you *see*, it's nothing fundamentally wrong in me." She knelt up, convinced by her own vehemence. "Wherever I was, I should be able to enjoy myself."

"Alone? In the cottage?"

She hesitated. "I don't like being alone. It's quite simple. I enjoy company."

“Evan’s company.”

“Yes. If I can’t have yours.” She added, hurt because he drew his hand away, “At least Evan’s easier to please.”

“I’m sure he is.”

“Charles, don’t be brutal.”

He said, “It’s ironical. I love you for just the qualities that can make me angry.”

“Because I enjoy myself?”

“That’s part of it.” He hesitated. Then he broke out, “Surely you could keep some critical faculty! Last night, at dinner, laughing with that man! Don’t you see that they’re all impossible?” He said, “Fiddling cacophonous tunes while Rome burns. . . . If the tunes were very good—they’re so depressingly vulgar.”

Jasmin said, “So am I.”

Something in her expression, a mixture of resentment and humor and sadness, made him laugh, made him seize her hand.

“Darling—I’m sorry.”

She said, “You’re strange. I don’t understand you. . . .”

He said, “All the same, I mean what I say about not coming back here.”

“But if I come?”

“You must come without me.”

“But if you’re doing this work for Daddy?”

“That’s in London. Anyway, he’ll understand.”

“But, Charles, it’s so rude and exaggerated.”

“I can’t help it. . . .”

“You are strange.”

“You’re strange, darling—not to understand.” She didn’t answer.

They were gentle with each other for the rest of the day; as if each felt the other a little raw.

Jasmin was quiet, so that the Sealyham breeder asked at tea, “What’s the matter with our little Jasmin?”

She made some reply and caught Charles's look.

Later he said to her that he'd been thinking about the talk they'd had before luncheon and that he was certain he was right. He looked nervous and obstinate and quoted:—

“And almost thence my nature is subdu'd
To what it works in, like the dyer's hand.”

He said that he'd always disliked the people she tolerated, and that he felt that the thing was becoming important now, because it came between them.

She was touched by his gravity and felt emotion behind his words. But it seemed to her that he was wrong about their relationship. It was nothing to do with her “friends”—whom she only sought because he was often detached and lived so far out of her life that she was alone. She said, “If you loved me more I shouldn't want anything else.”

His look shut up. He said with a deliberate blankness:—

“You expect the wrong things from me.”

She felt in her heart that she was wrong, but that he wasn't right. Seeing him hurt and shut away, she tried to get at him—since she knew that tenderness could do nothing—by jabbing. She said:—

“You're being priggish.”

He looked at her and answered after a minute, “I expect you're right,” and went off to the billiard room.

She woke suddenly in a chill light. He was leaning over her. He was still in a dinner jacket.

“Haven't you been to bed?”

“Not yet.”

She remembered yesterday.

He said, “I see what you mean—about my being difficult to please. I've been absurd. I'm much more sorry than I can explain. You're so lovely, you take life so easily and beautifully. I'm not a bit the person for you to have married—”

“—Darling, don't be—”

“I’ll try and be much less tiresome.”

“But it’s I—”

He looked down at her lying still-eyed in the ebbing dark. He thought, Yes—in a way she was unreasonable—undependable. But he’d taken her; married her; it was he (he knew that so clearly) who needed her—not she him. He bent down, touched her shoulder; whispered:—

“Go to sleep, my sweet . . .”

She whispered, drowsily, “But you must—”

He reassured her, “I shall sleep now. . . .”

Theresa went to Florence the following week, and Charles decided to join her. He thought that in his absence Jasmin might forget their transitory disagreements, and that when he came back he’d be able to arrange his work so that he could give her more of his time.

VII

(Letter from Charles to Jasmin)

FIESOLE
October 24

MY DARLING,

I hope that by now you are peacefully installed at Melcombe and really having a rest. It was oddly heartbreaking, saying good-bye to you. I'm glad this filial expedition is only for four weeks. I've got a final picture of you standing at the top of the stairs in your white dressing gown. I should like to do a "pic" of you in that one of these days. Call it "Femme en Déshabillé"—or simply "Le Bain" (which is always good enough if a bath can be presumed within fifty yards).

I expect Perdita flourishes and is practising her ripening powers of speech upon her beloved gardeners. (What a sound instinct to love gardeners and abjure footmen!) Do rest yourself now, my darling. The last weeks have been a strain for both of us. My fault. Italy is rapidly restoring my equilibrium. Melcombe is perfect in October and should have a benign influence on you.

The sunshine is unstinted here, the place lovely (though too many have said so and too many "sightsee" exactly what I want to paint—and *when* I want to). . . . Yesterday two kind American ladies offered me ten dollars for my sketch when it was finished. I touched my hat, bowed, and explained in broken Italian that it was, alas, already dedicated. . . . I said to a beautiful lady (you! who would soon see its faults and regret it). However, they were touched by this and gave me a sandwich. . . . Cousin Mary Langridge (alas, unchanged!) didn't like the story. She told Theresa, afterwards, that it was a pity I "went about as I did" (i.e. the Antibes flannels and hat, and the blue shirt that Vicky is always trying to incinerate).

On the whole, my work goes well. I do a great many sketches (for use in the studio later). I can feel how much I have learned since I painted here last, four years ago (when, in fact, I made the momentous decision to take it up for good. I wonder what I should be doing now if I had stuck to politics). I wonder what you'll think of the work I bring back. I think some of it much better than nine

tenths of the stuff collected in the Uffizi. The other tenth, of course, leaves me flat—but if I can get a long enough life and stick to work like a leech I may be an “Old Master” in the end. Cousin Agnes says to me, with varying degrees of tact, that if only I would try to paint like the Old Masters! . . . In fact, if people would cutout the artistic-snobbery, Medici-print prejudice they would see that any “O. M.” worth twopence painted as their Young Selves prompted them to, made their mistakes, and worked out their own ideas in the end. If I died to-morrow I would rather, anyway, have painted a bad Charles Bitterne than a perfect School of—some hallowed Olympian of the Brush.

Enough of my daubing and dabbling.

Cousin Mary talks about you in a vein of adulation. This her only merit. She is really too plump and banal and snobbish. As for poor old Angus, he is the same and more so. He potters about the garden, reads and misquotes Browning, drives every day down into Florence and returns bearing some costly but usually valueless “antique” which he shows to Cousin Mary, who always looks up from her crochet and says, “Angus has such a ‘flayurr’ for these things!” In the last four years the antiques have spread to every corner of the house, pieces of carved wood, ironwork, and slabs of mosaic being so ingeniously distributed that even the plumbing has an air of being a “relic” of Charles V, and the food “hatch” in the dining room is surmounted by a Madonna as if it were a shrine!

Theresa is alternately lively and philosophical. She is lively because she is seeing quite a lot of people in Florence and philosophical because she is finishing her novel—which “gives her to think” about ultimate values and essential motives in life. Chantrey, the M.P., is staying with some dull people near here, and he and Theresa continue their friendship. His wife spends her time with her dull hosts and he comes up here and takes Theresa for walks. What other woman of over sixty could fascinate a man like Chantrey and keep him amused by the hour? They stroll up and down the Langridges’ “over-statued” garden, Theresa twirling her parasol while she talks and Chantrey with his hands stuck in his pockets, chuckling at her good things, and delighted by every moment of her. They are also serious. (You know Theresa’s knack of being confided in.) She says John Chantrey has a very difficult

life, and she wishes she could help him. (Sometimes she is rather like a retriever we once had who used always to jump in to rescue us when we were bathing with a “look-how-well-I-save” expression on his face.)

I’ve had quite a lot of talk with Chantrey in the last week. He has a great admiration for your father and thinks he is the kind of man needed in industry just now. He dislikes your brother Rex nearly as much as I do, and his remarks about Peter are not matter for polite correspondence.

Kiss Perdita for me.

My dear, write to me,
CHARLES

(Jasmin to Charles, November 2)

MELCOMBE, WARWICKSHIRE

DARLING SWEETHEART—I adored your letter, and your description of the Langridges. I am being tremendously quiet (if one can be quiet “tremendously”). Anyway, I am leading the simple life, and having breakfast in bed, and not seeing anyone except at week-ends; I am reading a book a day and storing that “abhorrible” vacuum my mind. I am doing a course of nineteenth-century history which I’ve never got straight. Daddy has supplied me, at my request, with enough books on every country and conference and war and treaty to keep me busy all my life if I were a Professor and had nothing else to do.

Last week-end there were a few people. The Brendons, Benita, an American couple, a dreary young German sculptor who said I looked like his idea of a Bacchante. I said, “Why? Do you think I look tight?” and he said, “Pleass?” I said, “Well—do I look Bacchic?” and he said, “Pleass?” and I said, “Do I look as if I drank too much wine?” and he said, “Pleass to excuse, I do not understand,” and I said, “You think I look like a Bacchante?” and he said, “Yes. That is what I think.”. . . Q.E.D. This week-end the Vernons are coming over and some of the minor Bankers of Europe and their families, and Evan and Peter and the “Mandedrille.”

I wish you wouldn’t be so beastly about Rex. You always are, and you know I’m fond of him. And as for Peter, she has very nice

qualities, though she is everything that John Chantrey says. (And probably says from experience, as he took a great fancy to Peter two years ago.) You are so different yourself from most people because you're absorbed in your work.

But I adore you, darling, and when I see you I shall fall in love with you all over again.

Perdita is too enchanting and says a lot of new words and sentences.

Bless you, my sweetheart.

Ever Yours,
JASMIN

P.S. So glad your work is going well.

(Charles to Jasmin)

VILLA
FIESOLE, FIRENZE

I'm sorry if I hurt you about Rex. I am stupid sometimes when it is least to my advantage—or credit (as I was over our final arguments). As you say, I often fail to be interested in other people, and therefore to understand them.

You are the only person I really care for. Towards everyone else I feel mild. I am very devoted to Theresa, and to Evelina, but I suppose if they both died to-morrow it would be much more the poignancy and drama of the thing that would hurt me than their actually being gone. On the other hand, the sense of being without you is something that gets hold of me more strongly every day. (If it weren't for my work, how depressingly uxorious I should be!)

C.

Nov. 15th

MELCOMBE, WARWICKSHIRE

CHARLES DARLING: Rather long in answering, but last week-end was rather hectic, and I've been in London the first half of this week. It seems very difficult to live the simple life for long. However, here I am back again. No one in the house but Mother and Evan Campbell—so I shall play some golf.

Perdita is well and sends you a kiss.

Peter is having a “flying party” next week. She and Rex and another man, and she has asked me and Evan. The idea is to fly to Paris (in her own plane), all stay there for a gay evening, and fly back as soon as it's light in the morning. Great fun. It all depends on the weather, of course.

In haste, darling,

J.

When are you coming back?

Telegram, sent off from Florence, November 18, A.M.

MUCH PREFER YOU DON'T FLY WITH PETER PLEASE
CHARLES

Telegram, sent off from London, November 18, P.M.

ALL RIGHT DARLING JASMIN

VIII

Charles's telegram arrived at Melcombe while Jasmin was lying down before dinner—a habit which she had copied from her mother during the last three weeks. She read it twice and put it on the bedside table. The emotion suddenly awaked by a sense of his nearness gave way gradually to consideration of his words from other points of view. Lying still in the shaded light, she began to find in his anxiety an assumption of a right to dictate and an intimation of just those criticisms—of the parties she went to, the company she liked, of her preferences, friends, and relations—which had made their common life so difficult in the last months.

After all, to fear simply for her safety in flying the Channel was as absurd as if she had been anxious about his going by train—to Italy . . . or if, in fact, he didn't like the idea of her flying. . . ! At home he cared little enough what she did—or little enough to forbid her any action. And now, he interfered. Because of Peter (of "Peter's riffraff," as he called them)? Or because of Evan? . . . But he hadn't cared when she saw Evan five days a week all the last part of this summer.

Or—did he care?

Were his coolness, his silence, his moments of looking at her as if she were a long way off, his way of saying the thing that he couldn't—or stubbornly wouldn't—vulgarize in words (words that belonged to such, common enough, situations) . . . Was his going off to Italy less deliberate, more impulsive than she'd believed? A characteristic challenge to her to do as she liked, to deal with Evan in her own way. . . . A way of saying that because he loved her he wouldn't care to coerce her, to harass her with his doubts, to bother her with his secret twisted anger? Was the nervous detachment that had become more and more usual in him in the last months a symptom of some violent, and therefore hidden, discontent?

Her mother's maid brought in the frock she'd ironed for her and laid it over a chair.

"Thank you, Lennard."

. . . And the telegram might be (for he was incalculable, suddenly losing hold of himself when he seemed most quiet)—might be his way of saying that he cared what she did, where she went, whom she saw. . . .

The idea that she'd hurt him made him suddenly dear, suddenly desirable; brought him back within the quivering radius of her emotions. She

shut her eyes, fancying that he might be there, standing beside her and bending down to stare, half-amused, half-enchanted, into her face.

She opened her eyes and saw the clock on the mantelpiece. But if . . . if that had been his motive in telegraphing, wouldn't he be coming back? Didn't he want to see her, to be with her?

Time to dress.

She got up, switched on the dressing-table lights, fetched a towel, and wiped the cold cream off her face. He might have said more. Said that he was coming back. His letters, since he went away, had been too easy, too talkative; had assumed that his small absence might solve their small disagreements. Nothing there to hint at any hidden motive for his going.

She began to brush her hair. His love for her was so strangely clear, even in the letters. And yet he seemed content to love her without,—she hesitated, combing her hair back into its thick, shining curves,—without claiming her, demanding her, owning her. So that she came, at times, to wonder how near he wanted her. . . . And then, at other times—she stared, fingering a scent spray—he fixed on her a vehemence, a blaze of feeling which made her feel like an animal dazzled by a headlight.

She slipped off her dressing gown. Her mind veered between her differing explanations of his telegram. She read it again and put it in the fire. A luxurious foretaste of submission made her decide to obey him. When he came back she'd tease him for being a tyrant. When he came back? The thought brought her again to questioning his motive. She took her dress off the chair. It was the dress she'd chosen to go with him last summer to the Pondworth's dance, and he'd refused to come, at the last moment. . . . (Not so good, though, as the white she'd been going to wear for the Paris party . . .)

The reflections of her in the triple mirror frowned, colored, tilted their heads. He simply wanted to spoil her fun, to keep her clear of Peter and Rex, to isolate her from the life that she was used to. She wouldn't go—because he'd asked her not to. But she finished dressing troubled by a sense of injustice; and puzzled that she should find Charles, of all people, unjust.

As she went out she caught sight of his last letter lying on the writing table. She stopped short, and went over to the table and picked it up. She read the last two lines, then held it against her cheek for a second, then threw it down and went out of the room, swallowing the tears in her throat.

When she got downstairs she told Miss Courage to send a telegram for her to Charles, telling him that she wouldn't go.

The subject of the Paris expedition came up at dinner. Peter began talking about dates and hours. They would have to get over before dark. The best thing would be to change their clothes at the Whichfords' Paris flat. Lord Whichford grunted. Yes, it was always open. They'd probably find old Madame Fournier, the caretaker, giving a party. . . . They'd fly back as soon as it was light next morning: the point was to be there and back and breakfast in England.

"The wonders of civilization, eh?" Lord Whichford turned to Jasmin. She colored, avoided Peter's look.

"I don't think I'm going, after all."

Evan, whom her mother had asked to dine, was beside her. He came out with:—

"Oh, I *say*—"

"Why not?" Peter asked.

She felt her mother's attention turn to her from the goggle-eyed little Baronet on her right. Jasmin answered her father.

"Charles doesn't want me to go. He wired."

Her father nodded, pronounced, turning a satirical glance on his wife: "Quite right. The young man's got some sense. I always told you so. Doesn't like his wife ragetting about."

Peter said: "Well! That's the first time we've heard that about Charles. Usually he doesn't care a damn what she does." Peter's fragile, metallic tones caught up the attention of the small party seated round the table. The goggle-eyed Baronet from Long Aston looked at her with a dim mixture of fear and desire. Rex said, glad to neglect the Baronet's wife, who had light eyelashes: "Charles being the heavy husband for a change?" He leaned over to ask his sister, "Why doesn't he want you to go?"

Peter taunted lightly: "Doesn't think my parties are suitable for her, I expect." She added, turning to her mother-in-law, "He's rather like his cousin,—what's her name?—Evelina. Rather stand-offish at times."

Jasmin broke out: "It isn't true, Peter."

Her mother smiled. "I always think he rather feels our being *here*, you know."

The Baronet's wife clacked to Rex: "We're all so glad to have people here who *do* hunt."

"But of course you'll come, Jasmin?" Peter demanded, calm but ready to be hostile.

Rex said, "I shouldn't be a doormat, Jasmin. If you start letting yourself be dictated to, he'll go on dictating."

Jasmin felt stupid and miserable. She said, "I can't go if he specially doesn't want me to."

"Oh, but look here," said Evan. "If he's nervous about you it's probably because he thinks—beg your pardon, Peter—that Peter's going to pilot you. But if you come in the special machine from the Airways people, with one of their own pilots . . ."

"Thank you, Evan!" said Peter. She laughed. "All in your interest to get her to come with you, of course!"

Lady Whichford interfered with a gay:—

"Now you're squabbling like a lot of children. We'll discuss it all afterwards, won't we, Jasmin? I'm sure you can go, darling! I'll write to poor Charles myself about it."

Jasmin was silent.

During the rest of dinner Evan tried to get her to talk, but she only answered perfunctorily. After all, perhaps it was true, she thought, that he'd imagined her going with Peter, while this later plan, that Peter was going alone in her Moth with her young man, would seem all right to Charles.

During dessert Evan said, "I say, you know it's going to be such fun. And if you don't come the whole thing'll be spoiled."

She turned to him:—

"Will it? Why?"

He tasted his port. "You know quite well why."

She gave him, automatically, one of her sweet, hesitant glances.

"Dear Evan. You're very nice," she said.

It was her mother who decided it. Jasmin had felt, from the moment that her mother took in the situation, that she would decide. She said, talking to Jasmin when the guests had gone, that of course she must go. That Charles's idea of preventing her was selfish. That it was absurd for anyone so young and lovely as Jasmin to shut herself away from all social life, and all amusement, as Charles himself did.

Jasmin hardly knew at what point she gave in. But by a sort of casuistry she argued that the decision had been transferred from her shoulders to her mother's, so that Charles could hardly mind. She went up to bed wondering whether to write to Charles, or to explain later. She decided to write to him the next day, explaining that she was going after all, but that there was nothing to worry about.

Meanwhile Rose Whichford told her husband that Jasmin had decided to go after all.

His comment was, "Is Campbell going?"

"I believe so."

He looked at her heavily, a little preoccupied. "That's why you're so keen on the thing. . . . I notice you take trouble to keeb young Campbell hanging round here. . . . Pity you can't let 'em alone. She's got a better thing in Charles than you could have got her with a lot of work." He added contemptuously but half-kindly: "You sometimes let your talents run away with you, old lady—"

Rose Whichford didn't answer. The word "work" annoyed her first, and then woke her latent sense of values as they are. . . . She had worked—worked from that first beginning, more than forty years ago, when she'd made her mother change their neighborhood from Cricklewood, drive round paying calls in Putney in a hired brougham. (Mother, who'd slipped into—shopping, gossiping, a bit of supper.) She could remember now the afternoon she was seventeen, when she sat on the bed in her dank neat room staring through the rain at the house opposite and made up her mind that she couldn't, wouldn't live her sister's life (three babies—her husband "traveling"—a char once a week). As she'd foreseen, the calls, the maid (hired for the afternoons "at home"), had placed them. The Johnstons had called finally. At their dinner party she'd met Edgar Lengel; heard "a brilliant young chemist" and listened while his future was talked of. He'd called on her mother. . . . She'd got him in the end. (She faced the early self that had got her here now by a log fire at Melcombe.) She'd won him finally

by pathos, by letting him feel that she was unhappy at home. (She reflected sentimentally that he'd been more tender-hearted then . . .)

IX

They arrived at Le Bourget just after five. Rex had ordered a car to meet them. They drove into Paris at a breakneck speed. Peter sang, and Jasmin and Rex and Evan and Peter's young man joined in the choruses. They dined at a Russian restaurant and then went from one *boîte* to another as they had planned. At three o'clock they got to one underground, built to look like the catacombs. Here they drank even more champagne, and Peter and Rex capped each other's stories and Peter's young man sat with his arm round her waist. Evan had been firmly talkative at midnight, but since then had grown quieter and seemed now unable to say anything except, "Havin' some more, anybody?"—"Any more bubbly, anybody?" Most of the time he watched Jasmin.

Jasmin was enjoying herself. During the evening the old delighted gayety, easy laughter, impulsive absurd chatter that she'd missed in herself for so many months, took hold of her again like a sensation of renewed health. She thought, with a momentary annoyance, of Charles's attempt to prevent her coming. He had ignored—selfishly, as Mummie said—how little fun she'd had since last spring. He never bothered to try to arrange her life so that she could enjoy it. (His usual *laissez faire* was nothing more than indifference to how she spent the time when he didn't need her.) But this was fun; this silly party was gay, amusing—the rushing round, the music, people, odd food, fantastic drawings on the walls, the sense of being simply out to enjoy one's self (however trivial it might seem to Charles, to Evelina; however vulgar—to Theresa perhaps?) made one feel, at least, alive.

She danced with Evan and sat down again. He poured her out some more champagne.

"Jolly this is?" said Evan, looking round the catacombs.

Jasmin said, "Awfully."

Peter said, "Enjoying yourself, darling? Aren't you glad you came?"

Jasmin nodded. After all, this was her element. It was natural to her to be gay. . . . It was this very lightness of spirit, she reflected, that Charles liked in her—and yet, when she was with him, she found it more and more difficult to remain light-hearted. So often she found her gayest mood checked by a mood of irony in him; her impulses countered by his logic, her momentary sentimentalities shown up in a flash of his humor. There were times in his company when she felt alien and depressed—the more so

because Charles himself couldn't understand how alien she must feel. During this summer, isolated with him in the country, she'd come to realize the opposition between their natures. His so strangely alternate, temperate and temperamental by turns. Her own easier, simpler, more vital; flexible, where he was stubborn, but with a weakness in her flexibility which made her subject to his moods rather than adaptable to his mind. She couldn't—she knew that—deal with him as Evelina could. She could only wait for his hard moments to pass—when he would reach out to her abruptly with a stifled longing, as if he'd been away a long time. . . . Or, instead of waiting, she could seek her own distractions. . . . Or rather,—she smiled at Evan, at Peter, at Peter's young man,—she could return, as she had now, to what she thought of as “ordinary people—ordinary amusements.”

The waiter brought lamb cutlets. No one could remember who had ordered them, but Peter and her young man ate them, and Rex ordered a mushroom omelette for himself and Jasmin. Evan refused to eat anything. He said, “My rule is never eat between midnight and cockcrow.”

“What a bad rule!” said Peter. “You might need to.”

“Wouldn't *rognons sautés* tempt you?” asked Rex.

But Evan looked determined.

Peter said, “The female at the next table is trying to get off with you, Rex.”

Rex turned and stared. “What—the bitch in yellow?” He lit a cigar. “She's much more interested in you, darling.”

Evan leaned on his elbows, bent his head nearer to Jasmin, and began to tell her a long story about a night club he'd been to in Budapest where all the waiters wore purple socks. He said this had a political significance which he couldn't explain to her, as it had been told him in the strictest confidence by a fellow in the Secret Service who was out there at the time.

Towards five o'clock they went back to the Whichfords' flat in the Rue Sainte-Honoré. Jasmin dozed on the sofa, only half aware that Evan was talking to her. He seemed to be laboring to amuse her, or, she vaguely guessed, to distract her attention from Peter and her young man. She fell asleep in the middle of an anecdote about a cousin of his who had kept a bear as a pet in Marlborough. Later Rex woke her up, and they went down into the cold half-light of the street.

They landed at Croydon in the rain—Peter’s Moth first, Jasmin and Rex and Evan ten minutes later.

Jasmin and Peter sat in the back of the car with Peter’s young man between them. In the morning light he looked very puffy, and Peter looked as if someone had smeared under her eyes with a blackened thumb. Rex was bristly and out of temper because of the cold, and had coughing fits.

Jasmin glanced at the back of Evan’s head (he was sitting by the chauffeur). He was the only member of the party who wasn’t out of temper or lugubrious. Jasmin herself felt headachy, choked with depression. She stared at the shrouded hedges and trees and thought of the remarks Peter had made about Charles while they were dressing. He *was* selfish—and inconsiderate . . .

At Peter’s instigation, they stopped in a semi-rural, semi-suburban bit of country at an hotel called the Crown Inn. They went in—dimly cheered by her notion of getting breakfast. There was no fire in the dining room and the palms looked dusty. There was an aroma of last night’s oxtail soup, and linoleum. Peter asked, “Can we have breakfast?”—and a waiter who must have slept in his clothes, doubted, “It’s a bit early—”

“It’s nearly nine,” said Rex. “Surely your guests have breakfast soon?”

The waiter gazed vaguely at him; looked round the tables, bare save for faint stains on one or two tablecloths. “We haven’t got no guests, not just for the present, but one lady, and she takes cocoa up in ’er room—”

Peter cried:—

“It’s no use staying here. We should freeze anyway—” She stamped out, back to the car, her gold heels gritting into the ash drive.

They all got in again.

“London,” said Rex to the chauffeur, and swore at Jasmin for kicking his ankle under her rug. “We can have breakfast at home,” he added. Peter cursed him for letting them get out. They quarreled. Peter’s epithets were vigorous. Finally Rex dozed off and snored, and Peter fell asleep on her young man’s shoulder. He was already asleep and breathing unpleasantly. Jasmin’s mouth felt flannelly, as if she’d been sucking sloes. She had indigestion and her feet were cold. She wondered if she would find a letter from Charles in answer to her note saying she was going to Paris. . . . Perhaps he’d come back, anyway. . . . She wanted to be with him, and away from Peter and Rex.

When they arrived in London at Rex and Peter's house, Evan drew Jasmin aside and said, "Look here, I'm certain you're awfully tired and don't feel like a breakfast party. Why don't you come back to my flat and have some breakfast there, quickly? My man makes capital breakfasts."

Jasmin agreed, wearily but with relief. "I *should* like to—" She explained to Peter, who seemed relieved to be rid of them. Her last remark was shouted from the door: "*You* look after her, Evan."

As he put her into a taxi he said, "By Jove . . . I wish I could."

Jasmin reacted with a glance consciously exhausted, and appealing. During the drive to Ebury Street, she leaned back, shutting her eyes.

A fire had been lit in the sitting room. Everything was orderly, solid, comfortable. The brass of the club fender was brightly polished, as were the pipe racks, ornaments, lamp shades.

Jasmin sank down on a big chair. "What ages since I've been here!"

"Yes." He arranged two more cushions behind her back, poked the fire, then went out of the room shouting for his man.

Jasmin held her hand to the blaze. The glowing Turkey carpet and heavy red curtains seemed to defy the foggy air outside. Something so well ordered, foursquare (so pleasantly unagitated by imagination) about all this. (The paper-basket made of an elephant's foot, the framed photographs of athletic groups, the books orderly and few, in a glass bookcase . . . a colored print of two spaniels over the mantelpiece. . . .)

When Evan came back she'd opened her coat and powdered her face. She felt less shivery. He brought in a glass of hot water and peppermint. "You said somethin' about having indigestion. Take this. Nothing like it. My mother swears by it."

She drank it down while he assured her that breakfast was coming.

She teased. "What a he-man's room it is!"

"What? I should hope so!" His man came in and laid the table. Jasmin said:—

"I smell coffee. Delicious."

"I should think you're hungry—our first breakfast wasn't much of a success this morning. What a night, wasn't it? I enjoyed it, though. Capital

idea. Feeling a bit tired this morning. But breakfast'll put that right. Hope you didn't mind my dragging you all the way out here?"

"I'm glad you did." She had an impression that he was making himself talk. He walked about the room and took up a fork from the table and laid it carefully in place again.

His man brought in the coffee.

"Come and sit down—you sit here nearest the fire."

The man returned with toast and two dishes. Jasmin slipped off her coat. . . . She was warm now, but she felt unsteady and her "Too funny to be breakfasting in white satin" had an hysterical note in it. (Had Evan got her here on purpose? What would he say?)

"Now. What'll you have? Omelette? Bacon? Grilled mushrooms? Better have a bit of each."

She said: "Lovely. It seems a lifetime since I had an omelette in the catacombs. . . ."

Evan sat down. "Must say I did think that place was a bit queer."

"Very," said Jasmin.

The man made up the fire and left the room. After a moment Evan said: "Well, anyway, you're safely back and Charles had nothing to worry about."

An impulse to discredit Charles and encourage Evan's pity, an instinct to play one off against the other, made her say:—

"I don't think he was really worried. I suppose he doesn't like my amusing myself while he's away." She thought as she said it that she could hardly be more unjust. . . . The sense of her injustice made her angrier with Charles. For somehow, she felt, he'd edged her into this situation—left her at Melcombe, left her to Mother, to Peter, to all the influences of her old life. When she most needed him he wasn't there.

Evan said, wiping his moustache with his table napkin, "Look here, Jasmin—"

"Oh, Evan, let's finish breakfast."

He got up. Walked about. "All right, of course you go on. I beg your pardon. . . . But what you said about Charles makes me see red."

She finished her last mushroom. (That seemed important.) Now that it was gone, and her coffee gone, she felt chill sitting here in evening dress—

and nervous.

She said, "Give me a cigarette."

"Of course—of course. Come and sit by the fire again." He brought her the cigarette box, lit hers with a shaking hand.

"Thank you, Evan." His abrupt and visible emotion infected her. She found herself keyed to a pitch of feeling. He said:—

"Look here, Jasmin—I wish to goodness you'd chuck all this . . . and get free . . . and let me look after you. I—you know I simply can't stand the idea of you not being happy. . . . I told you before . . ."

She asked, forcing a last gasp of irony, "Is this a proposal?"

He stopped pacing and stood with his back to one of the windows.

"You aren't happy, my dear—are you?"

She hesitated—heard her own choked, "No."

"I don't like being personal—but Charles doesn't make you happy?"

She stared at the flames, shook her head.

"Look here, Jasmin—these things can be arranged. Often are—heaps of people make mistakes."

She bent her head, muttered, "Oh, yes." (Heaps of people—But Charles and herself? . . . For in the beginning it had been so lovely. . . . The wrongness had begun to close in on them unreally, like walls in a nightmare.)

"If only you'd marry me. I swear I'd do absolutely everything to make you happy."

She shook her head. She couldn't speak. A sensation of staleness and exhaustion stifled her thoughts.

He said: "Jasmin—darling. You mustn't cry, my dear. You're tired, overdone. Poor little thing!" He sat down beside her, seized her hand, put his arm round her. "Poor little thing!"

The irritating phrase woke in her a violent self-pity. She clung to him, feeling him solid, and warm, and staunch. The merely sensual ascendancy that she'd felt and rejected in him three years before seemed now to promise some essential respite.

"Evan, you're awfully good to me—"

“Jasmin—”

She felt his grip grow closer round her waist. “I don’t know,” she said. “I’m tired—This is all too silly.”

“Silly? I’d make you happy, Jasmin.”

She bent her head back, away from him, thinking, “This is Charles’s fault.” She temporized: “Evan . . . do let’s be sensible.”

“How can I be sensible?—Darling—”

She gave way, from sheer exhaustion, to his embrace—felt, for a moment, a relief in surrender, as if her senses had absolved her of all need to argue. It was he who suddenly let her go, muttered: “I’m sorry. I’ve no right—I’m so awfully in love with you.”

He got up and lit a cigarette and threw it into the fire.

She said, “You’d better take me back.”

“Back where?”

“I’m staying at Belgrave Square to-night.”

“But Jasmin—”

She said: “I’ll let you know. At the moment it all seems a muddle. You assume too much.”

He stared at her, his head lowered, his face reddened. “You mean you’re still flirting—”

“I didn’t mean that. I’m not.”

He came out with, “*Not* a flirt?—Goodness knows you are. If I weren’t so fond of you I couldn’t have stood it. . . . You’d look at any man as if you were going to let him kiss you the next minute—and mean nothing by it.”

She got up, gazing oddly at him and with enough of the look he’d described for him to jerk out, as if she’d hurt him: “Are you serious now?”

She held out her hands to him.

“My dear, I’m serious, but I can’t decide anything.”

He drove her to Belgrave Square. He didn’t speak until his final: “You’ll let me know, then?”

“Yes.”

She went in, heard the door shut after her; stood still as if she'd had an escape. As she stood there she caught sight of a letter—a card—from Charles, forwarded from Melcombe. She took it off the table.

Hope you enjoy Paris. Have run across Michael Ward here and am off to Sicily—and possibly Greece—with him, for some weeks. Yours,

CHARLES

X

Charles stood on deck, watching the zinc-colored cliffs. Dover peered through the mist, the shapes of buildings picked out here and there by a window beaming a dim electric light. The air smelled dank, as if the whole of the sea and land lay in a vault of the universe.

The crossing had taken nearly half an hour more than its usual time and Charles had yielded to the common impulse to stand against the rail and peer toward the coast.

It was more than two months since he'd left. November now, and it seemed to him that during these weeks a kind of judicial interim had passed in his own life. He had gone away exasperated by the feeling that many things were wrong in his life with Jasmin, but that he couldn't define them exactly enough to deal with their reform. Laboring against his mistrust of all absolute conclusions, against his fear of impulses caused by emotional bias and personal prejudice, he had come, tentatively, slowly, to one belief—that Jasmin must choose between him and her family, between his life and life as it was conceived and practised by the Whichford "set."

The very freedom of his recent travels, the way that he and Michael had been able to turn their backs on time and obligation and use their days as counters in the purchase of new beauty and changing sights, had released him from the pent-up and harassed sensations of the last year. His muddled resentments, his feeling of being checked in action and dimmed in spirit by conditions that seemed easy and large enough, had been resolved by his perception that the ills of the spirit must come from the air it breathed—that the Whichford "climate," richly hot and bright, alternately stimulating and enervating, produced in him a sort of liverishness of the soul.

At first, in reaction to Jasmin's curt letter ("she would go to Paris if it amused her"), he'd acted on the dictates of a quiet and enduring rage. The letter had come when he was packing to go back, obsessed by a longing to see her again, and already half determined to get her somehow out of the life they'd slipped into. (He'd had a plan of taking her and the child right away for the winter—to the Pyrenees, to Corsica, to Morocco. A sudden obsession to have her to himself, away from the perpetual friction and waste of a social existence.) In his methodical rage nothing had seemed more reasonable than to go off. Michael's plans made an opportunity, and there seemed an added independence of Jasmin herself in going with Michael—to go off and leave no address, and work and travel, while Jasmin went to Paris with Evan and

Peter and Rex three times a week, if she cared to. . . . And Perdita could enjoy the company of her grandparents and receive the cultured influence of the repainted and curiously populated Melcombe.

Theresa had asked no questions when he said he was going. Nothing but “Merrick and I went to Greece after our second marriage.” . . . He’d given her a momentary attention. “Second?” She said, “Spiritually Once we had a bad break. . . .” She added: “But we were always falling in love all over again, and more fatally every time.”

During the second week in Greece, his anger went, seeping out of him as if he were losing blood, and leaving him—he realized it one evening walking back toward their inn on the mountain side—sharply sensitive to every touch of beauty, to every movement of inner feeling. He saw the trees and the bending road and the mountains with the plain and lucent vision of a child. And, in the same moment, remembered Jasmin last summer at Marlowe Cottage, running across the grass towards him, throwing her arms round his neck because he’d come back from London—remembered her look, her touch, the way the sunshine dusted her lashes. . . . And Michael said, “You’re in a hurry suddenly”—for he had quickened his pace.

His emotion of that evening might have driven him home. She lived again in his imagination. His constant sense of her, dimmed for so long, broke into light. He’d stood by the window listening to the sea and hearing her voice.

In the morning he decided to wait another fortnight, and then go back. During that time he’d think out the readjustment of their life; rid himself finally of all his humors and prejudices—and so be able to deal with the facts. To return without a policy—his reason forced that on him—might result simply in his seeming to claim her, absolutely and suddenly, just when it pleased him. He wouldn’t write. He felt that he could say everything or nothing, and that his “everything,” without a context, would puzzle her. . . . For, after all, he’d left her—emotionally enough, but with their misunderstandings thickening the air between them.

In retrospect, as he stood on the deck and heard, “Get your landing tickets ready, please. Get your landing tickets . . .” it seemed to him that his decision had been right. During these last three weeks the liberty of living—that he’d seized greedily at first—became an interlude in which he led two lives: an existence with Michael, painting, talking, exploring, going from subject to subject, from place to place; and a secret life in which the beauty

that he saw became canalized and flowed between the shining façades of his hopes, reflecting them and lighting them again.

The Customs officials blew on their hands. Charles's porter said, "First, sir?" and led him respectfully to a "third."

The cold followed him into the train. The porter touched his cap and shut the door. He felt the heating creep round his legs. As the train started he wished he'd sent a wire to Jasmin.

He opened *The Times*—and sat back to watch the countryside, the bare trees and secret fields, the chill-drenched hedges, the wet last brambles, the yellow elderberry leaves. . . . (Last November they were still at the Villa.) But England was lovelier, changing in its winter through all the moods of the year; bitter, gentle, threatening—suddenly still and exquisite, suddenly full of a crisp sparkling strength.

He thought of winters at Melcombe—the beeches silting the ground with their bright leaves, the silent garden, the lawns cold and asleep, the swans on the pale river.

"Refreshment, sir?" He ordered a whiskey and soda. She'd be at home. Having tea? Playing with Perdita? Perhaps, but not to-day—she wouldn't be in yet. Out with some of her *galerie*, out at a movie, a cocktail party, a concert (with gilt chairs) at her mother's house.

"Why keep Evan Campbell hanging round?" Theresa said. (As if Theresa hadn't had men, adoring, "hanging round," dancing a helpless attendance, all her life!) Jasmin could no more help it than Theresa could. But Jasmin, Theresa said, was "out for excitement." "But what were you 'out for,' Mother?" A smile, a gesture: "I was never 'out for' anything." True, perhaps, but that was the difference of epoch, of society—since thirty years ago there wasn't so much need to be "out for" things (provided you were privileged). And anyway, he'd demanded, "What harm did it do you?" And Theresa, enigmatic, troubled, half-humorous, half-defiant: "What harm indeed?"—And no more answer except, after a pause, the question, "*Did* it hurt Merrick, I wonder?"—and no more talk of Jasmin. . . .

Anyway, he'd change all that now—explain to her that they must make their own life; not a patchwork existence, made of outward contacts and unimportant relationships.

And now—he'd see her again—be with her again. . . .

His taxi took five minutes from Victoria to Westminster. It seemed half an hour.

“Is Mrs. Bitterne in?”

“Mrs. Bitterne hasn’t been here this week, sir.”

“Where’s she staying, then?”

“At Lady Whichford’s. At Belgrave Square, sir. She came in here and fetched some things, and gave orders for letters to be sent on the day after she came back from Paris.”

“Thank you.”

From Paris. . . .

He went slowly up to the library. The house felt like a museum. Perdita, of course, was at Melcombe. . . . And, naturally, Jasmin hadn’t wanted to be alone here.

Carlos rushed in, scampering, bounding, grinning.

“Hello, Carlos, old man!” He picked him up. Carlos licked his neck and chin. “Now—now—” Charles smiled. He’d ring her up—tell her that only Carlos had been here to welcome him.

He took up the receiver. It was Miss Courage who answered: “Hello. . . . Mrs. Bitterne—Oh, yes, she’s staying here. *Who* is that? . . . What? . . . *Oh!* Mr. Bitterne. . . . Why, yes, of *course*. . . . I’ll switch you upstairs. She’s in the drawing-room.”

Jasmin’s voice. “Hello—Charles.”

“Jasmin . . .”

“Hello—”

“*Darling*.”

A silence. Then: “Where are you?”

“At home—ours.”

“So you’re visiting England?”

Her tone sounded irresolute, queer.

“Jasmin—what d’you mean? Darling . . . you knew I was going to Greece for a time.”

“With Michael. Yes. You wrote to me.”

He remembered his postcard—written in another epoch!

“But my dear—darling! . . .” He checked himself, held the receiver firmly, managed a surer “My dear, come round here at once and see me. This is too absurd.” He laughed. “I order you as your lawful husband . . .”

A silence. Then: “I see you didn’t get my letter.”

“What letter?”

“I wrote to you, to be forwarded from France.”

“I didn’t have an address.”

“Characteristic.”

He broke in: “My dear, come here at once.” And heard her quiet “Yes. I’d better.” And the receiver put down.

He waited for her, shivering and walking up and down, trying to dispel an absurd sensation of panic.

Carlos sat in an armchair with one ear cocked and watched him.

He saw her taxi arrive. A minute later she came in.

He saw her beauty; then her pallor; then her expression.

She stopped inside the doorway, quite still, breathing quickly.

He’d meant, as a swift and absolute repudiation of whatever ridiculous obstacles she imagined, to take her in his arms, to feel her back again, and then—gradually—to speak.

He saw now that he couldn’t touch her. He managed: “What is it?”

She moved now. She got behind the sofa and stood leaning against its high back. He had a momentary impression that she felt easier there. Her gloved hand grasped the corner of the back. She raised her head, tried to speak, then brought out slowly:—

“There’s a lot to say. . . . (Down, Carlos!)”

“There must be.” He sat on the chair by the writing table and put his hands in his pockets and took them out again. Everything about her, her face, her voice, seemed distant. *A lot to say* . . .? What?

She watched him. She had forgotten he’d be so real. Her first sensation, which had been mostly a sick uncertain “stage fright,” gave way to an emotion that hurt her. She said:—

"I wish you'd had my letter. It would have made things easier."

"What things?" He heard his own voice. He was trying, through the buzzing of his whole consciousness, to get into contact with some section of his mind that, if he could only get at it, was trying to warn him—to tell him something.

She said, "The things that have happened. The things I've decided."

He said, "You'd better try and say them." (If only he could get at that mental impulse! . . . For there was something now, at the moment, that he must be ready to do, or say . . .)

"You know we . . . but perhaps you didn't really notice. . . . But in the last year . . ."

He turned eagerly. "My dear . . . yes . . . I do know. . . ."

She looked at him. (What did he mean?) She went on:—

". . . I don't think you found everything a—great success. And I didn't—in a lot of ways. You didn't really seem to find—to find our life very—interesting—"

"Jasmin!" She'd seen it all, thought it out. Only she hadn't been able, as he had, to find the way out. The pain that held him grew less.

She said, "We didn't seem able to lead the same life. You didn't like mine . . . and . . . you hadn't one—except for yourself." She added, "I know—in a way—you cared, but in so many other ways you didn't need me, or perhaps you don't really need anybody." She was looking down. But she felt him move sharply towards her and exclaimed, "That's why I'm going to marry Evan!" Her voice betrayed the panic in her mind; she stared at him, watching the effect of her words. Her mind was relieved at having said them. But as she heard the sentence she felt its reality, saw Charles—wondered if she were mad, wondered if she could escape by simply running out of the room, tried to imagine that she hadn't yet said the words, had an impulse to throw herself into his arms and hold on to him.

He said, "Of course . . . that alters things."

"*What things? What things?*"

He stared. But he was hardly aware of her exclamations. He thought, "How odd! I'm feeling calmer and calmer. What a relief!" He said:—

"Naturally . . . I didn't know that."

“D’you *mind*?”

He hesitated. “As you pointed out, a few minutes ago, I’m inclined to be indifferent about things.”

She sobbed out: “I don’t understand you.”

He sat down again. “My dear Jasmin, I might well say I don’t understand *you*. You come here to give me this—news. And although you must have thought out the whole plan, you don’t seem able to discuss it.”

She pressed her lips together, swallowed. She must be calm. (*He* was calm enough.) She entrenched herself deliberately, a little hysterically, in a situation somehow flanked by her mother and Peter and Evan (who wouldn’t let her escape, she knew that—she’d felt them cornering her, for the last three months). She said: “Evan would make me happy.”

His eyebrows peaked up oddly. It was the only change in his expression. “Good,” he said.

She said: “Since you’re better—without me, and I am—without you . . .” She stopped. He didn’t answer. (If *only* he’d speak to her!) She added, “Perhaps I was stupid, in many ways—”

He broke in: “Since you’ve decided to marry Evan, the rights and wrongs of our marriage are hardly relevant.” He got up and walked to the window.

“Charles.”

He didn’t turn. “Yes?”

She asserted, justifying herself: “If you could simply go off like that, for weeks, for no reason, leaving no address . . .”

He turned; came at her suddenly; stopped short, breathing hard. When he could speak, he said: “That isn’t worth discussing, either. I expect you made up your mind about Evan a long time ago.”

She went on, speaking with a wild voluble plausibility: “If you’d gone away, as *planned*, with Theresa! But you stayed on; you went away with Michael, of all people—Michael, who made love to me at the Villa and whom any other man would have avoided . . .”

“If it’s any relief to you, we never mentioned you once.”

“—you go off with Michael—you don’t know or care what I do, what’s happened to me or to Perdita.”

He looked at her with an expression of stubborn irony. He felt cold and hard and pleasantly indifferent. He watched her wipe her tears, and reflected that her tragic air rather added to her charm. He remarked:—

“What you must really do is to let me know about practical arrangements. Your mention of Perdita rather brings up the practical side.”

She had it all ready. Yesterday evening, talking it over with Evan, it had all seemed so easy, decisive. She said, “There’ll have to be a divorce,” putting up the words now like a row of ninepins which he might—if only he would—knock down with a word, a gesture, an assertion.

“That’ll be quite—easy.”

“Yes.” Easy. Of course—life with Charles, in the empty atmosphere of his absence, had become a thing of uncertainties, defections, hurts. (And Evan so easily available, so reassuring.) But now—

He said, “Of course I’ll do whatever’s necessary.” He smiled. “However, we can write about all—legal arrangements.”

She nodded. She couldn’t speak. He said:—

“I shall go to Lowndes Street as soon as I can get my things packed. . . . Of course Perdita will stay with you.”

She shook her head.

He said, “Of course. Anyway, that’s just.”

“No.”

He glanced at her. “We can write, anyway, about it.”

“But, *Charles!*”

“What is it? Why do you scream like that?”

She lifted her hands to her forehead and kept them there as if she could allay a sense of pressure.

He said, “Dramatics are unnecessary.”

“But we’ve hardly talked it over—we—”

“Jasmin.”

“Yes.”

“I came back this afternoon expecting . . .” He stopped. He said, “I expected too much.” Then: “Please go.”

“Charles.”

“Go at once.”

He heard her taxi go up the street.

He stood still for a long time.

XI

Evelina's father, the Reverend George Angus Bitterne, after a day's hunting always had a boiled egg for his tea. A poached, scrambled, or fried egg would not have suited the occasion; and for twenty-seven winters, in the late afternoon of Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays, he had clumped in from the stables, blowing his nose with a roaring sound, shifting his round shoulders, and remarking as he entered the hall, in a tone in which he opened a school treat or a Christmas sermon, "*Well*, now! What about a Boiled Egg?" (And a succession of elderly parlor maids had learned to hurry down the wooden back stairs to the kitchen with "The Master's back, Cook," or "Here He is—put the eggs on.")

It was Evelina's custom, when she had been out with him, to change her habit and have her bath before having her tea. So that by the time she came down her father, still in his boots, was eating a slice of plum cake, or smoking his pipe, and invariably commented on her lateness with a half-indulgent, half-contemptuous "There must be a chicken in that egg by now!"—a remark which always seemed to his daughter to typify the picturesque but unscientific processes of his thought.

On the last Wednesday in November, Angus Bitterne was cracking the top of his second egg when the parlor maid announced:—

"Mr. Charles Bitterne, sir. Will you see him in here or in the drawing-room?"—"here" being the Vicar's own study, a warm, handsome room hung with Rowlandson prints and views of the ruins of Carthage, and dominated by a pair of oars above the mantelpiece.

"Mr. Charles Bitterne?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well . . . I . . . Show him in here, of course. Show him in here."

Charles was shown in. He found his great-uncle stouter than he remembered him, his white stock a dazzling splash between his florid heavy face and pink coat. He had risen from his chair and was extending his hand across a table which had been placed in front of the fire, and which seemed loaded and glittering with silver like a display of wedding presents.

"Well, well, Charles. This *is* a surprise. And a very pleasant one." Their hands grasped above the silver kettle. Charles became aware that his coming—which was simply to see Evelina—might need some explanation to her

father. He said, as his uncle let himself down again into his high-backed and oddly episcopal chair:—

“I was motoring this way—so I thought I’d come in and see you both.”

“Excellent notion. I’m delighted you did. How’s your mother?”

“She’s staying in Paris with some friends.”

“Have an egg?”

“No—thank you very much.”

“Tea, anyway. Have some tea. Sit down. Pour it out for yourself. Evelina’ll be down in a moment. Must always souse herself in hot water, though. Hot baths are the ruin of people’s health. I only had such a thing once myself, and that was in a nursing home. (I dislike nursing homes. Full of minxes in caps and aprons trying to get married to the masculine patients.) My uncle Rupert—old Evershed, you know—a relation of your mother’s, too—died in a hot bath. A good thing, too, for his wife. However, *de mortuis nil nisi bonum*, as we had it at Harrow. Young people to-day think more of water than wine. A pity, that—a great pity. A man who would have laid down a pipe of good port forty years ago buys a dozen bottles to-day and spends his money on ‘fitted basins’ and what not. I gave my congregation a talk, last Sunday, somewhat on those lines—not quite, you know, but pointing out that people devoted too much time to external things. ‘Consider the lilies of the field . . . they toil not, neither do they spin.’”

“Or buy port,” said Charles, pricked by a momentary amusement.

His uncle hesitated, then gave a roar of laughter. “You’ve got me there. No indeed!” He chuckled and breathed, while he folded two bits of bread and butter together: “No—no.” . . . He glanced at Charles, suddenly curious. He scratched the back of his neck, drank half a cup of tea, glanced at him again. “Hate lilies myself,” he said, making conversation now. “The worst thing about weddings and funerals. By the way, I never came to your wedding, did I? Think I had one on myself that day . . . or it may have been a cricket match . . . I can’t remember. How *is* she?”

“She—?” Charles lifted his cup and put it down again.

Like all fanatics, Angus Bitterne was unobservant, or when he did observe was unable to draw an accurate conclusion. He noticed that his nephew looked pale, that his hand shook when he held his cup, that his last reply was *distract*—and thought to himself, with a mixture of misgiving and

joviality, “The boy’s been drinking.” So, when his mouth was empty, he spoke firmly and clearly: “Your wife, of course. How’s Mrs. Charles?”

“She’s very well—thank you.”

“And the little boy? How’s the boy?”

“It’s a girl. Very well, thank you.” To Charles’s relief, Evelina came in. She said:—

“My *dear* Charles. They’ve only just told me you were here.” Her voice, her look, her swift embrace, were what he’d come for. She looked from him to her father; then at him again. Her hand stayed for a moment on his shoulder; the touch of her fingers said, “I know something’s gone wrong. I’m here if I’m any use.” She stood in between them, saying something about his having a cold drive . . . and “It’s snowing now,” she said.

She was wearing a green dressing gown embroidered with white and silver flowers; its length and trailing sleeves made her look fantastically slender. She said: “You must have some fresh tea.” She rang; sat down; began talking, keeping the talk easy and impersonal. Twice she looked at Charles, and her gaze steadied him. Her father said:—

“Evelina’s been quite domesticated lately. She’s been here most of the autumn. I’m somewhat flattered, as you can imagine. Not so much rampaging to London as there used to be. Seems to find her neighbors less dull than she used to. Especially since that fellow Chantrey and his wife took a house in the neighborhood.” Angus Bitterne chuckled, and got up slowly and stamped about the room. His last remark was a joke of the hypothetical and mildly scandalous sort that he liked. Frequently, after dinner, he would entertain his friends by hinting that he could, if he would, reveal this or that romantic episode in the lives of his parishioners and neighbors. He didn’t notice Evelina’s sudden color. And Charles was wondering when he could see her alone.

After a moment she said: “You’ll stay the night, Charles? I hope you meant to?”

“I wasn’t certain . . . really . . .”

“Of course, of course stay the night,” chanted out his uncle. “Plenty of room in the spare room. Room to spare, in fact! We’ll have up some of the ’92 to celebrate the occasion.”

Charles thanked him.

“Not at all. Not at all. I believe in keeping open house. . . . I must go and change now. See you later. Evelina’ll look after you. I’m most delighted to see you here. Most delighted.”

Charles stood up while his great-uncle took this amiable leave of him. When he had gone he said to Evelina:—

“I hadn’t such a cordial impression of him before.”

She put her cup and saucer on the mantelpiece—bent to poke the fire.

“You’ve come on a good day. He sold a horse he’s been trying to get rid of for years to-day—for a great deal more than it’s worth. Last week he had sciatica and sacked the staff. I had to send them in the car to the cinema in Northampton to put things right.” She turned to him now; handed him the box of cigarettes off the mantelpiece; said, “I’m glad you’ve come.”

“I wanted to get out of London. I came back to England yesterday, you know,” he added, leaning back in his chair. “Jasmin’s going to marry Evan. She decided while I was away.”

He made the statement perfunctorily. She saw him shut his eyes.

She had a faculty, which served her capriciously, of foreknowing news, or apprehending events as they happened and before she could learn them through ordinary means. She had known the reason for Charles’s visit before she came into the room; and Evan Campbell’s name didn’t surprise her.

She didn’t answer. She was ashamed to find her first pity tempered by a sensation that was like relief after a long endurance. She met his hard, lucid look. He said:—

“You aren’t surprised?”

The short sentence showed her suddenly the state of his spirit, chill, isolated, suffering dimly from shock. She saw him monotonously conscious of his own inability to explain what had happened. She knelt down suddenly beside him, her compassion gaining all her impulses. She took his hand, felt how cold he was. “. . . darling, darling. I’m glad you came. . . . It can’t be so bad. I don’t believe she—means it. . . . The thing’s too absurd. I know her so well. . . . She’s so—in love with you—”

He withdrew his hand. She was like a light coming too close. He said:—

“You’re quite wrong. She never was . . . we made a bad mistake. Probably it’s just as well it’s over.”

She stayed kneeling, her hand on his arm, shamed now by the first meanness of her relief; knowing that she would go through any torment of spirit to give him back his unthinking selfish well-being of a year ago. (For this had been coming; she'd felt that when she saw them both in the summer —saw Jasmin defiantly light-hearted, Charles restless and argumentative. . . .) She said:—

“You can't really know—now.”

“She made it clear enough.”

“That she was going to marry Evan?”

“Yes.”

“But not—that she didn't love you?”

“It's the same thing.”

“No. It isn't.”

He asked, “What d'you mean?”—as if he were hardly interested.

“She might marry Evan *because* she cared—and things had gone wrong—and . . .”

“And what?”

“She *isn't* reasonable. You must know that. And she's weak. She's awfully definite, awfully alive—but she's got no—” Evelina searched for the word that would show him her image of Jasmin, a sun-warmed sweetness and goodness, a bloom of character made lovely by all sorts of immunities —“no toughness.” She added, watching his hard profile, “She's sensitive, as natural things are, directly—physically.” She saw he didn't understand (or care to understand). She'd meant him to see that Jasmin, unprotected, given too little warmth by him, would easily turn to Evan—simply for some kind of warmth. She said:—

“Charles, I *believe* it's a mistake, a muddle.” For surely yesterday, when he came back, whatever Jasmin had decided (decided?), he could have taken her back with a tone, a touch—and held her.

He said, “No. It isn't. It's all over, anyway.”

His manner showed her even more clearly how he must have reacted to Jasmin's ultimatum. (She remembered their childish quarrels, when he'd give up a fight suddenly, and go off white-faced, contemptuous, to hide in the high branch of a tree and watch, silent and gratified, while Vicky

searched for him with growing alarm, and she, Evelina, sobbing in an agony of repentance, hurried through the gardens and woods calling his name.) It was no use trying to get at him now. Later . . . or in a day or two . . .

He said hurriedly, suddenly taking her hand back in his:—

“I expect I’m better out of it, really. I shall work better. I oughtn’t to have married. I need freedom. You remember I thought so before. I quite see. . . . She wasn’t happy with me. And I wasn’t really doing my best work.”

Evelina got up. “You’d better not talk about it now. Words are dangerous. If you give them their head, like that, they make false ideas, and the ideas stick.” She stood looking down at him, her features as hard and pale as his own. “If you think, you *know* that isn’t true! It makes it better at the moment for you, but it isn’t real.” She added, holding her dressing gown more closely round her tall body, “*Thinking* the thing matters so. Nearly everybody’s mind grows up crooked—sort of rickets from being fed on sentimentalism instead of facts. . . . Think of the thing—as it is, my dear. Don’t *comfort* yourself.” She stopped. After a silence she said, “I’m sorry, my dear. I didn’t mean to be—unsympathetic. But I’ve tried pretending; and really a little courage hurts less in the end.”

He watched her, wondering for a moment if she were unhappy. He’d always accepted the antithesis in her of irony and integrity, of delight in the finely inessential and a respect for the essential, as typical rather of her character than of any state of spirit. For a moment the idea of her unhappiness touched him. He said:—

“Darling, I’m a brute to come to you like this. I don’t know why I bothered you. I shall get straight somehow.”

“You must make it *right* again, Charles.”

He stared at her, drawing down his eyebrows, pursing up his underlip so that she was startled by something distorted and ruthless in his face. “My dear, if you think I’m going to rape my own wife out of her father’s house and fight for her with my excellent cousin Evan, you misjudge my—capacity for romantic behavior—”

“Now then, now then . . .” The Reverend Angus’s loud fruity voice was followed by his person. “Better be thinking about changing for dinner! We dine early here, Charles. Seven o’clock. None of your London hours for me. Time to digest your dinner. Nothing worse than to go to bed with a full

stomach. Makes you dream, and that's how those charlatans the psychoanalysts get such a following."

XII

A week later Jasmin was having breakfast in bed when a message was brought up to her that Miss Bitterne had called and wanted to see her.

“See me?” The nerves of her body twanged, quivered, left her spent so that she sank back against her pillows. “All right. Ask her to come up.”

The lift brought Evelina to the third floor. A housemaid was carrying a breakfast tray out of the bedroom. Jasmin was sitting straight up in a white jacket. Evelina had an impression of something childish, startled, exhausted.

“Evelina!”

“I hope this isn’t too early for you. I’ve got an appointment at eleven.”

She shut the door. Jasmin watched her come across and sit down on the *chaise longue* near the window. Her movements, the inflections of her voice, her profile, the assured and thoughtful quality of her silence, created a ghost of Charles. And when she spoke, Charles might have said:—

“I hear you’re going to marry Evan?” She crossed her long hands on her lap; saw the quick phases of pain, irresolution, obstinacy, in Jasmin’s expression before she answered:—

“He wants to marry me.”

Evelina controlled an impulse of contempt. This quibbling with facts; this visible exhaustion (ameliorated by breakfasting in bed), this nursing of nothing more touching than a sick character—in this warm fresh room with pink taffeta curtains.

Jasmin asked:—

“You’ve seen Charles, of course?”

“Yes.”

“What did he say?” Jasmin, clasping her knees, leaned forward, trying to discern she hardly knew what certainty behind Evelina’s gaze.

“He said that your marriage was a failure, that you didn’t care for him.”

Jasmin tried to speak: “That isn’t—” Choked; bent her head suddenly on her knees.

“Do you care?”

Jasmin drew a long breath between two sobs. "I don't know. Anyway, it's all done with now."

Evelina watched the huddled figure in bed—the bright brown head, the stiffened shoulders.

"Why should it be over?"

"—I told him . . . Evan . . ."

"My dear—you know quite well that Evan's quite unimportant."

Jasmin threw herself back against her pillows, abruptly truculent, her mouth insolent, her face glistening with tears.

"He adores me. And he's attractive to me."

Evelina's hands unclasped, clasped again.

"Oh, that!" She added, "We can all consecrate ourselves to our senses when our hearts are starved. . . . It's only another form of going into a nunnery. . . ."

Jasmin demanded:—

"Does Charles mind? About Evan?"

"He 'minds'—altogether. Did you expect he wouldn't?"

Jasmin was crying again, less violently.

"He didn't say so. I don't understand him."

". . . He's difficult, but . . ." Evelina summoned a conscious strength to say, "You know he loves you. You could *make* him come back."

"Why doesn't he come to me, then? . . . I gave him an opening at the time. He made no attempt. . ." She asserted, scrubbing away her tears: "I can hardly be expected to pursue him! He stayed away weeks abroad without writing and just came back casually, when he felt like it. Last summer he didn't care when Evan kept seeing me . . . the whole thing is that he doesn't care—he couldn't—and I shall be better with a man who *does*. . . ."

"And Perdita?"

"I don't want to keep her. I couldn't bear to. I want to get right away from the whole thing. I adore her—but I should get to hate her for reminding me."

Evelina got up. She said: "I came to see you because in a way I'm fond of you. But chiefly because I care if Charles is happy. He isn't now. I wanted

to see how much you cared. I think, in your way, you do. But I understand your behavior. We're quite different—but I understand you. If you were to pull yourself together now, and stop your family and Evan and your own senses and your own frightful 'easiness' and weakness influencing you, you could still put things right. Try to think about it." She stopped. Jasmin was staring at her, her look slowly lit by interest, tenderness, vehemence—by an exquisite glowing excitement that came out in her choked "Evelina—darling." She held out her two hands. Evelina stood for a second looking down at her, fascinated by the stained brilliance of her features, exasperated by their too dramatic expression. Then she said: "Think it over. Charles is at Lowndes Street now—if you want to see him. I'm at my flat—you know my number. Telephone me if I can be any use."

She turned away without touching her, and went out, Jasmin's "I will—you *are* a darling," sounding huskily after her. Out in the Square again she wondered if her whole idea in going hadn't been a piece of false heroism—to impose on her own feelings rather than to help Charles.

Jasmin, left alone, began crying again.

And when her mother came up to see her half an hour later she was still crying—a bouquet of roses, with Evan's card on them, lying on the eiderdown at the end of the bed.

Theresa came back to London from her visit to Paris a week later. She summoned Evelina to come to see her. They talked for an hour, Evelina sitting still, Theresa walking up and down. Theresa said at the end of their talk:—

"He's better without her. He says so. He'll get over it. And there'll be nothing left but a sort of painfulness, to haunt him sometimes—He'll be enriched by it. . . . As one is by the snatches of song and fragments of gold that remain—"

"Long romantic views won't help him."

Theresa eyed her. "You make fun of me."

"I wasn't thinking of you."

"But would she come back? What did she say?"

"She didn't say much. She looked ill and kept crying. She said things were better left as they are now. I went hating her. But I was sorry for her."

“Does she care about poor Evan?”

“She doesn’t say so. She kept asking me if Charles minded very much.”

“And you said—?”

“Yes, of course. And then she demanded that he should come and tell her so.”

“If he went, would she throw herself into his arms?”

“Yes; I believe so.”

“And you want him to go?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t believe you’ll persuade him. I believe some profound instinct of self-preservation stops him.”

Evelina said: “That’s one of the things he likes to tell himself. Characteristic of him that where another man would go and simply—take her, he likes to take her word, to assume that she’s in love with Evan, that she’ll be happier with Evan, and that it’s all for the best in the worst possible world.” She added: “You’re right. I can’t persuade him. I spoke to him this morning. He said he didn’t want the matter mentioned again and that he was interested in finishing the ballroom and then wanted to go abroad to work next month—”

Theresa said: “He mentioned that to me. I’ve evolved a plan. That we might all go. Take a house somewhere in the sun.”

“All go?”

“Yes—you. If you’d come. You make a difference to Charles, my dear. He’s used to you and gets companionship without any effort. And Vicky and the child—”

“But would Vicky? It’s strange enough the way Jasmin sent the child here—”

“Vicky’s been a different creature since she’s had Perdita. She’d go anywhere with her. I think Vicky feels that Providence is showing a belated wisdom.”

“But wouldn’t Charles prefer to go alone?”

Theresa set aside the notion. “He can’t. He thinks he wants to. It wouldn’t do. He’s got too odd a streak. He’d become a monk, or the opposite.”

Evelina said, half-affectionate, half-ironical:—

“I doubt it, darling. . . . But I expect his ‘instinct of self-preservation’ won’t stand up against you. . . .”

Theresa smiled, preoccupied. Asked abruptly:—

“You’ll come, then?”

“Yes. If we go.”

“You won’t mind leaving England?”

Evelina asked directly: “You mean because of John Chantrey?”

Theresa said: “He talks to me, now and then. I don’t mean of names—and particulars. But, as men will, he dwells on the vagaries and strange incidence of Love.”

“Love.”

“That’s the word he likes, anyway. I hope, my dear, you keep your head?”

Evelina smiled oddly.

“Well enough. My head and heart. They were never in danger.”

“Then it’s nothing more than a sentimental gavotte?”

Evelina went to the glass and slowly reshifted the pearls round her throat. When she spoke, it was to a nothing beyond her own bright pale reflection.

“I shouldn’t call it that.”

“What then?”

Evelina turned her indifferent gaze in the glass to the reflection of Charles coming in at the door. Said: “I don’t know”—absently, aware of Charles’s spirit as if the room had suddenly grown darker.

XIII

Theresa stopped the car at Melcombe Lodge, and told the chauffeur to wait for her in the village, at the Red Lion. “—Have some tea there. I shall be back in about an hour.”

The gates were open. She walked in, wondering at the impulse which prevented her from driving up to the house. She felt that, whatever the result of her mission might be, this was the last time she could come here. . . .

She stopped for a moment, looking at the far house that seemed to wait for her in the poignant December sunshine. (To drive up would be like saying good-bye to someone you loved with a veil drawn down and suede gloves on your hands.)

She walked on, over the bridge, and slowly up the long steep drive. In the parkland on either side of the drive the oak trees, the chestnuts, the big Spanish walnut,—the trees that she knew from every aspect, limb by limb, as if they were her children,—seemed to watch her pass. The grass glistened. The chill brilliant air held a tang of frozen soil, of drenched grass.

She paused to rest.

She and Merrick used to laugh so at Herr Scheuer,—poor Rudi!—who would always stop exactly halfway up and make Charles do a scientific “pause,” dropping his arms and taking deep breaths. She remembered running all the way up the drive from the boathouse to warn Merrick, who was in full view playing diabolo with Lettice and Paula, that the victoria of his archenemy, Mrs. Quint-Blagdon, was approaching. . . . For a strange moment she thought that Merrick was beside her. She held out her hand, dropped it slowly.

Merrick must be young still. And she’d grown old. . . . (Wasn’t it better to die before you’d made an enemy of Time? Before you were disinherited by your own youth?)

She walked on again. The house was hidden by the clump of beeches. Now she saw it again. Its beauty that had held for so long, so that its essence lived in her now like her own spirit, would let her go, with that blind gentleness that makes inanimate things live for so long and die without rancor. She went through the stone gateposts and up the beech avenue. A garden boy was sweeping up a few papery leaves. He stared at her for a moment and went on sweeping.

She rang the front door-bell.

The butler visibly concealed his surprise; said her ladyship had gone out for a walk after luncheon. Would she wait in here?

Theresa thanked him; she'd rather wait in the garden. Perhaps she might meet Lady Whichford. She turned and went through the inner hall to the garden door beyond and left him staring after her. She couldn't wait in that "battered" library; she wanted to keep the place now as if she hadn't visited it, last Christmas, and seen its rooms arranged as a setting for the *Beggar's Opera*. Out in the garden she was safe again. No one had thought of an "amusing" way of "picking out" the lawns.

Lady Whichford passed the cricket pavilion and returned across the half mile of tussocky grass that separated the cricket pitches from the lawns in front of the house. She had her two bull terriers with her, and saw them suddenly run forward and back at a figure seated on the bench at the near edge of the lawn. She called her dogs, wondering, as she came across, who the woman in black could be. An old woman. . . . She wondered, irritated, if one of the village people or some relation of the household had taken it into her head to come and stare at the place and poke about without being noticed. . . . As she came near, the figure turned, got up—came forward.

"Good afternoon, Lady Whichford."

Rose Whichford stopped short, shifted her walking stick from her right hand to her left.

"Mrs. Bitterne!" Her voice unconsciously held something of the tone she had meant for an errant villager. Its perfunctory insolence made Theresa repeat, "Good afternoon," showing a glint of malice. She examined Lady Whichford's appearance: her infallible "country clothes," her admirable brown shoes and spats and gloves, her hat with its neat brim and its pheasant's feather, set at an angle on her golden hair; her features a little rigid both by character and by recent cosmetic surgery. . . .

Rose Whichford put her walking stick back into her right hand and called her dogs, who were sitting beside her with their tongues out. She moved forward.

"My dear Mrs. Bitterne—I'd no idea. . . . They should have told me. . . ."

Theresa said: "I rang you up in London and heard you were here. . . . I wanted to—discuss certain matters with you, so I came here to do so. What

lovely dogs!" The bull terriers were round Theresa, sniffing her hands. She patted them and talked to them. . . .

"Oh yes. Yes. Perhaps we'd better come indoors." Theresa perceived in her companion a desire to get her back to a familiar wall.

"Not at all. I wouldn't dream of spoiling your exercise. And it's so lovely out of doors to-day. We might walk through the garden. . . ."

Lady Whichford produced a narrow smile.

"If you're sure you're not too tired." She tried to draw assurance from her visitor's clothes. No wonder she'd mistaken her for any old gamp! That dreadful sealskin jacket . . .

"How nice of you to think of that. No, I'm not tired at all." She turned in the direction of the rose garden, Lady Whichford beside her. Rose Whichford tried to fill a silence whose every second made her more nervous. (What had she come for? How lucky that Jasmin was out with Evan—it wouldn't do at all for her to see Jasmin. How eccentric to come like this, without announcing herself! And what motive, clearly difficult and unpleasant, had she got at the back of her peculiar visit and manner?) She said:—

"I'm afraid this is all very painful, Mrs. Bitterne."

"Very," said Theresa, and was silent again, wondering how to free her powers of persuasion from her dislike of her hostess.

Rose Whichford tried:—

"Of course we all make mistakes. And perhaps the best thing is to put them right as soon as we can."

"An excellent principle. There are, of course, various ways of doing so. Naturally I've come to talk to you about Charles and Jasmin."

"Yes," said Lady Whichford with an air of condolence.

"You and I," said Theresa, "may have—indeed we must have—personal prejudices in the matter. You, I remember, were openly doubtful at the beginning."

"I was."

"Incidentally it is almost a commonplace that doubt can to some extent bring about its own justification."

"I don't quite see."

Theresa slowed her pace as they passed through a long pergola. "I had an impression that you allowed Jasmin to feel your—mistrust of the marriage."

"I—"

"However, that isn't to the point. Their marriage is what I want to talk about. I came to praise Cæsar, not to bury him. . . . You, I feel, and therefore Jasmin, have been rather ready to—shall I say, my dear Lady Whichford, to make a bygone of what is still a controvertible fact."

Lady Whichford sought for defensive words, although she hardly knew what to defend. Mrs. Bitterne was always so obscure, it was almost impossible to argue with her. However, she asserted:—

"The marriage has been an absolute failure—I'm afraid."

"I admit failure—but not absolute."

"He didn't make Jasmin happy. They aren't suited to each other."

"So she says—apparently."

"She'd be better with a man who—really cared."

"So she says—I'm told."

"He never gave her any sort of life—or interests."

"I'm told she says that, too. And what about the child? Has giving up the child, sending it to us like that, also been a relief to her?"

"Ah, there you touch on what seems to me the saddest thing of all. She adores the child. But the more we thought it over, the more clearly she saw that it could only remind her of the life she wanted to forget and she might even grow to hate it."

Theresa looked down into Lady Whichford's face; remarked:—

"Yes. She said all that to Evelina."

"Evan—one hates to say such a thing to you—is much more her type."

Theresa stopped by the swimming pool.

"I expect you thought that over with her, too. However, what I've come to suggest—is nothing at all despotic, my dear Lady Whichford. This is the kind of matter in which interference, as you must see, would be too great a responsibility—for any of us. All that I feel one can do—that one *must* do—is to give them a last opportunity of talking things over. They haven't seen

each other since the day he came back. They're—kept apart. They've let the whole thing come crashing down round them. She made the thing seem final to him (if it wasn't before) when she sent Perdita to Lowndes Street."

"But, my dear Mrs. Bitterne. You probably don't realize. They hadn't been getting on for a long time. So that, really, when Charles came back it was practically settled between them not to go on."

Theresa's gaze returned from the reflections in the pool. "That isn't relevant though. All I want is that they should meet—and discuss the thing finally."

Lady Whichford broke in on the last word.

"That would merely upset Jasmin and do no good at all."

"But 'upset'—the word has no proportion to the problem. It's a question of right, of sense, of justice—possibly of their whole lives."

Lady Whichford's manner dropped suddenly. Suddenly her speech came out, half choked by its own vehemence:—

"I never heard of such a thing. To make my poor child go through a dreadful ordeal, and face the man who's illtreated her, and have to face it all over again. And I was right about the child. She must start her life over again. She's young, and she's got her chances still before her. Evan Campbell's the sort of man who can give her a decent life, and the things she's been accustomed to. I didn't want her to marry Charles at the beginning, and I've been right. And I'm not going to have it all upset by an *interview*—a 'meeting again.' . . . I want to see her happy and having the position that's due to her. . . ."

"You mean," Theresa asked, "that you wouldn't let her see Charles? . . . He wrote to her, you know, but she didn't answer."

"She didn't answer quite rightly. I saw the letter. She's going to marry Evan, and he needn't bother her. Her solicitors had better write to him instead. And the sooner the thing's fixed up the better."

"But I gather that Jasmin herself can't make up her mind—yet—to anything definite."

Lady Whichford's glance grew cooler again. She wiped the corners of her lips. She said, "The poor child's had a sort of nervous breakdown. She doesn't feel like doing anything yet."

“I see,” said Theresa. Her quiet tones echoed oddly across the pool. “I should anyway have liked to see Jasmin—to say good-bye.”

“I’m afraid she isn’t fit to see anyone.”

“I’m so sorry.”

They turned and moved back up the path. Lady Whichford said, “All the time that he was finishing the ballroom in London she wouldn’t go near the house. She stayed down here.”

“I see.”

Rose Whichford felt she’d held her ground against an enemy the more dangerous because her impulses were so obscure. Mrs. Bitterne seemed unaware, or indifferent to her defeat. She seemed, indeed, to have receded into her own thoughts. Rose Whichford felt that a series of conclusions and criticisms were being ranged against her; and partly from a desire to ameliorate the criticisms, partly from a notion of showing a kind of superiority which could act, obversely, as an insult, she renewed the conversation with:—

“Of course, we want to come to an agreement with you about—the child’s education and upkeep. I mean—of course Edgar will settle some capital on her.”

For a moment Theresa stared. Then she said mildly:—

“You’re very kind. But I’m almost sure we shall be able to manage.”

As they approached the house, Theresa took her leave.

“You’re going now? You won’t stay—and have tea?”

“No, thank you. My car’s waiting—in the village. I must get down there before it gets dark.”

“I’m so sorry . . .”

Theresa ignored Lady Whichford’s hand.

“I’m sorry—that I’ve been able to do nothing for them.” She bent her head with an air of dismissal, so that Rose Whichford was left, exasperated, searching for a last phrase, watching the tall black figure move away, limping slightly, across the lawn and round the angle of the house.

When Theresa got down to the bridge, the dusk was closing round her. Her first anger with herself, with Lady Whichford, with the whole situation,

had given way to a sensation of acute fatigue. She looked back. But already the near trees were dimmed and the house was hidden. As she looked, she saw three windows lit suddenly; and then darkened, one by one, as the blinds were pulled down.

XIV

The lady who had coursed the platform of the Gare d'Orléans demanding the *Christian Science Monitor* came into the restaurant car carrying it under her arm. She sat down in the empty place next to Evelina.

"You've not got a fourth in your party?" she demanded of Theresa.

Theresa admitted this with a formal but gracious negative. Charles read the wine list.

Over the soup: "Are *you* going South, too?"

"Yes," said Evelina.

"To Spain?"

"To Majorca," said Theresa.

"Why, so am I!" said the lady. "Isn't that a coincidence!"

Charles looked at her. She said, bending forward so that no soup might drop on the white frilling that adorned her bust: "I hear it is perfectly lovely—even at this time of year. Some friends of ours were there for Christmas *last year*."

"Really," said Theresa.

"I suppose you're going to stop in Palma. I wonder which hotel?"

"We've rented a villa," said Charles, "from some friends. Some miles from Palma."

Evelina met his look.

"Oh, I believe the whole island is just a Paradise," said the lady, addressing Theresa again.

"I'm so glad."

"In September and October we were in Monte Carlo. We enjoyed that very much."

Charles watched the reflections of the tables in the dark window. . . . Monte Carlo . . . Where was Michael now? . . . That was when she began to resent things—

"Did you play?" Theresa asked.

“Oh, yes. We went once or twice to the Rooms. We saw a great many curious types. My daughter was with us—I daresay she’d be about your daughter’s age,” glancing with black friendly eyes at Evelina.

“She isn’t my daughter. I wish she were,” Theresa smiled. Charles reflected that she could never resist a stranger.

“Why, I could have sworn she was! Your son and she are so *like*, except that she’s blonde.”

Theresa said that they were cousins; she began to ask questions about the aforementioned daughter and got copious answers.

Evelina watched the two older women—Theresa with her flashing questions, her air of traveling incognito, the other as bright and florid and undistinguished as a piece of Berlin tapestry.

Charles watched them too, half aware of their talk and movements. The train rocked and rattled. The waiters whisked up and down the car—*fromages—corbeilles de fruits*—(One’s little life went on and on. The train jolted, rattled, beat out “on and on”—over a vacuum—an inexplicable darkness—)

“—But Anatole France,” expatiated the lady, who was, she told Theresa, from Louisville,—“has no message for me.”

Theresa sipped her liqueur. “You cannot look upon Literature as a series of broadcasts from God—”

“My daughter,” continued the other, “studied in Paris for a year. . . . She says she reckons the greatest writer France has ever produced is Victor Hugo! He’s got that sublime *something*—Do *you* write?” She turned to Charles and shouted louder as they went through a tunnel. “You look to me as if you were a writer.”

“I paint.”

“An artist? Well, that is interesting! You should meet my daughter. She’s crazy about Art—”

In the *wagon lit* Vicky sat on her camp stool beside Perdita, who slept in the lower bunk. When she saw Charles she beckoned him.

“You’d better be getting to bed now. There’s no sense in staying up.”

“But you?”

"I told you. I shall doze off sitting here. You go on up above there. Here's your dressing gown. I got it ready. Take off your top things anyway. Your toothbrush and sponge is in there."

"But, Vicky, you must lie down." Theresa stood in the doorway. "Charles said at the beginning that he didn't want a sleeper, and that you and Perdita—"

"You go and lie down—you and Evelina." Vicky got up and began to take off Charles's coat. "I wouldn't sleep anyway in one of them—shelves. . . . I prefer to be as I am."

Theresa and Evelina retired.

Charles protested. "But, Vicky—"

"No nonsense now. Off with that waistcoat."

"But I shan't sleep."

"Be quiet or you'll wake the child. Sleep? Of course you'll sleep. I've mixed this to make you sleep." She took a glass of white liquid off the corner shelf.

"What is it?"

"Never you mind."

Charles teased, "Ask no questions and you'll get no lies?"

Vicky laid her hand on his arm. "Drink it down."

She made him climb up and nodded up to him as he lay down.

"Now you'll have a good sleep and wake all the better for it."

He stretched down an arm. "Vicky. You are a treasure."

"Treasure fiddlesticks!" She settled down again on her stool, folded *Home Notes*, and put it away with her spectacles in her green canvas bag. She took out a plaid poplin handkerchief and tied it round her head, undid the top hooks of her high collar, and then crossed her hands on her lap and composed herself to rest. Her eyelids closed. Charles asked:—

"Shall I put out the light?"

She answered with shut eyes. "Yes, please."

Darkness. The repetitive rattling sound of the train; the monotonous regular roar of its speed. . . . A faint glare came into the carriage from the

light in the corridor. Charles could discern Vicky's face, hands, immobile, only swaying a little with the movement of the carriage. . . .

Below him Perdita. A queer remainder of Jasmin. She'd said, "You must keep Perdita, if you want to. You've a right to her. . . ." Untrue, anyway. Letting Jasmin divorce him, she'd have the "right." . . . But did she want her? What did she mean, in her note, saying, "I don't want anything left of you. She's too much—us."

He wanted the child. "Forgetting" wasn't possible anyway, for him.

He thought of Perdita lying asleep below. Her fat determined gestures, her shining gaze, ecstatic laughter. (Something of Jasmin distilled in her—the same responsiveness, the same way of delicious speaking . . .)

He turned over, as if a new position might pacify his imagination. A heavy drowsiness closed down. He dreamed that she was close to him . . . asleep beside him . . . Dreamed that he woke and bent over to take her in his arms. . . . He woke and heard the rattling darkness of the train . . . the scream of the engine. . . .

During the morning Perdita looked out of the window or listened to Vicky reading. Evelina helped to amuse her. They had a bears' tea party on the seat. Theresa read in one corner; Charles in the other.

Whenever they stopped at a station Perdita wanted to get out. Once she cried and fixed on Jasmin as the thing she wanted. Charles watched Vicky calming her.

Once Theresa looked up, and said:—

"Isn't this lovely country, Vicky?"

Vicky said that it looked very "heathenish." She added: "No proper hedges or anything. . . . I should say it was very damp and unhealthy."

Perdita slept after luncheon, and as they approached the Spanish frontier Vicky was free to take in the details of the countryside. She had read *Home Notes* through and refused to have a paper bought for her at Carcassonne. She said you never knew what French newspapers might not have in them. And when Charles explained that he could get her the *Daily Mail*, she said, "It would be certain to have been tampered with." . . . She also said it was a disgrace to see bulls pulling the farm carts. Evelina said:—

"But they're bullocks, Vicky. It's the custom here."

“Custom or no custom, they was never meant for pulling carts. It’s like it would be setting a typewriter to wheel a perambulator. . . .”

At Port Bou the customs formalities provoked Vicky to a state of dangerous obstinacy. She refused to give up her keys and spoke loudly and with authority to the officials.

“I’m not going to have a lot of foreign soldiery messing about with my things! I’ve packed the trunks myself, and I shall unpack them myself. ‘Cally’ was a lesson to me.”

Vicky hitched her dolman more securely round her person, gripping the keys in one hand and Perdita’s hand in the other. The uniformed official argued, gesticulated. Vicky bent her marble stare on his face. When he had finished she remarked:—

“All the tricks in the monkey house isn’t going to persuade me.”

Theresa’s luggage had been examined and she came up hurriedly at Charles’s request. She explained:—

“But, Vicky, we all have to. It’s a regulation of the Spanish state.”

Vicky remained indomitable. She said, “And I’m British and proud of it. Perdita’s things is all packed, ready washed and ironed, and if he goes and puts his dirty hands in . . .”

“But, my dear Vicky—” Charles looked at the clock. Everyone else’s luggage had now been examined.

Theresa turned to the lowering official and began to speak to him in Spanish. Gradually his threatening air gave way to a mollified look, finally to a smile, eventually to a flashing grin. He nodded. He bent down, and with a wink at Evelina chalked Perdita’s trunk, Vicky’s hatbox, Vicky’s straw basket with the umbrella and camp stool strapped on.

Finally he escorted them all back to the train, and at the last moment ran and brought Theresa an illustrated Spanish paper, and handed it to her with a bow and laugh as the train moved out.

They passed away from the coast and through a rich wide countryside, olives, ilex trees, rocks and red-brown land—mountains beyond. Here and there a fragmentary town set on a hill. One of them reminded Charles of a town in the frescoes. Old Whichford had been good about the whole business. . . .

Charles took his writing things out of his suitcase. Evelina was reading nursery rhymes to Perdita.

He must write to Jasmin and get it done. The train jolted, but he wanted to post it in Barcelona.

Jan. 25

MY DEAR JASMIN: I haven't answered your letter of three weeks ago, as I have been finishing the frescoes.

It is a difficult letter to answer. You repeat what you said in November on my return, that our marriage was a failure, and that Evan is the type of man to make you happy.

I said then that I would naturally do whatever could ensure your happiness. I told you that I would go through the usual formalities so that you could get a divorce.

In your recent letter you say you "suppose" you had better marry Evan. That is your affair. I have seen my solicitors and as soon as you let me know, the proceedings can begin. (If it involves my temporary return from Spain, that is also possible.)

Of course you will then have Perdita by law. If you still feel that you don't want her, I should like to have her, and you can hand her over to me voluntarily.

I expect to be with Theresa and Evelina and Perdita at the villa we've taken (address, Villa Miramar, Valdemosa, Majorca) for the first three months at any rate. I hope to get some work done. I hear the country is lovely, and the climate better than most.

Yours,

CHARLES

XV

Jasmin was at Melcombe when she got Charles's letter. She read it through several times while her father harangued his secretary about deferring an engagement in Hamburg and her mother discussed with Rex and Peter the guests who must be invited to Antibes this spring.

Miss Courage went to and fro filling coffee cups, taking discarded envelopes from beside Lady Whichford's plate, gasping out her "*Can* I get you a little cold tongue, Mrs. Lengel? *Would* you like some fresh toast, Lady Whichford?"

A family party. . . .

The dining room was too warm with the log fire and heating. It was snowing outside—the lawns and trees white; the sky dark. Lord Whichford was saying:—

“—Anyway, it's no use hoping to fly there in this weather—”

Jasmin looked across at Peter. The snow light from the windows lit half her face, emphasizing its small harsh contours, the babyish softness of her hair. . . . Jasmin put the letter in her pocket.

Her mother turned to her.

“You and Evan will be coming, won't you?”

“—Coming?”

“To the villa, darling . . .”

“—Oh, yes. Yes, I expect so.”

Jasmin got up and went out into the hall. . . . Evan was coming over to spend the day. Whenever he came, he urged on her the need to get things hurried up. It would be jolly, he said, if they could get married in the summer,—just quietly, of course, no fuss or anything,—and then go off to Norway to get a bit of fishing. . . . She'd enjoy that, he urged. . . . And then come back to Long Aston for the winter. . . .

Jasmin sat down in a window seat. The snow was silted against the corners of the frames. Evan's wife. . . .

He asked her often, looking into her face as if it held an intricate meaning he couldn't get (and knew he couldn't get), “Do you really think you can care for me, Jasmin?” And she said yes, or kissed him, or nodded

and sat still, letting him hold her in his arms, grateful for the respite of his hold.

That, at least, she must hold on to—that he was good to her. The thing that she'd played at—to Charles, harping on Evan's protectiveness—had become real. He had, with all his tardy thinking and rattled-out notions, qualities that could make one happy—an industrious loyalty, a power to be content, an eagerness to like things as they were. Easy to laugh at him—humiliating to feel his touching goodness.

She took Charles's letter out of her pocket again. Her fingers traced its lines—here his hand must have lain as he wrote. . . . A matter-of-fact letter; and here and there the quizzical note that she hated.

Mummie said that she liked to think of her being really happily settled. . . . These last two months, at home again, at Melcombe, in London, had made Charles's strictures on the people who made her social life seem an understatement. . . . Daddy was real. But the others—"fiddling cacophonous tunes." (The Bitternes amused themselves with words. . . .)

Odd that he didn't understand her giving up Perdita. . . . She wanted a blankness before Evan. The moments of wanting Perdita came and went—bright evasive pictures that hurt, and went again. She'd cried when Perdita went—and let Charles go, forced him to go, with indifference.

And found that he hadn't gone.

That he owned her. That she could go through a dozen antics of independence; elaborate her relation to Evan, work up her need of him; later, marry him, live in his house, have his children—and know that he was a game, a caprice. She thought, "All the same, I shall go through with it. Do what they all want me to do. . . ."

The snow was stopping. Charles, when he lived here, must have seen the park white like this, and the river hidden. . . .

She thought of words, phrases that she could write to him. . . . No use in that. Leave it all. . . . Something had cornered her. Anyway, wasn't he better without her? . . . He must have forgotten already—all the things she remembered. . . . That first moment in Melcombe gardens, his upward stare—the shining width of the pool between them. . . . The morning when his studio was full of lilac and dusty sunlight, and the traffic seemed far off. . . .

"Excuse me, madam."

"Yes?"

“Sir Evan would like to speak to you on the telephone.”

“Thank you.”

She got up and went to speak to him.

He said, “Is that you, darling? Look here, it’s a rotten sort of day. I’ve had an idea. We’ll go up to London and dine somewhere this evening and do a show. How does that strike you?”

“I’d like to.”

“Sure?”

“Yes. That would be lovely.”

“Good. Splendid. All right, then, you get your kit packed and I’ll come and pick you up in time to catch the two-fifty train. The weather’s too bad to motor. That suit you all right?”

“Yes, beautifully.”

“Good. Splendid. So long, darling.”

Lady Whichford, who had been listening at the telephone extension in her boudoir, showed surprise and pleasure when Jasmin told her Evan’s plan. “So like him,” she said. “Dear Evan. Brixham shall pack for you. Just tell her what you want.”

She dressed at Belgrave Square. Evan went off to his flat and returned at quarter to seven with tickets for *Bitter Sweet*. Two stalls in the middle of the third row. He said, “I know you’ve been wanting to see it.” She thanked him. He kissed her carefully so as not to crush her dress, and let her go unwillingly.

“You do look lovely!”

She saw herself in the glass as they went out. She said, “I’ve got too thin for this dress.” She noticed her appearance without interest.

He said, helping her into a taxi, “I’ve ordered a table at the Savoy.”

She said, “Good—splendid,” automatically.

He said, “We shall have plenty of time for dinner. It’s only five to seven now.”

“Is it?” She noticed that he had a carnation in his buttonhole. The flower reminded her of Theresa. Brixham had told her that Theresa had been to

Melcombe one afternoon before Christmas. She wondered why? She hadn't dared to ask her mother, in case she should make a scene and lose her temper and cry as she did the day that Evelina came. But why had Theresa come?

"You aren't feeling tired, are you, darling?"

"No—not a bit." She turned to him in a way that recalled her former impulsive movements. He looked so impeccable, so admirable—his solicitude was so dreadfully real. She said, "It is sweet of you. To think of this . . . I've been longing to go."

He took her hand diffidently in his.

"I'm afraid—all these last months—have been a bit trying for you. Thinking it over—and all that!" He didn't mention his own anxiety. Even now he felt unsure of her.

The restaurant atmosphere laid its brilliant veneer over her state of mind. Their table was in a corner. Her favorite crimson roses were arranged on the table. She touched one of them.

"You ordered them?"

"Yes."

"You are a darling." She smiled, then bent forward to sniff them and hide her uncertain underlip. She should have changed her favorite flowers when she changed—everything else. The rose motif had come too often. She had them at her wedding—after Perdita was born—last winter, when Charles had brought her some after a quarrel.

He'd ordered the dinner already. He read it out for her approval—beginning with oysters, ending with *crêpes flambées*. "A savory after that?" he asked.

She shook her head. What kind of place—the Villa Miramar? And Theresa there—and Evelina. He'd grow happier there. He'd work without being interrupted. Evelina would help him in his moods. Perhaps in the end he'd marry her. . . .

Evan was saying ". . . There's Queenie Davenant . . . and there's Estelle over there with Bob Ryan. . . . And did you notice Benita Hume with a party of about ten people as we came in? They say she's going to marry David Brendon once he's got free of the Dalworthy girl. . . ." He went on, to entertain her. He knew that patter well; and she knew it even better—a name and then some story about its owner. Evan's gossip was kind, if lacking in

dramatic presentation. . . . She remembered Charles's description that had annoyed her so—"people with intellectual cataract and semi-paralyzed souls drooling stale scandal."

When she'd had a glass of Chablis she managed to induce in herself a vague lightness of heart. She agreed with Evan that the Savoy was always jolly and the food good. He asked her which hotel she liked in Paris. She said the Ritz, which was the one she'd been to, once, before her father took a flat there. He said:—

"That was a jolly evening in Paris, wasn't it?"

"Frightfully."

He said, "Darling, we'll go to Paris when all these troubles are over and we can get married. . . . You can get yourself some clothes and we'll do some shows."

He was more confident now. But something touching in her expression that he couldn't analyze, but which reached him as an appeal for reassurance, made him add, "But I dare say you'd rather have a quiet honeymoon."

"Oh, no. *No*. I think Paris would be *lovely*!"

He was delighted by the emphasis. "Good—splendid. . . ." His spirits rose. He gave her an account of his experiences on a French race course two years before. And went on to question the value of the tote to English racing. Then he gave her an account of his bad luck at Goodwood the previous summer. But all the same, he said, he'd backed the winner of the National for once. But he'd never go in for the thing seriously, he said, and grew grave discussing the morals of betting. Still, he said, you couldn't run the whole crowd down. For instance . . .

She was relieved when they had to go. Her spirits had flickered out.

At the theatre Evan bought two programmes and produced a pair of opera glasses out of his coat pocket. She said she wouldn't really need them, as they were in the third row. He said he would use them anyway, as it was a "costume affair" and he liked to get the details of the dresses. He said there was an awful lot to be learned about costume. His mother had a book about it.

When the curtain went up he leaned back and straightened the lapels of his coat and hitched down his white waistcoat. "Jolly," he whispered. "Awfully jolly, isn't it?"

“Yes.” The scene hypnotized her vision and left her mind empty. She sat watching the figures on the stage without understanding the meaning of their words. The young man sang a song to the pretty girl in the muslin flounces. The tune was sweet and sentimental. It brought the tears to her eyes and gave her a momentary relief from the fears that had been closing in on her in the last weeks, and that this evening, during her dinner with Evan, had suddenly grown monstrous, like the shadows of a vanishing candle. She was afraid of her own emotions and her own weakness; afraid of the future; afraid of thinking. . . . The audience was clapping. The figures on the stage grew distant. She tried to imagine the future with Evan. She would never see Charles again. . . . Or, years ahead, meet him as a stranger.

The curtain went down. In the *entr’acte* they went out into the foyer. As they came under the light Evan asked her if she was sure she felt all right. She reassured him. They caught sight of the Vernons. Caroline Vernon came and spoke to them. “How did you like it?” She and Maurice had seen it once before. “Sentimental, but really rather delicious.”

Evan asked her if she didn’t think the costumes were jolly?

She agreed that they were. She asked Jasmin, “How’s Charles painting? I saw in some paper that he’d been doing some mural decorations for your family.”

Jasmin said, “Yes, it’s a great success.”

“I’d love to see them sometime.”

“Oh, you must.”

“. . . He’s awfully clever. Brancker the critic told me the other day that he’s going to be important.”

The bell rang. Jasmin accepted Caroline’s final words and turned to join Evan, who had been talking to Maurice Vernon. They went back to their stalls. She sat down shivering as if she’d been out in the icy night.

She hardly focused the next act. She was dully conscious that Evan was enjoying it. At the end she saw the young man of the first act fighting a duel. He was killed, and the pretty girl who was in the cabaret with him leaned over him. Their dramatics seemed far off. But the young man’s death and the ending of their love haunted her thoughts in the next *entr’acte*,—while Evan remained beside her expatiating on the science of landing salmon. (She wouldn’t see him again. That was real now. . . . But in the beginning, in London, at Marlowe Cottage, how clear their love had been—like the first hours of light. And she’d spoiled it without seeing what she was doing.

She'd been, always, in love with him. But had she loved him as Evelina did? And so understood him?)

“. . . pounds, the biggest one I got last time I was there. I've got a photo of it. Bigger than an average man. . . .”

The curtain went up again.

She gave the scene half her attention, wondering what third act could remain. The whole of her life before her with Evan. In ten years she'd still be young—and Charles and Perdita an episode at the beginning of her youth. She bent her head and noticed her hands clenched—and uncurled her fingers. Her tears seemed to have sunk to a leaden pressure in her chest.

When she looked up again the heroine was on the stage. She looked pretty in a white dress. She sang the song that her lover had made for her in the first act. The tune seemed familiar already—sentimental, poignant. . . . It pricked, jabbed, and suddenly pierced the living tissues of her nerves and turned like a blade.

She sat helpless, the tears pouring down her cheeks. She felt Evan's hand and held on to it, pressing her nails into his palm.

He took her out.

When she first noticed what he was saying she heard, “. . . You're all to pieces, my darling. I oughtn't to have overtired you.”

She went on crying. But she could listen to him now. He said, “I'll give you some brandy, and when you've had a rest I'll take you home.”

She saw that they were in Ebury Street.

When they were in his rooms and he had made her lie back in the armchair before his fire, she said, “It's like the morning after going to Paris,” and began crying again from the effort of speaking.

He said, “Come, drink this.”

She disliked brandy, but obeyed him. The act of swallowing checked her sobs. She grew quieter.

He was anxious and perplexed. But of course he oughtn't to have taken her to that thing. You couldn't really call it a “light” thing. It was more of a tragedy in a way, and she was feeling all worked up still—and of course the thing had upset her. He bent over her and patted her shoulder.

“You mustn't be upset, my dear.”

"I'm better now." She laid her hand on his arm. "I'm so sorry."

"That's all right, darling; we won't talk any more about it."

She stood up. She caught sight of her face in the glass. She took out her powder puff. She was trying to think. But her thoughts wouldn't work. She felt drained of emotion, and in need of rest as an actual sensation. She pressed her finger tips to her stinging eyelids.

"I'm so desperately tired."

"Poor darling."

She stood still while he came and put his arms round her. He felt her passivity and held her, bending to kiss her forehead. She raised her face for him to kiss her lips.

When he wanted to let her go she said, "Let me stay here the night. . . ." She added, "I *couldn't* go back to the house alone." She was too spent to think out her own meaning. She left the implication to him. She didn't want to be alone, and she wanted to go on feeling him near her.

He answered after a pause:—

"All right. I could go round and sleep at the Grosvenor Hotel."

She said nothing.

He said, "I'd wait until you felt quite peaceful. The only thing is my man."

She slipped her arm round his neck.

"You are conventional, my dear."

"I'm only thinking of your reputation. If it weren't for that, I'd sleep here on the sofa."

"I could do that."

He seemed relieved.

"Look here, you lie down here a bit and sleep, and perhaps later on in the early morning I'd better take you back. Don't you think so?"

"Yes." With the same passivity she lay down on the sofa. He fetched a traveling rug and tucked it round her. She lay still, looking up at him. She saw the situation as if she were outside it: Evan grimly chivalrous; herself acquiescent, possessed by a kind of fatalism of the senses that gave her to his ministrations and would as easily give her into his embrace. Evan tacitly

(or was it unconsciously?) rejecting the one relationship by which he could gain her affection. She could grow an affection for any man, she thought, who was kind to her and possessed her senses; she had it in her to attach herself like a spaniel gained by dinners and caresses. . . .

He said, "Now go to sleep, darling," and switched out two of the lights, leaving only the shaded lamp on the writing table alight.

He sat down in the armchair by the fire. She lay still, her eyelids closed, watching him through her lashes. He stared at the fire and didn't move. Her first hysterical passivity changed under the influence of their silence to an immense liking for him. She'd be, she saw that now, too safe with him. He would never fail her; this unfailing quality would exasperate and comfort her by turns. In time his slow but gentle perceptions would convince him that she was still in love with Charles.

Her eyelids closed. . . . What was he doing now? Did he think of her? How did he think of her?

People "got over" things.

But how could she get over the thing that was in her self? A dream blew across her senses, printed with some faint image of Charles. . . .

Evan watched her. When he saw that she had fallen asleep he got up and came over to the sofa and stood looking down at her. She looked plain and worn-out. A vehement pity made him forget his unhappiness of the last hour. (That show had reminded her of Charles!) He was oppressed by his own helplessness. He bent down and kissed her hair and then went back to his armchair by the fire.

When she woke Evan was bending over her and saying, "It's after six. I shall have to take you back."

She got up and let him put her cloak round her.

In the car she leaned against him to keep warm.

He waited outside her parents' door while she found her latchkey. Before going in she put her arms round his neck. "I'm sorry I was so silly. . . . You are so nice to me."

He held her close for a moment. He said:—

"I'll ring up and see how you're feeling at lunch time when you've had some more sleep."

He watched the door shut after her and went back to his car. He was obsessed by a sadness for which his nature provided no palliative sentimentality.

XVI

Charles and Evelina strolled upward through the steep streets of Valdemosa.

Women in their black shawls, seated in the doorways, looked up as they passed—stared, nodded, bent to their sewing again. The lanes were in shadow between the houses, but at corners the sun laid bright carpets and the wind blew, hard but fitfully, bringing smells of drying clothes, of oil, of dust from the road and narcissus in the orchards near by.

They climbed above the white and amber town with its coral-brown roofs. In the olive terraces the trees bent their shadows in fantastic rows on the earth. Evelina said:—

“Whenever the wind touches the trees they turn pale, as if it muttered some frightful prophecy as it passed.”

Charles stared. The leaves glistened silver. “It tells them the spring is coming and there’s no end to life.”

They walked on, upward, following the stony tract which led to a gorge between the mountains. He said:—

“Theresa seems to enjoy herself here.”

“She and Perdita both like it.”

He didn’t answer. In a few minutes she paused and looked back. She said, “Look too, Charles.” He obeyed. The town lay below them now in the terraced horseshoe made by the mountains. The road wound steeply downward below the town, passing here a pink farmhouse, there a yellow shed, and disappearing into a gorge filled with almond blossom and lemon trees, and emerging again beyond the gorge, out in the plain towards a speckled whiteness, Palma and Palma harbor, and a dark flash of blue where the sky was cut off suddenly by the sea.

He asked, “D’you like it? Are you happy here, Evelina?”

She thought that she would be happy enough—if he were; said:—

“It’s very picturesque.”

“You mean you don’t like it?”

She said, “Nowhere’s so lovely as England—nowhere’s so livable in. . . .”

They walked on farther. Then sat down on a rock under an olive tree. He asked:—

“Shall you go back to England?”

“Not if you want me here.”

He poked the ground with his stick.

“I’m selfish. . . . You know I want you.”

She said, “If I’m any use, my dear.”

“You are.” He wondered if, in the end, her companionship would give him peace, as now it brought him an occasional respite.

But now the pain came back after each quiet moment. An intolerable longing simply to see her—to hear her speak. He said, breaking through his own secretiveness:—

“The thing comes back and back. Just when I begin to believe I’m getting free of it.”

“I know.”

“All the last part was such a muddle. Mostly my fault. But in the beginning the thing was right, and in essentials it ought to have stayed right. But all the inessential things went wrong—” He stopped. He said, “I don’t know why I say ‘was.’ It’s something that’s over in time—but will go on living in me while I live. . . . I get moments of hallucination when I tell myself that I’m free; and that I shall work better; and that most people have some sort of disillusioned love affair—which fades out after a year or so. But I know all the time that I’m deluding myself.”

Evelina thought of her last evening in London with John Chantrey. Charles’s next words were like an antistrophe to her thoughts. He said:—

“I used to assume that the whole business of love was manageable. Then you find it grows into you, gets into your blood and into every cell of your body, until even one’s eye can’t see a green tree with the same vision as before.”

It seemed to her that she’d seen all life with her passion for him informing her vision.

He said, “I know you thought that I ought to force her to come back; or persuade her. Don’t you see I couldn’t? How could I have lived with her, if she’d come back, knowing that she was unhappy, or bored—and would

rather be with someone else?" He demanded, "Could you bear a man you loved to play love to you? And make sympathy and passion a series of antics?"

She shook her head; stayed still for a time; then got up abruptly: "I'd better go back now. Theresa's discovered friends in Palma and they're coming to tea. . . ."

"I think I won't come in."

He watched her go. . . .

To-morrow he'd start working. . . . The idea of work was chill but clear. It focused his thoughts. He could do something with those trees and the roofs beyond. . . . A respite. . . . Something to do. A channel to force his thoughts to some use. . . .

La cadence m'enchaine à l'air mélodieux . . .

The shape of her brow—her sudden laughter. . . . Fantastic ache for her sweetness (destroying sweetness); for the uncertain imprisoning beauty of her voice, her touch, her movements . . .

*D'un sourire j'ai fait la chaîne de mes yeux
Et j'ai fait d'un baiser la chaîne de ma bouche . . .*

He watched the far strip of sea grow darker as the clouds banked on its horizon. A charcoal burner passed, singing a raucous song in a slow, honeyed voice. He nodded to Charles.

"Buenas . . ."

"Buenas tardes . . ."

The man went down towards Valdemosa, still singing.

Later a goat whose eyes reminded Charles of many well-bred women tinkled up the terraces, three white and chestnut kids following her, bucking and prancing. Charles held out his hand to them. They came near, surveyed him with a soft startled gaze, and scampered off.

The afternoon changed to a chill burnished evening; the light slanted between the olives, and the wind grew stronger. Charles got up.

As he turned to go, he saw Jasmin.

She was coming towards him up the terraces with a quick stumbling gait.

When she got near, and he saw that she looked grubby and heard her panting, he believed that she was real.

He felt cold to the heart.

She stopped a few yards off.

When he could speak, he asked:—

“What are you doing?”

“I’ve come—”

“Why? Why should you come here?” He stepped back, as if an instinct made him get farther from her.

She didn’t answer. She stood staring at him, twisting a pair of gloves.

He yapped out, “How did you get here?”

“By—I knew you were—”

“How did you find me? Have you seen Evelina? Theresa?”

“Evelina told me. I went to the villa. You see, I knew the address. . . . I’ve been coming all night and the night before—I couldn’t bear it any longer—I—”

“How did you find me *here*?”

“Evelina told me—exactly.”

“Nice of her.”

“Yes. Theresa had people. But Evelina came out—I got a car at Palma —” She broke off. She asked, “Can I talk to you?”

“Yes, if you like.”

She sat down on the rock, still staring at him. The wind blew a strand of hair across her face. He stood waiting for her to speak. He thought, “She can speak, and then she can go. It can’t all start over again. . . . It can’t. . . .”

She said, “I had a lot to say. I kept thinking all night in the train of all the things I was going to say to you—and on the boat. . . . I’ve been thinking for the last week.”

“I don’t know what you want.”

A swift movement; then she was still again. “What d’you suppose?”

“What am I to suppose?”

"I've come back."

He said, "Very pretty . . . and very prettily stage-managed."

"Charles."

He looked away from her. "I don't want you. It can't all start over again. . . . It can't. . . ."

"It won't. Not in the same way. That's what I want to say."

"People never change."

"That's not true. It *isn't* true."

He said, "It's all done with." He added, "I've spent the last four months realizing that."

She watched him, seeing that she had lived with him for two years and hardly known the young man who stood before her. She'd come to find him as she remembered him—and found him more real; deeper, harder, more evasive; enchanting her heart as, in the beginning, he'd held her imagination.

She said, "Do you still mind at all?"

He didn't move. "People never change."

"You mean you do care?"

"Must we discuss this?"

"Yes."

"I'd much rather not go into this. . . . I only wish you hadn't been so—so extraordinary as to come." He thought, "She must go. I shall have to walk down with her to the villa and send her down to Palma for the night."

"Charles, let me say one thing."

He turned, glanced at her, and sat down, getting out a packet of cigarettes. He saw her untidiness—her collar dusty, her face, thinner, scarcely powdered.

She said, "I didn't come because I was sure—of anything."

He lit his cigarette. . . .

She said, "I see I've been so futile."

He muttered, "I was a prig. . . . There's enough I could say. But now—" (*It can't start again. . . . There's no sense—*)

She asked, “Didn’t you see I didn’t care for Evan?”

“You said—but you know *all* that over and over; what you said and wanted—and so on,” he checked his tone. “Sorry—but what exactly—” his bitterness helped him to look her in the eyes now—“did you expect?”

“I suppose I hoped, really, that you’d see through all my stupidities and that Mummie was driving me all the time—and Peter—and Evan. . . . Mummie had such a hold over me always—”

He sat with his forehead resting against one hand.

He said, “I suppose I could have seen—I didn’t look—I didn’t feel very ‘understanding.’” Her silence made him ask, “What is it? What are you thinking?”

She shook her head. “About—you.”

He said, “If we—if it began again—do you imagine that there wouldn’t be all the same difficulties—hurts? My work—your life cramped—my selfishness—your longing for change, when I get all the change I want in—”

“In what?”

He said, turning away, “In you, my dear. Don’t cry. It’s no use crying.”

“Then—”

“Of course I love you. That’s why I’m afraid of it. I couldn’t have you back—and then lose you again. . . . Darling! Do stop—”

“I love you now. I didn’t before—in the same way.”

“Words.”

“Darling.”

He said, “You’d be bored, exasperated—”

“Words.”

She moved suddenly and knelt down beside him. “I’m going to stay. I must stay . . . even if you don’t want me to—”

His hands touched her. “My dear—” He felt the familiar curve of her waist, the shape of her bones, the movement of her shoulders. . . . “You know I want you—” He had her in his arms. He caught her words, “I’m so in love with you—I love you—”

Vicky was bathing Perdita in a brown tub.

The room was warm and cheerful—checked curtains, a blue tablecloth, a fragrance of soap and talc powder. Vicky, indomitable pioneer, had transformed a few hundred cubic feet of Spain into an English nursery. She was wearing a large flannel apron, her sleeves were rolled up, and she was singing in a sweet tuneless voice to the chuckling Perdita:—

“I had a little nut tree
And nothing would it bear . . .”

“*Again!*” shouted Perdita. “Nutt-tree-a-*gain!*”

“Don’t put the sponge in your mouth, then.

“I had a little nut tree . . .”

Vicky caught sight of Charles and Jasmin standing in the doorway.

Her mouth snapped together. She sat slowly up, wiping her hands on her apron. She looked Jasmin up and down. (Never, thought Charles, had she more exactly resembled her “dear Queen.”) After a silence, broken only by the gurgling whisper of Perdita sucking her sponge, Vicky said:—

“So you’ve come back.”

Then she turned away, took the bath towel from the guard round the stove, and lifted Perdita on to her knee.

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 spelling of the title Summers Night, instead of Summer's Night, is as printed in this edition and has not been corrected throughout.

[The end of *Summers Night* by Sylvia Thompson]