Itself to please

Mary Crawford

ITSELF TO PLEASE

Although this is a novel of Oxford in the late nineteen-thirties, it must not be imagined as simply another account of undergraduate life. Andrew, the young man whose sentimental education is a part of the pattern, is an undergraduate, but it is friendship with the kind, distrait Elizabeth and her family, who have little direct connections with academic life, that leads him and them into exploration of the complexities and paradoxes of love, responsibility and anxiety. The coming war throws its shadow behind it, as it were; all the people in the book are aware of it and react to the thought of it in their individual ways. Less clearly they are aware too of the confusion and dissolution of social classes in which each has a share. Yet the story is in essence a comedy; its elements of the tragic are mostly those of wasted possibilities, in private life and in the world at large. Throughout, there is again the freshness, lightness of touch and accuracy of feeling that will be remembered from this author's earlier novels.

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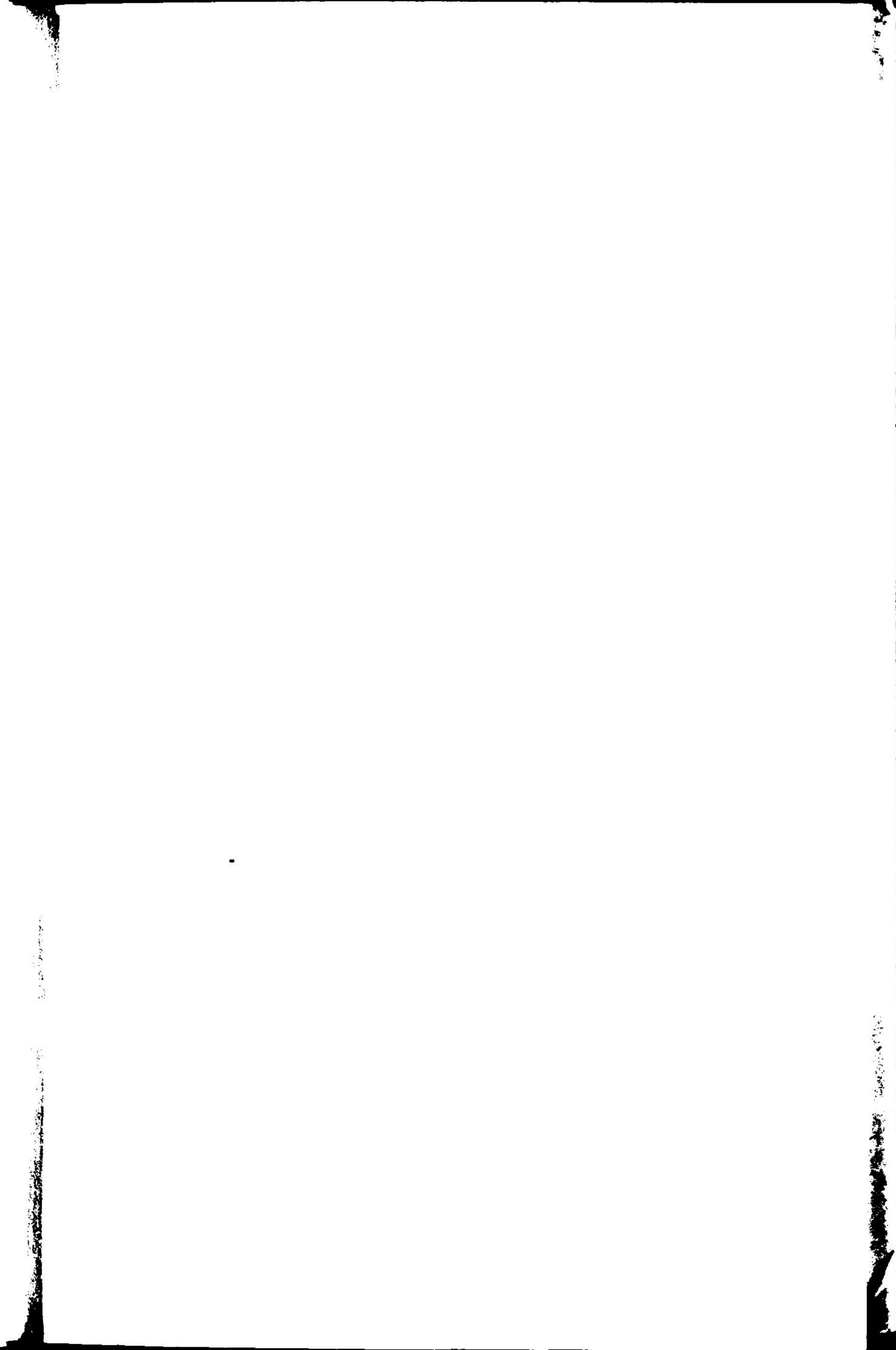

ITSELF TO PLEASE

Love seeketh not Itself to please,
Nor for itself hath any care,
But for another gives its ease,
And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair.

★ ★ ★

Love seeketh only Self to please,
To bind another to Its delight,
Joys in another's loss of ease,
And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite.

WILLIAM BLAKE

By the same author

LAUGH OR CRY

ROSES ARE RED

Itself to Please

a novel by

Mary Crawford

JONATHAN CAPE
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1

ANDREW intended to work. But his sensible plan of mooring under a willow shade and opening his notebooks had been put off so long that the intention was now fatally weakened. It persisted only as an underthought, enhancing his delight in the sunshine, the green and gold and silver of meadow and river, and the rhythmic movement of his paddle. His examination was only two days away, but the arguments in favour of careful revision became less substantial as the pleasures of gazing and dreaming seduced his conscience, and the physical pleasure of exertion – a comfortable sweat, and a tension in hardening muscles – provided him with an alternative sense of accomplishment. A fresh mind, he told himself, gives better service than a mind loaded up with a heap of facts. Then, conscious of the nice balance of his canoe as he swung out of the rocky shallows and across the tranquil surface of a pool, he considered the interesting concept of a mental plimsoll line. His best friend, Conway, was undoubtedly loaded full and down, and was perhaps incapable of the finer manœuvres, or of hoisting in any cargo, however precious, if it was offered unexpectedly, while Harry, a victim of obsessive diligence, seemed to be slowly submerging under an accumulation of schoolbook learning. Ralph, at the other extreme, rode high. Andrew saw him as a sailing vessel, fully rigged, catching the hardly perceptible movement of a fitful breeze, and apt to capsize in a stiff wind. He needed, according to his tutor, more ballast.

Three years before, these young men had been drawn together by force of circumstances. They all came from unambitious day-schools and arrived in Oxford without a single acquaintance. Surrounded by self-confident and self-contained groups from the greater public schools, they had endured the strange experience of feeling insignificant and friendless. Behind Conway's imperturbable gaze, and Harry's clumsy diffidence, and Ralph's

haphazard overtures to all and sundry, lay the same doubt. Was it possible for a newcomer to this ancient tradition to find himself a niche? Andrew alone suffered no disappointment. He was accustomed to loneliness and incapable of envy. The beauty of the city delighted him and his first exchanges with the other freshmen seemed full of promise.

First Ralph, in a fidget for company one glowing October afternoon, took him for a walk; and pointed out one or two notable personalities – the Editor of the *Cherwell* and a man who was said to dabble in Druidic rites. Then Conway, having slowly reached the conclusion that he looked a sensible fellow, invited him to his rooms. They discussed clubs, and agreed that they could not afford very many subscriptions. Time, also, was precious; so Conway was confining his spare time activities to soccer and the Labour Club, and Andrew, committed to a historical society, was still hesitating between archeology and the Bach Choir. Harry, meanwhile, remained hidden in his shyness until, ludicrously trapped on a bicycle with one trouser leg caught in the chain, he was rescued by Andrew; and thereupon dedicated to him the humble talent for devotion which had so far lacked an object.

The habits of friendship developed. The four of them met for cheap meals, worked in each other's rooms so as to save coal, and spent a great deal of their free time together. Andrew, who had in the first place made the introductions, remained the retaining influence. For Conway never wholly approved of Ralph, and Ralph never quite got over his first impression that Harry was dreary.

They all made other contacts, but they did not, with the exception of Ralph who was always seeking new openings for experience, become much involved with them. The little group seemed to provide all that was wanted, and the diversity of character within it was for Andrew a particular source of satisfaction.

Yet it must be admitted that he had made for himself a bit of a

backwater. Restricted by lack of means, and sobered by the knowledge that his schoolfellows were already earning their own living, he did not enjoy the full freedom of a student life. Intellectually, he had grown up, but emotionally he was still the boy who had worked like a fury for his scholarship and was genuinely astonished when he got it. He was quite unaware that there were many people, from very different walks of life, who would have liked to know him better.

His earlier circumstances had seasoned a disposition naturally sweet-tempered, independent and considerate. His mother died young. His father, stunned by grief and by the heavy responsibility of two young children, appealed to her sister, who immediately left a good job and reclaimed the household from the confused management of several helpful neighbours. Andrew never forgot the few days before the funeral. The baby cried incessantly. Tasty meals appeared wrapped up in napkins at strange times, half-eaten dishes mouldered on the kitchen table, and strange women stood about the familiar stove brewing pots of strong harsh tea. One night, his father had carried the baby up and down for three hours. Andrew woke up, and listened, and missed his mother, and cried, and listened again, and finally got up and felt his way through the interior dark to the moonlit kitchen.

'Let me have him in bed with me, Dad,' he said.

'I think he's just going off.'

Andrew crept into the wheel-back armchair with the worn slippery cushion and waited in silence. He often played with Maurice, and he could tell that the child and the man were both feeling muddled, uncomfortable and hopeless. The three of them, aching with exhaustion, let the painful minutes drag past in a silence only broken by the baby's wailing and the man's slowing footsteps.

'Perhaps you may as well try it,' said the man at last. He settled them in bed, laid his broad hand for a moment on Andrew's rough brush of hair, and the baby's round skull with

a fierce pulse beating in the cleft; and left them. Andrew whispered in the darkness, and, as Maurice grew quieter, slipped into sleep beside him with a consoling sense of something re-captured from disaster.

Aunt Maud arrived next morning. Meals were plain and regular; the doorknocker shone; the baby thrived under a capable and confident rule. The visitors found themselves politely discouraged, and hinted that she planned to annex the widower for herself. This was not true. She was a woman with a firm will and powerful intuitions, and she believed that her brother-in-law was not the man for her. Her motives in coming to his rescue were a sense of duty, devotion to her dead sister, and the knowledge that she had been quite long enough in the same rut. Secure in her own attitude, she was not consciously bothered by gossip, but perhaps exaggerated the coolness and detachment of her own nature so as to discourage anything beyond guesswork. The atmosphere of the home remained tranquil, tolerant, but somewhat desiccated. The master of the house spent his leisure at the darts club, or in the tiny work-shed at the end of the garden; and the mistress cooked, scrubbed and looked after the children, but seldom played with them.

In one respect Andrew was extremely fortunate. His father, a cabinet maker, had very little use for college education, which he illogically identified with the decay of craftsmanship; but Aunt Maud had broader views. Although as a rule they conversed very little, subjects of real importance were discussed fully and amicably, and the decision rested with whoever made out the best case. Thus, quite early on, Andrew found her prohibition on long trips into the country over-ruled by his father; and later, he saw her influence being brought to bear to keep him at school when he might have gone out to work. He was surprised and grateful to find the same woman who had sniffed at jars of tadpoles, and kept his school-friends skulking at the back door, suddenly hobnobbing with the Headmaster, and showing an eager intelligent interest in his academic successes.

Maurice, who had hitherto been the favourite, was at that time in the tadpole-hunting stage, and was less popular. He looked to Andrew for support, sympathy, information and company, and Andrew took trouble to give him a livelier time than he had had himself. For there was no one he knew as well as Maurice, or loved so much. Even since he left home, and discovered that women were ready to like him, he had not ventured into any closer or more lasting attachment.

The examination marked the end of an epoch. Andrew, as he guided his craft through the green and whispering solitude, was conscious of unexpected happiness. A foretaste of nostalgia, not wholly painful, quickened his senses. The river had never looked so beautiful.

2

HARRY was working. He had decided to revise Physiology today and Comparative Anatomy tomorrow. But his brain felt like old elastic, with no grip. In the midst of chasing a slippery memory of the formation of the leucocytes, the sense of huge gaps and spaces in his knowledge of bone structure caught him like a vertigo. The gaps had seemed smaller yesterday. Then, he had been able to recite the bones of the carpus without a hitch. He tried it again. Failed. Returned to the blood stream, and found he had lost the clues he had been working on a moment earlier. He opened a book, propped it on his table, leaned forward, clutched at his solar plexus, and groaned. But he did not give up.

Ralph put his head in at the door. 'Can I distract you?' Harry shook his head. Ralph, undiscouraged, came in. 'It's no use sweating too much.'

'*You* don't have to,' said Harry sourly. Ralph was also reading medicine, but he had decided on it rather late, and had contrived to extend his scholarship for a fourth year.

'Shall I ask you some questions?' he said, picking up a textbook. Harry laid a possessive hand on his pile of untidy notes. 'I would much rather not,' he said. He was in no mood for Ralph's ruddy good looks and shrank from a losing contest with his quick, argumentative brain. He gave an abortive sniff, which did not clear the permanent block in his nose or the headache behind his eyes.

Ralph found it difficult to leave. He was really concerned to find Harry so obviously bogged down, and out of good-nature pressed his offer with tactless persistence.

'Do go,' said Harry wretchedly, turning a hunched shoulder. Ralph patted it lightly. 'You are letting me down. I shall have to spend the afternoon with my more disreputable friends.'

Harry let this pass. He knew, of course, that Ralph had lately

been taken up by a young don, a marine biologist, who was known to have a weakness for gay and clever young men; but he did not want to think about it.

'You don't much like Mark, do you?' said Ralph. He intended his voice to sound detached, but he could not altogether keep out of it a note of wistfulness. He was powerfully attracted by Mark's circle, and exhilarated by the weclome he had found in it; but he was occasionally struck by doubts as to whether he could keep his end up amongst people who had started with so many advantages. At such moments, he needed his more ordinary friends.

'But I hardly know the chap,' said Harry. He remembered chiefly a long hair-cut and a large signet ring – both ominous. Ralph sighed. He was well aware that his new patron did often make a false impression on strangers, who were liable to think him fussy and conceited.

In fact, Mark's success as a host, a mentor and a confidant represented a long struggle with his own shyness and he paid for it heavily in nervous tension. His appearance, which was comically ugly, disgusted him, and his mannerisms were originally an attempt to distract attention from his face. Behind his idiosyncracies lay considerable intelligence and great depths of kindness, which were revealed only on closer acquaintance. His feeling for his own sex, sternly disciplined by disappointment, were more romantic than sensual; and his protegés, although prone to love each other more than they loved him, were dependent on him for the tolerance and understanding which a youthful self-seeking love very rarely offers.

'You are prejudiced,' said Ralph. Without waiting for an answer, he banged his way out of the room, regretting the time he had wasted. After all, his mother, who was quite as conventional as Harry, had liked Mark very much. 'He seems so sincerely interested in young people,' she said.

Ralph, who was devoted to his mother, felt a glow of amused affection as he recalled her artless habit of giving people simple

labels. Andrew was 'clever, but amazingly easy to talk to', and Harry was a 'poor thing who needed something done about his sinuses'. And her sometime husband, who had disappeared years ago in an unexplained huff, was usually referred to as 'not a very understanding sort of person'. But she and Mark had agreed that Ralph was exactly the opposite.

Agreeably pre-occupied with the subject of his own sensibility, Ralph strolled across to the labs. There, not unexpectedly, he found Mark, who was leaning over one of the salt water tanks. A first year student whom Ralph only knew by sight was standing at his elbow. They were adjusting the aeration but talking mainly about politics.

'I tried to get over to Spain,' the lad was saying, 'but I was hauled back. It was all very difficult. They said I was under the age of consent.'

Mark turned to Ralph, his fleshy face lighting up with a smile of welcome. 'We supporters of lost liberal causes,' he said, 'are going to be right out in a year or two.' He contrived to give Ralph the impression that he respected him for not being fooled by the Communist imitation of fascism; and at the same time invited him to share an admiration for the more heroic attitude. The young man, Richard, gazed at the tank with a sleepy expression. He did not object to being an exhibit, viewed in profile (his best elevation), from either side. Someone had once told him that his eyelashes were long enough to cast a shadow on his cheek, and he wondered if the lighting was right. Mark, who made strenuous, if spasmodic, efforts, to prevent him getting too spoiled, averted his head.

'Are you both coming back to tea with me?' he asked.

The young men eyed each other. 'I thought I was,' said Richard. Ralph felt a stab of envy. Last week, Mark had been listening with the same sort of attention, to the story of *his* life, which now seemed in comparison so dull. He was tempted to make an excuse; but Richard, having delivered just one tiny pinprick, urged him to join the party. He had really no particular

interest in cutting him out with Mark, and for the rest of the afternoon decided to concentrate on the reverse operation, to make up for his rudeness.

Mark's rooms, overlooking the High, were sombre and stuffy. At the window, which was closed to keep out the noise of traffic, hung curtains of a safe colour not much lighter than the panelling, and the furniture was massive but nondescript. Mark, who did not ordinarily notice his material surroundings, regretted its air of neglect and apologized for the litter of papers; yet it seemed to him, as he poured out the tea with the cautious, elaborate gestures of a naturally clumsy person, that this uncompromising setting gave a special poignancy to the two expressive young faces — Richard's so blond and Ralph's so dark. He watched them through a haze of tobacco smoke, adroitly steering the conversation so that neither should feel left out. Ralph was thoroughly happy. It began to look like a stroke of luck that most of his other friends would be gone next year. That would mean more time for the really worth-while people.

'What are you smiling about?' said Mark.

'I was only thinking what a wonderful summer this has been.'

The rumble of traffic was beginning to die down. Mark opened the windows and let in the sweet evening air. Richard wandered round the room and fiddled with books. Ralph let himself relax, unkindly gloating over the thought that Andrew and Harry and Conway were no doubt working like beavers.

In point of fact, Andrew was still dreaming his way up the river; and Conway, having completed a well-planned scheme of revision in Politics, Economics and History, was out walking with a girl from Somerville. More exactly, he was taking her for a walk, since it was he who set the pace, turned right or left according to his pre-selected route, and, after they had left the footpath, decided which thorny gaps in the hedges could be regarded as negotiable.

'You see, Phoebe,' he said, 'although one clearly gets an easier life in a public school, I shouldn't feel justified. It's only

because the best people take the bribe that we've been able to preserve that out-of-date system so long.'

'But isn't it a good thing,' said Phoebe, 'to have some schools which are really independent, and can make experiments?'

Conway laughed. 'But do they?' he said, 'do they? Look at your brothers.'

'I know,' said Phoebe, apologetically, 'they are both terribly hidebound.'

'In any case,' said Conway, 'we don't really want fluffy experiments. There's only one experiment that's worth making, and that's a complete switch-over to a wholly democratic system of education. To take the case in point, your brothers haven't suffered from the way they've been taught, but from the sheltered conditions in which it was done. They don't know what life is like.'

'Nor do I really,' said Phoebe. She was a little out of breath. Conway was walking faster than ever, so that she occasionally had to take a few running steps to keep up.

They came to a gate. Phoebe put her elbows on the top bar and stood leaning. Conway took out his pipe and felt for his pouch. He hardly noticed what he was doing, for his favourite theme was forcing up his thoughts in dense formation. Phoebe felt a touch on her elbow and looked sideways. Conway had opened his pouch, and was passing it to her.

'But I am not a man,' she cried. There were tears in her eyes. Conway, who was not observant, went on talking.

3

ANDREW heard the drone of aircraft at a distance. A tremor of anxiety swept over his happiness and left it less rich and full. It was two years yet before the question *ours or theirs* became real, but there were already certain sounds – the hum of engines in the sky, the rattle of lorries travelling in convoy through the night – which carried a premonition.

Andrew was trying not to think about the state of the world too much until after his schools, but it was not altogether easy. On days when the mad, comedian's smile of the Prime Minister sprang out of the morning paper, or the hysterical voice of a single-souled German crowd tore through the radio, he was shaken with terror. It was not so much a terror of the body as a terror of the soul. He saw faith crumbling into credulity, courage corrupted with cruelty, and the common sense of practical men dissolving like a heap of sand under a heavy tide.

He was less affected by the wild rumours of the nature of a total war. 'We shall all be blotted out,' cried Ralph's mother, '*just blotted*.' She had not been able to leave that terrible thought alone, she imagined the sky netted with aircraft like a trellis, the streets smoky with deadly creeping gases, food and water impregnated with new diseases, more hideous than cancer or the plague. She had made her own flesh creep, but Andrew could not take her seriously. Yet he had to admit that this war was going to be quite different from the last.

He had reached a stretch of river where the current ran slowly. On the left bank, a scrub of willow and alder hung along a shallow curve where the water scooped out the earth between their roots. Andrew forced his craft slowly through weed and submerged branches; and considered the war ahead of him.

What is a war? 'My war' some people said, meaning trench feet in Flanders, or slaughter in Gallipoli, or frustration in a Ministry, or queues for food; or the loss of four sons; or blind-

ness. To Andrew, their war was hearsay, like all the others. He thought of the encumbered armies of Agincourt; of the Picts skulking over the Northumbrian plain towards the escarpment where the Roman garrisons waited; and of Athenian generals desperately seeking a mandate from the volatile, acquisitive, politically-minded populace. Certainly, the weapons changed; and the tactics changed with the weapons. Now surprise could strike from a distance. The fighting troops were vulnerable from the rear, down long supply lines to the bases of production and the nerve centres of strategy. Yet, if we saw our fate in new terms, images of unexampled horror, that was nothing new in itself. The fears of the past had spread also to the limits of imagination, expecting an irresistible onslaught, then braced to meet it; and the issue between attack and defence had never yet been decided.

Was this the moment? Or did the riddle have no answer? Were the cross-bow and the howitzer no more than symbols of the struggle in the other realm of thought and will and passion? Is it victory to sack a city? Or defeat to creep away into the hills and forests?

Andrew shivered. A cold breeze had got up, and the sun was dipping behind a row of elms. He stretched forward into the bows for his sweater.

It was high time to turn back. He was a long way from the town, and the river-distance, even down stream, was considerable. He congratulated himself on a good day; and regretted that there could be no more excursions until after the examination. Then, he was staying up one day extra to entertain Maurice and Aunt Maud, who were coming over for a picnic if the weather was fine.

He felt tempted to bring them up here. But Aunt Maud would probably prefer a punt and that would be very hard work. Two canoes, perhaps? Maurice would love to have one to himself.

At that moment, Andrew caught sight of a punt pole drifting downstream. He edged up and drew it alongside with the tips

of his fingers, already planning a new way of impressing and delighting Maurice.

Andrew had always wanted to pole a canoe; but he had been shy of practising in public, or with passengers on board. This was the ideal occasion. He caught the pole, swung it in front of him like a tight-rope walker, and very gingerly got up on to his feet. The canoe rocked violently.

He steadied himself and surveyed the scene. Now that he was facing downstream, he could see a tumble-down boat house down a short backwater, and some way behind it, the roof of a long low-built house. He supposed he ought to hand in the pole, but first of all, he was going to try it out.

He poised it to one side, and eased his weight towards the other. With a neat, firm thrust against the river bed, he sent the canoe shooting off like an arrow. Wonderful. He thrust again, beginning to get the feel of it. Easier than people said, nothing to worry about so far.

The house fell away to starboard. With a following stream, he was going much too fast. He considered the mechanics of turning. Simple enough in a punt, but that was a craft which gave you time to think.

He trailed the pole and turned almost through a right-angle. But then, with his nose in the main current, he was swung forward again. He attempted a reverse turn through the second loop of a figure of eight. Failed. Decided that something drastic must be done. Found the bottom. Leaned, forcing the canoe up into the current; felt it slipping from under his feet; clutched the pole and braced his hips in a last frantic attempt to keep his support under him; hung kicking in the air for a split second, caught his foot on the gunwale, and fell smack into the water.

He rose to the surface with empty hands and weed over his eyes. He spat, coughed, shook his head and took stock of the situation. The canoe was upside down; the pole for the moment, invisible; and his sweater was turning sluggishly, already almost water-logged, in the bubbles of a whirlpool.

Clothes are replaceable. He struck out towards the canoe, prepared to dive for his books. If only he could find them quickly, the haversack might give them some protection. After a quick calculation of the drift, he plunged. His hands found only mud, granular but sticky. He could see nothing, but, as he groped, he could feel the mud rising off the bottom like clouds.

He came to the surface, and almost bumped his head on the side of the canoe. He clung to it, getting his breath. Then, as he collected his wits, it occurred to him, rather late, that it might be worth while to feel around inside. Sure enough, the haversack was still wedged firmly in the bow. He eased it out, down, and up, and laid it dripping on the upturned bottom.

'Give it to me,' cried an imperious voice, 'I've got your jersey.'

4

ELIZABETH had expected the worst. She had not actually tempted providence by untying the punt, but she had put down her gardening basket, and taken off her leather gloves. Then she sat on the grass, watching with cheerful interest the nice-looking zealous young man with the artless trick of sticking out the tip of his tongue as an aid to concentration. She had very long sight, and was accustomed to seeing other people before they noticed her. So she contemplated him quite happily, as if she were looking at a picture.

When the picture broke up, and became a real young man with a practical problem on his hands, she acted quickly. Of course he could swim, so there was no need to bother about him. But the jersey was certainly of value, and on the point of vanishing beyond recall. So she made for it first.

When she looked up, Andrew had disappeared. A little anxious, she turned towards the canoe, and was enormously relieved to see him bobbing up on the far side of it, with a trail of green weed over one ear, and a battered parcel in his hands. Once she had relieved him of it, he righted the canoe. She directed him to lash it to the punt.

'We'll tow it over to our side,' she said. Andrew followed the procession, swimming slowly, rather conscious of appearing clumsy and stupid. His clothes and shoes had sucked in a dead weight of water. He dragged himself up on to the landing stage and stood gushing water from every surface like a spaniel.

'Did you get the pole?' he asked.

'For heaven's sake,' said Elizabeth, 'what's a pole?'

'I thought it must be yours.'

'Then it's of even less consequence,' she said smiling. 'The first thing to think about is getting you into some dry clothes.'

As he followed her up the path, he had his first full sight of

her. Thrashing about in the water, he had recognized a decisive voice, a capable hand, a friendly not beautiful face. Now he saw a middle-aged woman, her broad back draped by a shapeless grey cardigan, her grey hair bristling at the nape of her neck, her pretty youthful ankles slipping about in large shoes. She stooped a little stiffly to pick up her basket, and waited for him to come up alongside. Her face was ruddy and weatherbeaten, dominated by fine grey eyes.

'I'll put you in the back kitchen,' she said, 'then the puddles won't matter.'

She led him round the side of the house, and ushered him into a little room which smelt of oil, earth and sawdust. There was a carpenter's bench against the window, which was half obscured by creeper; and a cluster of croquet mallets were sticking out of a disused bread oven.

She followed him inside, and looked him up and down. 'I think I can find something to fit you,' she said. 'Do take those things off quickly. You're shivering, and nobody will come in.'

But he had only been alone half a minute, and just had time to strip off his clinging shirt, when she flung open the door again herself. He felt naked, but evidently she had no such thought, for she made no apology. Standing in the doorway, with the soft evening light behind her, she became a more impressive figure, taller, straighter and more commanding. Andrew felt extremely confused. He would have liked to appear to better advantage: and yet there was something very agreeable about being so helplessly at her disposal.

'Do you wear vests and pants?' she inquired.

'Not in summer,' said Andrew. He was conscious that in his own home there would be some awkwardness about putting just that question to a total stranger; and it would certainly not have been asked in the voice people use for saying 'do you go to the ballet?' He was not shocked, but shy, and amused that anything so ridiculous could give him such a powerful conviction of taking a first step outside a charmed circle.

He kept his trousers on, and stamped about the room, beating his arms to keep warm. The door opened a crack.

'Here's a towel,' she said, 'and some clothes. We can't have supper for a while, but I'm warming your soup up. If you come right round the house, and in at the french window, you'll find me.'

He rubbed himself down with the energy of an ostler. His skin glowed. He was accustomed to thinking of his body as a good workable structure, not athletic, but reasonably tough and well-made. At this moment, however, he was suddenly surprised by a delightful sense of physical power and beauty. He scrubbed his hair with exaggerated effort, and whistled through his teeth.

The shirt she had given him was of fine silk turned yellow and pliant with age. Most clothes are armour, he thought, as its light and living touch fell against his skin. The trousers were of whipcord, cut with narrow legs in a style which was at that time quite unfashionable but retained a curious period elegance. The costume was completed with worn expadrilles, once scarlet, now the colour of red sandstone. Andrew was inclined to feel satisfied with himself, but very much regretted that among the tools, seedboxes and hanks of bass, there was no comb or mirror. He wrung out his own clothes on the garden path, and spread them out tidily on the grass. Then went to find his hostess.

The room where she was sitting stretched right through the house, and there was a small window on the far side. But the evening light, filtered through summer foliage, left the centre of the room dim. Andrew was first conscious of the pale flames of a newly lit fire, of a smell of polish, wood-smoke and fresh flowers, and of the soft kindly shapes of well-cushioned armchairs. Then he saw shelves of books from floor to ceiling, a table holding a couple of magazines and a piece of knitting, and a big speckled mirror in a moulded frame.

'I hope you feel at home,' said Elizabeth, following his wandering gaze.

'Yes, I do,' said Andrew, 'can I borrow a comb?'

Scolding herself for the omission, she rooted in a handbag. 'Can you see all right over there?' she said.

Andrew could see very well. In the ordinary way, he checked his parting by eye and managed the rest, including a savage pounding on his unamenable cowlick, by habit. But in this watery shadowed surface his face seemed to invite more interest. He smiled at himself, and smoothed the cowlick along its own line of growth. No, really, his face wasn't too bad.

She confirmed it the moment he turned round. 'Now you look splendidly neat and gay,' she said. 'Come over by the fire. I've poured you a medicinal dose of whisky; and then there's hot soup.'

'I'm very grateful to you . . .' he began. With his feet stretched out in the warmth, a glass in his hand, dry clothes on his back and a covered bowl awaiting his pleasure on the hearth, he hardly knew where to begin. His books too were propped up to dry, with cockled pages spread out. '. . . for everything,' he said.

'It's nothing, nothing at all,' she said. 'A visitor is a treat. All you have to do to make me thoroughly happy is to tell me about yourself. So far, all I know is your name and your college, and that you're reading history and are left-handed.'

The fourth item brought him up with a jerk. 'Is it impertinent of me to look at your books?' she said, 'I'm sorry.'

'No, it wasn't that. But I must have looked a perfect fool . . . Did I?'

She laughed. 'Yes, you did look funny. But you shouldn't mind. After all, the worst fate is to stand back for fear of looking foolish. I hate safe people who can't do what they like or say what they think. Don't you? But you must stop me if I ask too many questions. It can be a bore. And look, you must have your soup.'

He was very hungry. He had lunched carelessly on biscuits and plums, with a very temporary satisfaction. The soup was

thick and hot, and had a refreshing taste of herbs. He ate greedily, his brain too sluggish and contented to be bothered one way or the other about her evident curiosity. He was too happy in her welcome to take fright, too comfortable to make efforts for the sake of politeness. He foresaw that it would be quite easy to make her extraordinary confidences; but for the moment, he had none to give.

'While you're eating,' she said, 'I can fill up my side of the introduction. I was born in this house in 1896. We Caxtons were decayed gentlefolk, always shabby, in cousin's cast-off clothes and odd inventions by the village dressmaker. The war got me into a uniform and out into the world, and I married as soon as my husband was demobilized. We went tea-planting (that shirt was made in Ceylon, but Edward can't get into it now). It's such a beautiful country, I can't tell you, only something went wrong, my health isn't perfect, and Edward decided we must come home. So we started a little market-gardening business, which gives us a kind of living. My unmarried sister, Marian, lives with us, she works in Oxford, but she'll be back on the seven o'clock bus. She's much younger than I am, much cleverer, a great scholar, but all the same, she seems to like coaching all sorts of waifs and strays for their entrance. And then Paula, the youngest of us, is married. She's the beauty, so full of life, and always surrounded with friends. We see her too seldom. And yet we are a very united family. . . .'

Andrew was already forming a picture of three sisters, alike in their warm-heartedness and their lack of ambition, distinguished by their talents, one by the gift of physical grace, one by intellectual strength, and the third, whose low flexible voice was in itself expressive of constancy and devotion, for strength of character.

He did not think about Edward, the young captain who went abroad to seek his fortune; the conscientious husband who brought back his ailing wife to the benign climate of her home; the elderly gardener who was putting on weight.

5

MARK was not very pleased with his guests. Ralph and Richard sat on the window-seat, with their heads together, giggling over a book of Peter Arno cartoons.

'I do think women are *frightening*,' said Richard, 'and so terribly lumpy.' He wrinkled his nose and ran his fingers through his crisp hair. He waited for Ralph to turn the page, like a good child, glancing at him with happy expectancy. Ralph did not really enjoy the cold cruelty of these particular pictures, but he lacked the self-confidence to disappoint his new friend by shutting up the book. It would look peculiar, as if one suddenly objected to reading Tom Kitten.

Mark fidgeted about the room, tidying here and there, reading bits of books, and from time to time filling glasses.

'This is a new sherry, isn't it?' said Ralph, 'Dryer.' He was feeling rather unstrung, and anxious to appear as a man of the world. Mark, absurdly pleased to be addressed, was quite ready to drop his harassed and wounded air and behave with a more natural geniality. He displayed the bottle. 'It's a good thing anyway to have a change. One's palate gets unresponsive. But do tell me what you think of it.'

Ralph sipped again, slowly, reflected at leisure, and finally approved. Richard watched him with wonder.

'I wish I knew how to look as if I were thinking,' he observed. 'Perhaps I don't think enough. It's not a bit of use asking my opinion on this lovely taste, because I'm as ignorant as a squirrel.'

Mark heard the malice in his voice. Ralph, less suspicious, was touched by an impression of simplicity and candour. They were both a little embarassed, for they had been made to look affected. Mark reverted to his aimless wandering, and Ralph to his book. He laughed immoderately at a drawing he failed to understand, since Richard seemed to find it particularly congenial.

Mark, dispirited by the familiar experience of loneliness in company, thought with regret of a new paper on his own subject which he might be reading. The human world was set about with snares and traps. Why had he ever thought, when he gave his invitation, that this time events would take some quite unprecedented course? What course, he did not specify. At the back of his mind the dim figure of a disciple, a docile, eager, deferential and charming boy, exercised an unadmitted tyranny. And while consciously he strove to meet his students on equal terms, success was as much of a disappointment as failure. In theory, their off-hand treatment was a compliment, for it proved that they accepted him as one of themselves. In practice, he found it inexpressibly painful. He entertained, momentarily, the mean thought that he had wasted a lot of good drink.

Leaning against the mantelpiece he surveyed the immediate beneficiaries. He was fond of Ralph, happy that he had been able to help him once or twice, and anxious not to damage the cheerful gratitude which was something of a bond. He was less fond of Richard, but far more fascinated and more uneasy with him. Ralph had not yet quite lost the stigmata of adolescence – a neglected hang-nail, a spot on his jaw – and this was a consolation to Mark, for he rightly associated it with the notion of a vulnerable, unintimidating personality. Richard, on the other hand, bore no sign of the natural suffering of growth. His face was childlike, unmarked, with a bloom on the skin. One could imagine that he still had creases at his wrist, and deep folds under his buttocks; and there seemed little doubt that he had preserved also his infant egotism. He was quite single-minded about getting his own way.

Mark found his assurance, his poise, his dewy surface, and even his excessive plumpness, very attractive indeed. But it was repellent, too. In a human being, there is something ghoulish about a complete absence of pathos.

'You look like two birds on a wire,' he said, 'just about to migrate.'

'Do we?' said Richard, looking up. 'Does that mean you want us to go?'

'No, indeed. It was simply fair comment on a subject which might be of public interest. But I ought to warn you that Anne may be dropping in later on. She's a nice amusing person, Richard, you ought to meet her sometime. But it's just as you feel, of course.'

'I don't feel anything,' said Richard frankly. 'How can I, if I don't know her? Is she a friend of Ralph's? Tell me the worst. Is she a student, an Eight's Week apparition, a bursting virgin, a marriageable daughter, an intellectual harlot, a mechanical doll, an ice-bound Anglo-Saxon, a delusive Celt? Low, middle or upper, as regards class, creed, height, weight and temperament? Is she *das ewige weibliche*, the eternal crocodile, the middle-European fondant loaded with cumulative poison? Or has England saved her? Diluted the mixture with endless, endless rain, and provided teams of ordinary horrid Englishmen to keep her in her place?'

There seemed no reason why he should ever come to a stop. His invention was profuse, and he was genuinely anxious to stave off any outside disturbance of the present precarious equilibrium between the three of them. He wanted to manœuvre it himself. Mark and Ralph were laughing. So far so good.

'Well?' he inquired suddenly, catching them both out of breath. Mark recovered first.

'Anne's not so easy to classify. But I can tell you something about her. She's nearer my age than yours, rather happily married to a gentleman farmer over towards Bletchley, comes in fairly often to do some obscure reading in Bodley, and to see some non-hunting friends. She says she has a fine seat on a horse, and looks wonderful in a bowler, but I wouldn't know. At the moment, she's working on a book . . .'

'About horses?' said Ralph.

'No, people. But now you mention it, she has got rather the

temperament which is more often found in animal lovers, sympathetic but ruthless.'

'Is it a good book?'

'I don't think that's the object. It's supposed to be funny. But that you can judge for yourself. She said she was bringing me some new bits.'

'I die of curiosity,' said Richard in a detached tone. 'Shall we play some suitable music?'

6

'THERE'S no need to take me home,' said Phoebe, observing that Conway hesitated at the crucial street corner, 'best wishes for the day after tomorrow, if I don't see you.'

Conway did not hear the implied question. He thanked her briefly for keeping him company. Phoebe scuttled off to the right, conscious of increasing distance and an attachment stretching like a spider thread unbearably thin. She resisted the temptation to turn her head. Conway was not the sort of man who ever looked back.

Over at the cottage, Marian walked up the flagged path with a load of books under her arm. She was tired and hot, and looking forward to a bath. Her crumpled blouse irked her, and she could feel a wisp of hair straying from the knot at the back of her neck.

Her brother-in-law was dining with a botanical friend in Oxford, and she rather hoped Elizabeth would be in a mood for reading at supper. So she was disappointed to hear talk and laughter from the kitchen, and went quietly upstairs without calling out to say she was home.

She did not share Elizabeth's taste for impromptus. But when she appeared at supper, after a few minutes' solitude, no trace remained of a hard day's work. In her calmer fashion, she gave Andrew a cordial welcome, and seeing that Elizabeth was much taken with him, was quite prepared to like him when she knew him better. He had evidently been accepted as one of the family.

Andrew sat between the two sisters. His hunger still had a sharp edge, and the food was delightfully fresh and crisp — an omelet, green salad, and tomatoes tasting of that day's sun. It was not, however, very ample. He went on eating brown bread and cream cheese long after the others had finished. They both put their elbows on the table, and talked.

They were well matched. Elizabeth was more impulsive and

open; Marian more thoughtful, lucid and tense. Their faces, in spite of a strong family resemblance, differed in the same sort of way, for Elizabeth, who had no claim to beauty of feature, had great charm of expression; and Marian, whose normal expression was somewhat cold, had a certain nobility of poise and bone-structure. They both listened well, Marian with complete repose, and Elizabeth with a frank curiosity that was equally flattering. She was captivated by emergent thoughts, and often had to make visible efforts to wait in patience while Marian judiciously weighed her words. But she succeeded, because, above all else, she wanted to hear them.

'And you younger people,' she said, 'what do you think of things? Are we a finished country?'

'No,' said Andrew, conviction forestalling argument. Both women smiled.

'I like to hear that,' said Elizabeth, 'but do you really approve of what's going on?'

'Oh, no,' said Andrew, 'I wish we had a Labour government.'

'I think I do too,' said Elizabeth, 'but how much do governments really matter? This government is feeble, but what could a strong one do except join in a mad rush for power? I see the hope of the world among private people who oppose tyranny with moral force.'

'My sister is a great admirer of Gandhi,' said Marian, 'and so am I. But beyond that we differ. She would like to imitate him; but I can't believe that his kind of heroism would fit our character or our circumstances. Look at all those people who signed up for peace. Most of them only meant that they weren't going to trust these ageing die-hards with a gun. And I don't blame them. But I don't see Hitler paying any attention to the fact that we don't care for rigged elections, or secret police, or the torture of political prisoners.'

'Surely,' said Elizabeth, 'it is some deterrent to be regarded with horror throughout the world?'

'I see no signs of it,' said Marian, 'after all, that is one of the

favourite Germanic roles. They have been called barbarians ever since the Romans first brought them into history, and they feel compelled to act up to their reputation. If only they could stick to grand opera.'

'Some of them are so pleasant and homely,' said Elizabeth. Marian laughed.

'It's the same repertory company, my dear,' she said. 'When they've reduced Europe to a shambles, they tuck themselves up in their feather beds, and feel wonderfully cosy and good-natured. It's the height of injustice if the self-styled civilized nations don't instantly respond. Don't you realize, they say, the play's over? Then they weep for self-pity, pick out enemies on every frontier, and prepare for the next performance.'

'We are not perfect either,' said Elizabeth. There was a curious pause. They were all aware of the doubt, the guilt, the divided loyalty of a liberal minded people. It seemed at that time almost impossible that such a nation, so small, so vulnerable, so far from the great reservoirs of natural resources, could survive amidst the great blocks of power which were consolidating all over the world.

'Two things,' said Andrew, and paused. He did not know which to take first.

'Yes? Well?' said Elizabeth. Andrew spoke slowly, picking his words, hoping he did not sound too pompous. 'We still have,' he said, 'so many underprivileged, helpless, insecure, ill-fed, uncared for people. That's a disgrace in itself, and we can't afford it. I know a great deal has been done, more than in many other countries, but we ought to be much further ahead. In the old days we were leaders in technical invention, but now we can't keep up. And I don't know what will happen to us unless . . .' he gave a shy smile 'we have some sort of talent for political experiment.'

'I hope we have,' said Marian. 'It's possible. And then?'

'Oh, quite a different subject. At least, it came up earlier, but perhaps it is connected. I was only thinking of all the people who

can't help admiring many of the things that have been done in Fascist countries. . . .'

'Oh, dear,' cried Elizabeth, 'those wonderful trunk roads, and the Italian trains all running on time. You're quite right. Our wretched brother-in-law has been quite mesmerized. He makes me so angry, talking as if nothing else mattered. And all because some more or less distinguished public men took him round and gave him a good time; and flattered him. He's now the expert.'

'This is Paula's husband,' said Marian, 'he does something with money in the city. We none of us understand. But it makes him a great supporter of the status quo.'

'Poor Paula,' said Elizabeth.

7

ANNE was in the Parks, lying outstretched on the grass. Above her, the brilliant sky was fading and, shaded on the eastern side, began to take on the appearance of a solid object, an actual dome. The moon, apparent but not yet shining, could have been a slit in the roof. Anne was not observing it. She was poking at a beetle on a grass-stalk. But she was not really observing the beetle either. She was thinking about her book which was still in that delightful state when all is possible and only bits and pieces are in writing.

Although Anne was now the mistress of a large house and a wide acreage of land, she kept a taste for the less privileged pleasures — such as reading in steamy cafés and meditating on public lawns — which had sustained her in youth. Up to the age of twenty-eight she had drifted through life, as a student, a hospital almoner, a shopgirl and a contributor to women's papers, while enjoying throughout an easy social life in a struggling bohemian circle of her own vintage. Then she met, and rather to her surprise married, a lean-faced younger son of a county family, who was burning to abandon the law and take a farm, where he could earn a respectable living and keep up hunting. His family expected disaster; the decision was so hasty and the bride, though one could see she was attractive in an odd way, was not their sort. But the venture was a success, and Anne, sustained by the first real passion of her life, did well. She had no wish to choose her own way of life. She preferred to have a life presented to her and could then enjoy making something of it.

The fact was that she found all facets of the human scene more or less equally absorbing. She hardly minded where she was, so long as she had a good view. This tolerance, combined as it obviously was with a serious intelligence and a quick wit, was what really bothered her sisters-in-law. They could never work out how to place her.

For Robert's sake, she took a good deal of trouble with them, but she did not much care what they thought. They had a right to their own opinion about her, as about other subjects. This sensible attitude was sometimes mistaken, by some people, for arrogance. But anyone who took her at her face value, as a person who was permanently open-minded about how to place herself, found her easy company. She valued friendship and cherished it in an odd but effective fashion.

Mark liked her because she was unexacting, unprejudiced, high-spirited and refreshingly caustic. She was a bit of a tease, but teasing was a welcome means of expressing her concern for him, since he shrank from anything in the nature of tenderness. For her part, she found him agreeable company for the raffish streak in her own nature, and, though they were poles apart in temperament, recognized a quality of mind that was not unlike her own and thus gave her a wonderful sense of intellectual freedom and vigour. They both thought fast, and pursued ideas with the same sort of ironical relish.

Mark had lately told her that a warm irony should be the key-note of her book, as it was of her attitude to life. The words had pleased her. Now, lying on the grass under the evening sky, she was reviewing the plot in that particular light.

But living people intruded. Hearing a brush of footsteps on the grass, she turned her head and saw, in this order, a pair of clumsy sandals, bare legs, a lumpy cotton dress, and a forlorn pre-occupied face. It was Phoebe, continuing her walk alone and fruitlessly going over in her mind the whole of her talk with Conway.

I know that girl, thought Anne. What's the matter with her? Ought I to do anything? But by the time she had recalled the name and remembered that this was an ex-pupil of her friend Marian Caxton's, Phoebe had gone by. Anne laid her cheek on the warm grass, feeling suddenly dejected. The image of a child crying in an empty street – which was to her the symbol of all human suffering – came before her inner vision.

Then she scolded herself for sentimentality. Phoebe was probably quite all right, and merely afflicted with the sort of face that looks sad in repose, for no reason. Marian's, on the contrary, always wore an expression of calm, attentive cheerfulness; and she, it was said, had 'never recovered' from the loss of her fiancé, who had been killed, long after the war, by an unsuspected splinter of German shrapnel in his lung. Certainly she had never seen, or sought, a substitute for this one man; yet that was no proof of an exclusive love or of a living grief. It seemed now that the mild affection of her pupils was solace enough, for she was more contented and more balanced than many people whose lives were fuller.

Mark, for instance, was always busy about someone or something and he was almost always unhappy. The initiation of a useful research, or the prospect of a new friendship, gave him good moments; but the frustrations of his private life seemed to cast a blight even on the real achievements of his work.

A clock chimed. Anne jumped to her feet and shook the grass off her skirt. Mark was expecting her for a drink and, anxious not to be too early, it appeared that she had made herself late.

As soon as she entered his room, she understood that things were not going well. Mark seemed relieved rather than pleased to see her; Ralph burst into a flood of pointless chat; and neither of them introduced a blonde young man who was lounging at ease in the background. Mark made some half-hearted inquiry about her writing. 'You know almost as much about it as I do,' she said, so as not to burden them both with a serious answer. The whole atmosphere struck her as very wretched and she shrank into herself. Richard, in an empty, lying tone, reminded Ralph that they had an engagement; and took him off.

'Well?' said Mark. He thought he was inquiring about things in general, but Anne was very likely right in answering the specific question.

'He's very cute,' she said. Mark laughed, and poured her a glass of sherry, his hand very slightly shaking.

'I'm sorry, Mark dear. I didn't really have time to look at him. It just wasn't love at first sight.'

'A perfectly rational reaction.'

'And mutual, I thought. Which is really quite a convenience. But Ralph is nice; he worked very hard trying to make everyone comfortable.'

She pursued the same course, talking lightly and easily without waiting for much of an answer. And gradually, the tension relaxed.

'It's a pity about Richard,' she said suddenly. 'Is he really the love of your life for summer 1938?'

It was the nearest she could get to saying, never mind, dear, it will soon be better; and she was rewarded by a sad, affectionate smile.

8

'LOVE is an art,' said Ralph, 'not a technique.'

'Who ever thought it was a technique?' asked Conway.

'Ralph did,' said Harry unexpectedly, 'at the beginning of term.'

'One learns,' said Ralph, improving the knot of his tie.

Andrew listened in a dream. He had just come in, late, and found the party assembled in his rooms. Although he was tired, he was quite happy to put off going to bed. He was thinking his own thoughts, but did not find other conversation irritating, merely vague and distant.

'Why are you in fancy dress?' said Ralph suddenly.

'I fell into the river, and borrowed some clothes.'

'They're nice clothes. You ought to wear them always. Although I might like to borrow the shirt occasionally.'

'Are you all right?' said Harry. Andrew, who had found Elizabeth's concern delightful, felt slightly insulted now by this suggestion that he could not stand getting wet.

'Oh, yes, I had a good time.'

'You outdoor boys are wonderful,' said Ralph. 'Me, I plan to stay indoors for the rest of my life. I'm taking up politics seriously.'

'You're not the first person,' said Conway.

'Ah, but I'm really going to concentrate. I shall have no time for healthy walks, for high-brow pictures, and women, wine and song. I might even make a career of it, I don't know. But in this country, right-minded people are too apt to stay out of things, they won't make the necessary sacrifice of leisure and comfort. We ought all to have been fighting in Spain instead of taking refuge in this backwater. . . .'

'I must take you up on that,' said Conway. One could see he was prepared with excellent arguments which would need some time to develop. Harry got up, and said he was going to bed.

'So am I,' said Andrew, 'but don't go unless you want to.' He withdrew from the shabby near-comfort of his sitting-room to the monastic discomfort of the bedroom. The iron bed creaked as he lay down on it. Through the wall, the voices of Ralph and Conway droned on.

The next day, he went out by bus to fetch his own clothes. Ralph, who had expected to meet Richard and only found a rumour that he was in London for the day, asked to come too. He was very full of himself, gave the other passengers in the bus an account of his political views, and held his hostesses in a technical discussion of the various periods in which their house was built.

He did know something about architecture, and Andrew was pleased to see that they liked him. But the magic of the previous day had gone. Only towards the end of the visit did Elizabeth take him aside and say that she hoped not to lose sight of him. It appeared she was not merely a good samaritan; and it was finally arranged that the river party before he went home should be a joint one. Andrew might provide some of the food, but she would supply the boats.

Andrew very much looked forward to it, but in between lay a stretch of grim days. Ralph, whose ordeal was still a year ahead, excelled himself in ghoulish sympathy. The compulsory white ties, he said, were clearly the insignia of sacrificial beasts; and indeed, as Andrew took his seat in the examination schools, and waited to look at his first paper, he did feel both dumb and doomed.

The feeling wore off. He got into his stride, and on subsequent days he even began to enjoy the sense of being on the stretch and working against time. He thought he was doing reasonably well.

Conway was uncommunicative about his own papers. Harry was gloomy, particularly about his first practical. But the most wretched of them all was Ralph, who was left with anxieties of a totally different order.

Richard was being impossible. He was just friendly enough to send ripples of disturbance over each day; but never available for long enough to seem worth while. Ralph was too proud to pursue him, too uncertain of him to complain. He wasted his time waiting about for a visit or a message; and if he went out worried about what he might have missed.

It was very nearly the end of term when his fortunes took a turn, for better or for worse. He was walking along the Broad when he saw three women bearing down on him, and recognized first Anne, then Conway's girl, and then one of Andrew's new friends. He was momentarily shocked to find that his two sets met at the edges, for his instinct had been to keep them apart. But that, he instantly decided, was a childish habit, only forgiveable while he was young and foolish. The feeling that he had changed over-night, a recurrent feeling but one that was fresh every time, was strong in him. All the ramifications of his previous existence had become quite unimportant — they were only a feeble attempt to support oneself somehow pending the time when one could really know people.

The image of a unique character, profoundly known and wholeheartedly loved, was unnamed. His absence, however, was more forceful than any visible face. Ralph was much tempted to dodge into Balliol, but left it a little late.

They stopped to talk to him. He reported, to Phoebe, that Conway was in fine form; and to Marian, that Andrew seemed to be enjoying himself. Anne asked him to join them for a cup of coffee.

At that moment, an arm was flung round his shoulder. Richard, leaning rather hard, raised his hand to Anne in a mockery of a salute. Anne introduced Phoebe and Marian, and said no more. She was damned if she was going to include this bit of fluff in her invitation. Phoebe, very conscious of youth and incompetence, was bothered by the hostile silence, and wished she could think how to break it. Marian regarded a passing cyclist with no sense of responsibility.

'My dear,' said Richard, speaking to Ralph, 'I haven't seen you for aeons. And there are so many things I want to say and do. Can I tear you away?'

He could. The ladies had their coffee and gossip as arranged. They agreed that scientists, on the whole, were not particularly good-mannered; and, having settled that, went on to discuss the present state of literature, and the history of the novel. They were all avid readers, with violently differing tastes. Anne loved Dostoievsky and Emily Brontë; Phoebe preferred Charlotte, and Jane Austen; while Marian was devoted to George Eliot – *Middlemarch* especially.

Then Marian, with a perceptible but not offensive air of descending to lower ground, asked Anne if she was working. She suspected, rightly, that Anne was not systematic, and felt herself bound to give an occasional reminder about regular hours and a steady output.

'It seems to be building up,' said Anne cautiously.

'Do you mean,' said Phoebe, 'that you know exactly what's going to happen?'

'Oh, yes. I know *what's* going to happen, the difficulty is to know exactly *how*. But the people seem to live and move and have some sort of being, so I suppose one of these days the moment will come when they suddenly *take charge*.'

9

ANDREW had done his packing and said goodbye to his friends. Now he was taking a last look at the place where he had been happy beyond all his expectations. He had been dreading this moment. The careless and familiar love he had long felt for the grey stone and the green lawns was beginning to reveal its intensity as the time ran on to his departure.

His nostalgia was relieved by the company of Maurice and Aunt Maud. It is hard to tear up one's roots, but it is pleasant to have an examination behind you; and pleasant to be with people who are quite convinced you have come out top.

'But actually there isn't a top,' said Andrew, 'only classes.'

'I mean that, of course,' said Aunt Maud, 'top class.'

They were walking through the garden of John's. Maurice bounded round them like a retriever.

'They keep the grass very nice here, I must say,' Aunt Maud observed.

'Look, they've got tortoises,' said Maurice, 'Oh, do look, they're hitting each other. This black one is an awful bully. Can I take him up the other end?'

'You leave him alone,' said Aunt Maud. 'You shouldn't interfere with what isn't your business.'

'Would somebody mind?' said Maurice. He was crouched over the tortoises, and turned his round merry face up sideways to look at Andrew.

'That's enough,' said Aunt Maud, 'I want to look at all these bushes. That lilac at the back of the house, Andrew, has got to come down, and I'll have to find something to take its place.'

'But they're fighting,' said Maurice, reluctantly following.

'Actually,' said Andrew, 'I think it's courtship.'

'Oh, I see,' said Maurice, and shut his mouth. Aunt Maud made the little explosion with her lips that signified annoyance. She knew there was a difference of opinion between herself and

Andrew here, and she disapproved of him airing it in public where she could not challenge him. The fact that she had also made a stand for her own view escaped her notice.

Andrew did not like the way Maurice now kept silent and dragged behind them. If they had been alone, the conversation might have gone on, and led to something useful. He discussed shrubs with Aunt Maud while regretting her presence. He was conscious that he himself had started out hopelessly ill-informed by schoolroom rumour and the diagrams in medical books; and Ralph's boastful account of earlier successes with girls and Conway's pronouncement (which Phoebe had not heard) that he would probably marry her once he got a good job, in no way completed the picture. It was a doubtful help that certain points had been very definitely established in conversation, for instance, that masturbation did not matter so long as it was unaccompanied by any sense of guilt; that divorce should be easier; that experience before marriage was essential; that impotence was more usually a psychic and not a physical condition; that no one in their right mind would put off going to the doctor if they feared they had contracted venereal disease; that brothels had become redundant since the invention of contraceptives; that jealousy was a primitive emotion which should be eradicated; that abortion should be legalized; and that bastards should have the same chances as anyone else.

That is all very well. You can talk far into the night on any of these subjects without for one moment suggesting that there are real people involved. Andrew, who was not prone to see things in simplified versions, was not really deceived about the abstract character of his present knowledge. A bastard, relieved of its stigma, has still not got a father. The fear of impotence, whether lodged in the body or the mind, is real; and if it is in order to get rid of this fear that experience before marriage is so widely recommended, it is a bit hard on the young women, who had not, presumably, been warned.

In these penumbral regions Andrew was quite at a loss. And

his conviction of ignorance made him very shy of initiating a serious talk with Maurice. On the other hand, he thought he ought to do it, since nobody else would, and he did not want Maurice to endure the worry and confusion he had let himself in for earlier on by believing all sorts of nonsense.

Maurice was quicker than Andrew to shift the load off his mind. 'There's a boy at school,' he said, 'who could climb right up to the top of that tree.'

'You?' said Andrew.

'Oh, no, I'm no good at that sort of thing.'

'He won the swimming,' said Aunt Maud, quite happy again. So far as she was concerned, an awkward moment had been passed off and left no mark.

'That's terrific,' said Andrew.

'Well, it wasn't bad,' said Maurice. 'Of course, I had to practise like anything. I'll show you a new dive at the picnic. And I bet you can't do it.'

When the time came, Andrew did not even make the attempt. He admired Maurice suitably, and then enjoyed a minor triumph in finding that he was still the faster swimmer. Marian, who joined in the race, was almost as fast, and Maurice insisted on staying in till he was blue with cold, practising the crawl.

In one punt, Edward, whom Andrew now saw as an actual figure not much better defined than the fictional being of Elizabeth's report, sat by himself. So far as he affected the party at all, it was as a mildly paternal influence, benign but remote. He was actually considering the idea of throwing sixpences into the stream and inviting the boy to dive for them. But decided that this plan was, like so many others, impractical. The water was far from transparent.

In the other punt, Elizabeth and Aunt Maud were getting on like a house on fire. Aunt Maud's electric cooker, which took so much getting used to, was now described as a godsend. Elizabeth used calor gas, and that was a godsend too. Elizabeth congratulated Aunt Maud on her boys; Aunt Maud admitted that it hadn't

always been easy, but they both seemed to be getting on well. Maurice was keen on the Merchant Navy, and that might be a good plan, since he wasn't clever. Andrew was always the bright one, Aunt Maud had great hopes of him.

'You look as if you had been talking about me,' said Andrew coming up alongside, dressed, on the bank.

Aunt Maud said no, and Elizabeth said yes, at the same moment. Behind these single words was the great weight of two totally dissimilar traditions, one hard-working, puritanical, tight-lipped; the other expansive, energetic and open-minded. Andrew was not disposed to inquire why he felt torn between these two women who were clearly on very good terms with each other. But he did notice how different they were. Elizabeth held out her hand to him as he stepped into the boat, but he pretended he did not see it.

'It must be tea-time,' said Edward. 'Would somebody get that boy out of the water? And you come over here, young man, and help me undo the parcels. Don't disturb yourself, Elizabeth. We can manage very well.'

He was accustomed to filling up the interstices of their domestic life. Elizabeth made wonderful food, but was quite likely to offer it in the wrong order. She had a flair for instant contact with the new people, and could be trusted to talk to Andrew's aunt in a fashion that made her feel capable and interesting. But she could not be trusted to remember that this woman for whom she felt such warmth and understanding had baked a special cake.

Edward prided himself on his grasp of practical detail. He arranged the cake on the lid of its box, in full view. Andrew's contribution, of cream buns and chocolate biscuits, was also well displayed. Edward kept the raspberries covered – they were to be a last minute surprise at the end of the meal.

Amongst their friends, Edward and Elizabeth were recognized as a very devoted couple. It was generally assumed, also, that Elizabeth was the dominating personality. No one, with the possible exception of Marian, realized how dependent she was on

him. Under his watchful and loving eye, her vitality ran unimpeded. Very discreetly he provided against disappointments, looked after her friends when she forgot about them, tempered as far as he could enthusiasms which were likely to make her ridiculous, and was quite ready, if necessary, to pick up the pieces.

He was pleased with Andrew. Elizabeth loved young company, and was short of it since her sister Paula married. He noticed that she was not particularly interested in Maurice, who was presumably at an age when life consists of activity and exploration, and the inner life is in abeyance.

He himself loved children. He was delighted to get Maurice settled beside him for tea, and fed him to bursting. 'When I was your age,' he said suddenly, 'the thing I liked best was to get on top of a tram, on the front seat, with my pea-shooter.'

When the picnic was over, he took Maurice round the garden, explained the automatic feed of the greenhouse boiler, and encouraged him to eat more raspberries. Maurice was interested in everything. His only disappointment was to find that the swing on the lawn was broken.

'I shall certainly get it mended,' said Edward, 'before your next visit.'

Maurice was most anxious to pin him down. When the whole party were waiting at the bus-stop, he recited the formal expression of thanks with a short addition of his own.

'I have enjoyed myself,' he said, 'I look forward very much to coming again.'

Andrew wished he were free to express himself so artlessly. The day had been perfect. He said so, inadequately. When the bus came, and Maurice had dragged Aunt Maud to the top front seat, he stayed on the platform, prolonging his leave-taking.

As he was drawn away, he waved. His three hosts, smiling, waved back. But suddenly there was an interruption. Elizabeth turned her head and clutched at her husband and her sister. A small green car drew up beside them, with brakes squealing.

In miniature, Andrew saw a slight elegant figure jump out, and immediately embrace Elizabeth and Marian. He identified it as the married sister, the beauty of the family. Even at this distance, he could see that she moved like a beauty; and he was oddly disturbed. Elizabeth and Marian were such comfortable people to be with; but this creature, tilting back her dark head to kiss Edward, just as the bus turned the corner, was certainly beyond his sphere.

10

THE term was ended. The young men dispersed to their homes, Andrew to a small manufacturing town in the South Midlands, Harry to a London suburb, Conway to a garden city in Herts, and Ralph to the country town in the West where his mother had settled to be near her relations.

Ralph was the only one of them who was not waiting in suspense for the results; but he was very unsettled. His mother, who had longed for his return, began in a sneaking sort of way to look forward to his departure. A walking tour with Andrew had been arranged, but it seemed a long way ahead.

'You need more exercise,' she said. 'Can't you get Andrew to start a little sooner?'

'It wouldn't matter to me,' said Ralph gloomily, 'but he's got to hang around until after his viva.'

'That's the oral examination, is it?' she said, easily deflected. 'Those poor boys. I should be scared into fits. I don't know how they manage to say a word. And poor Harry, who's always so shy. Why don't you ask him down here for a few days? I'm sure it would set him up.'

'I don't suppose he could come,' said Ralph.

She looked at him over her reading-glasses. 'Well, now, perhaps you'd come down to the library with me, and we might have tea in the Scotch Thistle, it would make a change.'

'If you don't mind, mother, I'd sooner stay in. But I can easily make my own tea.'

She flared up. 'It's not any treat for me to get tea out by myself. I suppose I'd better put off changing my book till tomorrow.'

How unreasonable she is, he thought. He tried to make her see reason, by pointing out how necessary it was that people who lived in close quarters should occasionally go about on their own.

'After all, I've tagged along for all those visits to the aunts and great-aunts. I must have some time to myself.'

The arguments left her cold, cold with rage. But when she flounced out and slammed the door, the memory of a forlorn expression on his face drew her back.

'It's all right, dear, I'll just run down the road now, and I'll be back for tea.'

Ralph was immediately contrite, but not happy enough in himself to show any enthusiasm. 'I'll come with you if you like,' he said. The offer was refused, quite kindly.

As soon as she was out of the house, he went up to his room and wrote a letter to Richard. In it, he tried to express what a difference their friendship had made to him, how happy he was because Richard had been so kind, and how much he looked forward to seeing him again, whenever that were possible. It was an extremely sincere letter; but couched in language that would have seemed, to any outside observer, exaggerated and mawkish.

Unhappily, its fate was to be read by such a person. When he looked in his drawer for stamps, Ralph happened to find a book Mark had lent him, and happened to see that it was inscribed with Anne's name. He decided to send it back to her. As he was doing up the parcel, he heard his mother coming in. In a bit of a fuss, he put the letter inside it, and closed Richard's envelope without noticing that it was empty.

Anne read the short note first — 'Many thanks, Ralph.' Then she unfolded the other, which at first seemed quite meaningless. She had always been perfectly friendly with Ralph, but why should he address her as 'my dear,' comma? Was it a declaration of Love? No, not that, for evidently some tie, some pleasure, was already acknowledged. It gradually dawned on her what the letter meant, and for whom it was intended.

A feeling of great sadness came over her. The style was horrible, but yet she could see in it something warm and genuine and generous; and she was the more oppressed by the diffidence

of the last sentences. 'Shall I see you? I know it may be difficult but I wish you could tell me why? Couldn't we meet somewhere else if you really don't want me to meet any of your family. But tell me something, even if it's only . . .' a few words were heavily crossed out. Anne, who had some code of honour although not of the strictest, did not hold the page up to the light. She skipped to the signature. 'You know, only too well, what I feel. Ralph.'

What a hopeless business, thought Anne, but it's no use my interfering. It remained, however difficult to choose, the line of least interference. Returning the letter to Ralph was probably the correct procedure, but how was that to be done in a perfectly neutral style, affirming that she had not read it, or, if she had, that she could regard it as a perfectly ordinary document? It might be better to forward it, without comment, to Richard's college, but then, if he noticed the envelope, he would probably work out who had sent it, and realize that his identity was known. And it was just conceivable, that she had made a mistake about that. It would be quite appalling to pick on the wrong boy.

For the moment, she put it in her pocket, and went out to get some fresh air and clear her wits. It was a dank, melancholy afternoon, but a little better out of doors than in. As she was crossing the yard, her husband came out of the stable, and caught up with her.

'You look a bit peeked,' he said, 'let's have a stroll around.'

He took her arm and walked her off down the lane. 'If the time's coming when we have to grow our own food, we shall have to reorganize. Less pasture, more arable. I'm thinking of selling the horses, but we might keep Snowball. We could use her in the trap at a pinch.'

'Is it as serious as that, Robert?'

'Could be.'

She shivered, and transferred her hand to the pocket of his mackintosh, taking his hand with it. 'I'm beginning to think,'

he went on, 'that we've got too much permanent pasture in any case. I'm ploughing these two fields in the autumn.'

'I'm sorry about Redskin and Tommy,' she said, and squeezed his fingers.

'Worse could happen, my dear. It probably will. But looking at it practically, I can see a big job here for you and me. We'll know soon enough. What was it you wanted to ask me?'

'Have you ever put letters in the wrong envelopes?'

'Let me see, I don't think so. But I've sometimes been bothered, thinking of it. Is that what you've done?'

'Not me. I've just been sent one. It's a love letter from someone rather nice to someone rather nasty, very silly, oh, dreadfully silly, the person who wrote it has got everything all wrong, and I can just see the person it's written to being cruel and coquettish and condescending. But still, it was written and it was meant to arrive.'

'You don't make it very clear.'

'I can't. It's all so very confidential. But you see how hard it is to know what to do.'

'I should throw it away.'

Robert's advice seemed good. Anne hastened to put the letter in the kitchen boiler. She opened the damper and waited till the paper blazed. She thought about Ralph, not so much pitying him for his present troubles, as wondering how they would appear in the further course of his life. One can never tell at all. An apparent disaster may prove to be merely a regrettable side-track, or the first view of some ultimately rewarding vista. A hopeless, or even an embittered, passion, can be sweetened by the discipline of time. Regrets and disappointments, and hopes too, can change their character.

In her own life, the years before her marriage seemed to have been spent in pointless occupations and fruitless relationships. Yet it was because of them that she so surely valued Robert's integrity, his brisk kindness, and the stability of his love for her. Though at first she had thought him rather conventional, even

reactionary, she soon found that she could trust his judgment as well as his good heart. And now she could see no happier future, if the world was crumbling, than joining him in his big job. She thought of it practically, not sentimentally; and saw herself driving the tractor.

II

MEANWHILE, Ralph's silly mistake had other repercussions. In the long run, many people were affected by it.

Richard had not answered two previous letters from Ralph. This was not because they embarrassed him, or because he regretted the sudden intensification of their friendship. On the contrary, he thought about Ralph quite often with sincere pleasure which was only partly compounded of gratified vanity.

His main reason for not writing was that he was very much taken up with an amusing metropolitan life, and found it really quite difficult to settle down with a pen and a piece of paper. He was much more confident than Ralph that they would meet again fairly soon, somehow or other; and, to be fair to him, was unaware of Ralph's anxiety. He was accustomed to getting over-affectionate letters, and did not read them very discriminately. The general sense always seemed so obvious.

Consequently, it did not occur to him that he was treating Ralph shabbily. The only sign of a bad conscience was that, when he saw his writing on an envelope, he had a strong feeling that this letter was likely to be 'tiresome'; and he did not open it for some time.

When at last he did, the discovery that the envelope was empty had a strange effect. He was immediately convinced that Ralph had intentionally chosen this witty method of intimating that he was fed up, and determined not to write any more until Richard behaved. As a result, Richard liked him very much better and, for once rather uneasy, found his own feelings shifting from an indolent to an active phase.

He put through one or two trunk calls, engineered a breach with another friend who was booked for a vacation trip on a dredger, and wrote to Ralph with the greatest possible cordiality.

'Mark tells me there's an unexpected vacancy in his seafaring trip. You know what I'm thinking. Do tie up the rest of your

life in tidy bows, and come. It would be such heaven; and of course abundantly educational. Think of all that lovely gooey plankton. Yours (of course) Richard.'

When he got this letter, Ralph became a different being. His mother was delighted. She wholly approved of his renewed enthusiasm for his work, and touchingly pleased that, in the interval before he went, he was so much more generous with his company. It was so nice to see him making a really good impression on her friends, and he was prepared to help with games of patience, or read aloud while she did her sewing. He even exerted himself to hire a car for one afternoon, and took her to Glastonbury, and told her all sorts of things she ought to know about history and architecture.

He was quite simply very happy, and his happiness spilled over easily on his mother, his aunts, the charwoman, the girl at the library, and the high-pitched ladies who sometimes came in to play bridge. He seemed driven to pour his energy outwards, lest he should swoon with happiness; and anyone he met became a friend and benefactor.

The only slight flaw in his good spirits arose over writing to Andrew to disentangle himself from the walking tour. By taste and training he was rather polite; and it was not his habit to stand up a previous engagement for a better one. But under Richard's influence he already had some practice; and he did not find it too difficult to compose a pious statement on the desirability of doing some practical work. He was frightfully upset, he said, to rat at the last minute, but he recalled that Andrew had once told him he ought to take his work more seriously.

Having put a good face on it, his sabotage of Andrew's holiday no longer looked like an unfriendly action. He had no doubt that Andrew would find something better to do. In any case, the weather would probably be appalling. Once he had posted the letter, he had almost worked himself round into thinking he had done an act of charity; and then he forgot all about it. He was meeting Richard in three days' time.

Andrew, meanwhile, was having a dull and disappointing vacation. He admitted it was partly his own fault, but that did not make it any better. The viva loomed ahead. He studied the advertisements in *The Times Educational Supplement*, but put off applying for jobs until he heard the results and could give his full credentials. He was suspended between two lives, the full irresponsible life of a student and the unknown life of a man earning his living. Very little was left of the first, and there were no preparations that could be made for the second.

His home provided him with very little distraction. In previous vacations, he had worked regularly, and half-days of leisure had been filled up very easily. Now he had more time on his hands, and he found it dragging. Aunt Maud did not want to be taken out, and she very seldom allowed herself to sit down and chat. Maurice, too, was more than usually engrossed in a mysterious circle of local boys, who were alleged to practise formidable feats of endurance, and were bound by a solemn oath not to reveal their activities to anyone above the age of twelve.

Andrew took him once to a cricket match and once to the pictures. Both these outings were very successful, and clearly a better attraction than street-corner conferences, or swimming up-stream under the bridge. But Andrew was hampered by having very little money beyond what he had saved for his trip. And he was not inclined to ask his father for more, because they were not at present on comfortable terms. He probably made things worse by trying to make conversation about his life at Oxford and his plans for the future. The old man had been brought up in a tradition of innocent, expansive socialism originated in William Morris, and he was bewildered and frightened by recent trends. Trade Union schisms, the politics of a popular front, the glib dogmas of neo-Marxism, combined to disillusion him. The world was becoming too large and abstract for his understanding. He was only conscious of mysterious dangers, associated somehow with the shameful history of Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, and with the character of the existing

government. These Conservatives were unlike their forebears, who did at least have some knowledge of their world and whose self-interest was often enlightened. Now, the ruling classes were bowing and scraping to Hitler – a chap that no group of ignorant working men would have trusted with their Christmas Club.

In these circumstances, he clung to the ideal of solidarity within a familiar group; and he believed that Andrew was seceding, although not along very definite lines. He was acquiring the manners of a gentleman, yet announced with perfect unconcern that some friend of his intended to join the Communist Party. In appearance, too, he was no longer a working class boy of the old sort, for he wore flannel trousers and a tweed jacket both week-days and Sundays.

His father blamed himself for having yielded to persuasion earlier; and was the more inclined to put on an air of ironic respect which Andrew resented without quite understanding it.

One day Andrew offered to help repair a bit of skirting. His father watched him working with saw and chisel as if he were uneasy about his tools. At the finish, however, he told him he had done quite well.

'I might have made a real craftsman out of you, my boy,' he added, 'if I'd had the chance.'

Andrew felt he had been given a clip on one ear and then on the other. He decided he did not fit in here any longer. For the first time he admitted to himself that the house and the neighbourhood were small and dull; and that his own hopes were for something totally different. He longed to get away.

He was in this mood when he got Ralph's letter, and was immediately plunged in despondency. Later in the same day, however, he was salvaged by a short note from Marian. She asked if he could come and see them when he was in Oxford for the viva; and if possible, stay with them for several days.

12

BEHIND Marian's letter lay more than an impulse of hospitality. It was part of a plan which she and Edward had worked out for the benefit of Elizabeth, because they were anxious about her.

Up to the day of the picnic, and Paula's arrival for what proved to be a long visit, she had seemed to be in the peak of health and spirits. But even then, as they all realized later, there was something overwrought about her mood, which gradually grew more pronounced. She raced round the house and garden, reorganizing things and people, exhorting, explaining, arguing, tearing up plants, cleaning out cupboards, and shifting furniture.

This new excitability made her an exacting companion, but Marian and Edward indulged her, for they had great stores of patience. Not so Paula. In her own home, her life was difficult enough and she had come back to her family (while her husband was abroad on a long business trip) with high hopes of recapturing the golden age of childhood. At first all went well. Her sisters' welcome, so spontaneous and sincere, was balm to her; and Elizabeth particularly seemed to be the very person who could make her happy again. She followed her round, and was quite contented to be given the ancillary jobs like holding nails or trimming drawer paper — or else leaned against a tree or mantelpiece indulging, after long privation, the family habit of interminable conversation.

But Elizabeth, accustomed to follow her thoughts wherever they led her, and at this time particularly eager to drive every topic to exhaustion (even from the top of a step-ladder) found to her disgust that there were certain subjects on which Paula refused to chat. She could talk about parties she had been to, but gave no indication of what happened on evenings when there were no parties. She remarked that Reggie did not like her new

hair style, but did not say whether or not she intended to change it.

Elizabeth tried to be sensible. She knew well enough that her own dislike for Reggie made any conversation about him difficult. But she was oppressed by the knowledge of this massive barrier to free and happy intimacy, and did not altogether hide her feelings. Paula reacted badly. She quoted Reggie's opinions on this and that, apparently unaware that they were unpopular here. Worse still, she let it appear that even if she did not share them, she at least accepted them; and thus suggested that she no longer cared to have a mind of her own.

'She is really very silly,' said Marian. Edward observed that she probably did not mean a word she said.

'But why?' said Marian, 'Why? There's no disgrace about disagreeing with one's husband.'

'I don't think that's the point,' said Edward.

'Do you mean she merely does it to annoy?' said Marian, with horror. She could think of no other alternative. Edward, with shrewder insight, thought he saw the subterfuges of pride and fear.

'Poor girl,' he said, 'she has to keep her end up.'

He was more or less right. Paula as a child had been gay, wayward and self-willed. Elizabeth, returning from Ceylon with her hopes of bearing a child herself suddenly destroyed, spoilt her abominably. She had ruled the household and ultimately met the boredom and emptiness which all despots create for themselves by obscuring the independent life of more yielding natures.

Her attachment to her sisters did not help her. On the contrary, it contributed to her feeling of oppression. She thought them absurdly unworldly and ineffectual, and foresaw that she was likely to stick in the same rut. She fought for her freedom; exacted permission to live in London in order to attend art classes, and then made no secret of the fact that she spent her time in a whirl of parties.

Marian had no particular sympathy for this way of life, but she never dreamt of interfering with it. Elizabeth, whose principles were the same, brought up every sort of impediment. Paula concluded that her elder sister had no sympathy with youth, and no understanding of her frantic longing for amusement, admiration and bizarre experience. She had no idea that Elizabeth had enjoyed a similar taste of active popularity before her marriage, since she imagined those times as a rather stuffy period piece. Elizabeth rubbed in that she had been working, thus evoking a grubby female version of *Journey's End*; and with exasperating pertinacity exhorted Paula to train for a job. She was aware that her lovely young sister had no particular intelligence or talent, but she hoped that regular occupation would steady her. She seemed ripe for any folly.

It could not be prevented. Paula returned from a party with the news that she was engaged. The fiancé was not produced for some days, but finally the introduction was made in the palm-ridden lounge of a London hotel. The sisters were startled by his age, his superficial urbanity, and the air of self-confidence with which he uttered the tritest possible remarks. Although they led a very quiet life, they were not wholly unacquainted with rich and influential people — families with an aristocratic tradition of public service, and men whose business dealings upheld the same standard of integrity — but this man who had been floated up through an obscure industry into a comfortable network of holding companies, was a new species. He told them with pride that he had done very well out of the slump; and he was rude to the waiter, to whom he had given on arrival an excessive and purposeless tip. Their attitude was not free from snobbery; but it was mainly due to an instinctive distrust of pretentiousness and complacency. In his favour, it could only be said that he was besotted with love.

Paula took some pleasure in having made so complete a conquest. But she was far more delighted to experience a rare sensation of helplessness before this formidable will. Reggie was one

of those ordinary sensual men who believe without question that the strength of their desire automatically gives them rights, and he had no hesitation about telling her how to behave. From her point of view the engagement was not an act of love but an act of obedience. This was for her a novel situation. She was conscious of a new orientation in her inner life, as well as in material circumstances, and she passed the first weeks of her engagement in a happy and hopeful frame of mind which was not altogether unlike the state of being in love.

He knew very well that she did not love him, but he was confident that she would. With the calculated expertize he might have applied to a tricky business deal, he set about creating a wife for himself, endowed with a perfect balance of docility and passion. He bullied her and fondled her, flattered her and frightened her, stirred her senses and upset all her ideas. One moment she was swooning with excitement; the next, she was being lectured, from the far side of the room, because she was making things so difficult for *him*. And then he would rush off to order another consignment of expensive presents; and later, if her gratitude was not sufficiently demonstrative, would mock her prudery. So the cycle wheeled round again, leaving her yet more confused by the violent feelings in herself which she did not know how to conceal or how to express.

She came to her wedding in a condition of vertiginous expectancy; and was not disappointed. She suddenly understood why love was such a pervasive subject in literature and conversation and was prepared to accept it as the be-all and end-all of life as well. Reggie, of course, would have been quite pleased to have her cherish this fiction for ever; but he could not help making other demands which conflicted with it.

Reggie had never bothered about her social education. He had seen how she loved to shine in company, and how easily she did it. So he expected her to take to his particular milieu like a duck to water, or, more exactly, like a swan. She succeeded at first, and for his sake bravely endured the favoured type of party

which was a mixture of formality and drunkenness with no distinction and little spontaneous gaiety. She was very conscious of not knowing any of the right answers, but did not rebel until her obsession with her new husband reached such a pitch that she could no longer tolerate so grievous a waste of time. 'That,' he said, 'has nothing to do with it.' She argued, wept, refused to sleep with him, drove him away, hauled him back, worried him with reproaches, bored him with abject scenes of penitence, terrified herself with exaggerating the signs of boredom, and made a few diffident assays at exciting his jealousy. Finally she collected something to be frightened about, when, imagining he did not notice what was going on, she grew a little bolder. White with rage, he lectured her for something like three hours, and did not speak to her for a week. And so, in his own phrase, brought her to heel.

When he left for South America, she wept with relief. But as the days passed, she began to realize that she had forged a bond which was far stronger, and far less endurable, than she had ever imagined. Burdened by this knowledge, she sought protection in a bold and brittle style that suited her very badly. It was of course particularly evident with people who knew her well.

'I worry most about Elizabeth,' said Marian, 'It upsets her so dreadfully.'

Edward suggested that they ought to entertain more. 'Let some air in, do a bit of cross-pollination, give us all a change from thinking about ourselves. It would give Elizabeth something to do, and we might look about for some younger people for Paula. They could play tennis, or swim or something. And it would probably be quite a good thing if those two saw less of each other.'

Among others who could be invited for a tea-party or a visit to the theatre in Oxford, Marian thought of Andrew. He seemed just what was wanted. Elizabeth often spoke of him with affection, and he was devoted to her. A little young, perhaps, for Paula, but he might encourage her to get out and about.

When Andrew accepted the invitation, Marian and Edward acted as if they had successfully solved a difficult problem. But the real problem had not been approached and was not even mentioned. Both of them had vivid memories of a single occasion when Elizabeth had been in just such a touchy and violent mood, and they knew that it had then been followed by a terrible attack of depression. Their reticence was due partly to a superstitious dread of inviting disaster, and partly to the fact that neither of them guessed how much the other one knew, and shrank from causing unnecessary alarm.

Elizabeth had already had two attacks of the same kind. The first, and lightest, was in late adolescence, and Marian, younger but in many ways more mature, had helped to see her through it. The sight of Elizabeth, in her neat driver's uniform, behaving as if she were raving drunk on a single cup of tea, and later lying on her bed with her clothes messed up and her hair in elf-locks, had made a profound impression. But it seemed at the time that rest and mild drugs had supplied a speedy cure. When Edward came into their lives, Elizabeth's nervous breakdown was occasionally mentioned, but he noticed no after-effects. The next attack, like a tornado or a volcanic eruption, struck just when his prospects in Ceylon were brightest. It was a period he remembered with pity and terror. He brought her home and took her round to a number of specialists. They did very little beyond holding out hope of spontaneous recovery; and taking away her baby.

The operation gave its name to her illness. Edward was not the man to advertise his own suffering, or to cast any doubt on her capacity for a normal life. He hoped he had persuaded her that she was the victim of a physical crisis and, crushing down his own disappointment, drew some satisfaction from the fact that it could not happen again. The doctors had made certain of that.

And now there she was, forcing a reluctant Paula to practise duets, and drowning her wavering treble in a rich, exuberant alto that shook the rafters.

13

'HOW truly delightful,' said Elizabeth, 'you look quite like the bridegroom in a Balkan opera.'

Andrew had come straight from his viva, and must have expected some comment on his white tie. Indeed, he may have invited it, for he could very easily have changed into one that was less of an eye-catcher. Yet Elizabeth's greeting jarred. Did he detect a new tone in her voice? Or was he already aware that Paula's still, grave expression was intended to be read as criticism.

'You must be very glad it's all over,' said Marian. Elizabeth, with one hand on his arm, was gesticulating with the other hand to command a re-arrangement of the seating. Paula must cope with the deck chair that was falling apart.

She forgot to pour out any tea. Andrew, settled finally beside her, had a cup passed by Edward. Paula transferred herself to the grass, and shook her head, frowning, when Andrew made as if to rise. Elizabeth, then, exclaimed that the grass was certainly damp, and proposed to take the broken chair herself. Edward said quickly that he was just going in any case, and Marian offered to fetch a rug.

'For God's sake,' said Paula, 'stop fussing.'

Elizabeth did not lack aplomb, and indeed preferred a sudden crisis to any other form of social discomfort. She drew herself up, turned to Andrew with a queenly air, and asked how he had got on with his examiners.

'I can't tell. I hope not too badly.'

'What did they talk about?'

'Military history, campaigns, theories.' Edward had crept away unobserved. Paula's smothered yawn made a much larger disturbance. Andrew, with his eye on her, made his answers as short as possible. He thought he was going to dislike her, but he still did not want to appear a dull dog.

'Whose theories? Whose campaigns?' Elizabeth persisted.

'Clausewitz and Napoleon,' said Andrew.

'Well, I've heard of Napoleon,' said Elizabeth, smiling to show she was not quite serious, 'but who was the other?'

Paula raised an eyebrow. This sort of humour, it said, is too arch for my taste. Marian, who never saw a joke, let alone a weak one, chimed in.

'Wasn't he the man who said that defence was a stronger form of war than attack?'

'I hope so. That was what I said.'

'And is it true?' said Elizabeth, with extraordinary stress on the last word. Her eyes became wide and intense, and she breathed heavily, as if she had difficulty in controlling a sudden impulse or a stab of pain. She had not yet consciously admitted any misgivings about her personal fate, but the foreboding which touched us all in those days weighed on her with particular force as if it were supplied from some other source of anxiety.

'I believe in the Maginot Line,' said Paula. She laid herself down on the grass and stared calmly at the sky.

'Whose faith is that?' said Elizabeth, 'yours or Reggie's?'

'Reggie's of course. What could I know about that sort of thing? But Reggie's actually seen it. He says the French are thoroughly well prepared and have the best generals in the world.'

She spread out her fingers against the sun. Andrew noticed that her nails, delicately polished, shone like wet shells. Elizabeth disregarded her, and turned to Andrew.

'And how did you deal with Napoleon?' she inquired.

'We talked mainly about communications. You know he argued that the defeat in Spain was because his army was too far from its base.'

'I always thought,' said Paula, raising her head, 'that Paris is nearer to Madrid than London is. Tell me I'm wrong.'

She was thinking in air-routes. Andrew hastened to explain the advantages of sea over land transport. He mentioned the

Pyrenees. She turned over on her face and laid her head on her arms. 'Go on. I'm still listening.'

'It's nearly six,' said Marian, 'will you give me a hand with supper? You, Paula.'

'Not just yet, darling,' said Paula in a sleepy voice, 'I'm so comfortable, and it's so good for me to be educated. You know I'm a tiger for spoon-feeding. Go on, Andrew.'

Something in her voice made Elizabeth look at her more indulgently. She could certainly be very maddening, but the old trick of turning sweet and silly still worked. A tiger for spoon-feeding, indeed! Elizabeth smiled at Andrew, but he was more than ever abashed.

'Or have you come to the end?' said Paula.

Rather lamely, Andrew tried to show how the English had directed their campaign at close quarters, while the French had referred back. The strategic picture, which had seemed so clear a few hours ago, now came out jumbled and inordinately slowly. He hoped he had done better the first time!

'I don't understand,' said Paula.

'I begin to see it so well,' said Elizabeth intensely. Andrew did not know which of them embarrassed him more. Paula got up and stretched, remarked on Marian's absence and went off to help her.

Alone with Elizabeth, Andrew almost recaptured the charm of his first visit. He completed his account of the war in better order, and this made him more ready to believe her assurance that he seemed to have done brilliantly. In Paula's absence, he did not judge himself so harshly.

Later, when Elizabeth went off to tidy for dinner, Edward took him for a view of the vegetable garden and explained, in his own way, some of the underlying complications.

'People talk a lot of nonsense about difficult ages, and I rather think that for women all ages are difficult. Strong-minded people like Elizabeth suffer very much, she is furious with herself for getting twinges of rheumatism and so on and so forth.

She needs taking out of herself, and I see you have quite a knack. Paula for some reason isn't very tactful, but it won't be so dull for her now you've come, and at your age you may understand her better than I do. I've always found her a most charming girl, but I'm not sure that would be the first impression. Some people need a lot of work put into them. This soil was just the same, sticky and badly-drained. But I'm proud to think you couldn't see a finer garden now within five miles. No, not that way, if we take the other path I can show you the bees.'

Andrew had never before heard Edward utter more than a clutch of incompleted sentences. But they had made far more sense to him than this long speech. He could well believe that Paula was the problem child, but he did not see what he could do about it. Still, he was prepared to try if occasion offered.

In this frame of mind, he played spillikins with her after dinner. She was very neat and skilful in her movements and enjoyed winning. He was clumsy, and did not enjoy losing.

14

AFTER a scorching day, the stretch of lawn, protected by the house and the trees, seemed to hold a sluggish pool of warm air. So the chairs had been moved to the rough grass at the edge of the water, where there was a suggestion of a breeze.

Anne listened to the murmur of the stream, and voices. Marian, respecting her unaccustomed languor, left her to herself, and the rest of the party, occupied with concerns of their own, hardly noticed she was there. So she was able to drift, without impoliteness, into the dreamy and inconsequent state that seemed to arise from the hope that she was pregnant.

She cast her mind forward to the time when her own household would be three, not two. Less tractor driving, more waking up at night. Another little animal to look after, another mysterious and original human being, exploding into the world and immediately altering it, creating a father and a mother. . . .

Oh, it was nice to have it on the way, as the village women said. When I was carrying so-and-so. Carrying? But such a small insignificant parcel so far, invisible and not heavy. Yet it already made her feel that she had to balance her own weight differently.

The chair she was sitting on seemed very wobbly. She shifted into a more stable position, very nervous of falling. How odd. One could surely not dislodge such a very small baby. Why should one feel it was necessary to think about it and look after it?

More comfortably settled, she was almost submerged in sleep. It was wonderful to feel so sleepy; and she struggled to keep half-awake, so as to enjoy it more.

Robert was pleased, enormously pleased. There would be a good welcome waiting for this little creature, who would not even have a heart of its own for several weeks.

Had she remembered to give Robert's message to Edward? Something about a load of muck. Yes, it was all right, it had

been given and Edward said yes, he would be most grateful and had some cuttings to offer later on in the year. But wasn't there some other message? Oh, of course, she meant to tell them all about the baby. That was the whole object of the visit. She had refused at first, out of indolence, but Marian had begged her to come, and she decided she wanted to tell some of her own friends quickly, before it got about in the way things do. And Robert had lent her the brake, such a ridiculous vehicle for one person. Much better with a gaggle of little children in the back.

Have I really given myself half a dozen already? We have started something. I meant to tell them at once, but there's such a lot of talk, and I haven't the energy to break in, or to take Marian into a corner and whisper. Perhaps none of them will take the faintest interest anyhow. They seem to be very much occupied. And of course this isn't the first baby in the world, and there are endless other ways of embarking on a new course.

Through half-closed eyelids, she looked round the circle imagining that each being secretly carried the seed of some change. Elizabeth, according to Edward, has some crisis approaching; presumably what he meant was the change of life. One wonders what that amounts to. For Edward, it seemed to mean that he was called to rally the forces of sweetness and light. Poor Edward, he looked so frail and sometimes behaved oddly. He had the reputation of an eccentric, because he wore quaint clothes, and occasionally interrupted his masculine silence with little bursts of odd information, or unexpected confidences. Yet his main eccentricity was a rare lack of egotism. It never occurred to him that his clothes were noticed, or his remarks remembered. And he was often quite right. Anne dimly heard Elizabeth interrupting him in the middle of a sentence, to ask him to hold a skein of wool for winding.

'Who is it for?' said Paula.

'Andrew.'

'Isn't he lucky,' said Paula, not looking at him. Andrew, taken

by surprise, tried to appear grateful. 'But isn't it a huge job? Surely it takes weeks and months.'

'I knit very fast,' said Elizabeth.

'You do everything so fast,' murmured Anne, 'think fast, talk fast, cook wonderful meals in a quarter of an hour, and catch trains in minus something. It's magic.'

She had been much struck that afternoon by Elizabeth's tempo, and, referring it to her own lethargy, saw nothing new or strange in it. She did not observe that Edward, who had dreaded recognizing an acceleration, looked troubled.

Anne had come back to the theme of her meditation, choosing now other examples – the new undergraduate and the kid sister. All afternoon, they had been treating each other with a neglect that seemed somehow purposeful. They sat side by side, but did not talk to each other, except in remarks that were meant to bounce back from the other side of the circle. Paula did not look at him at all. He avoided her eyes, but sometimes he stared at the hand lying on her knee, as if it were a precious and fragile object, in a well-supervised museum, which he longed to pick up and examine.

'How wide are you, Andrew, across the chest?' said Elizabeth. Andrew did not know. 'He is thinner than Edward,' said Paula, 'but about an inch taller.'

Elizabeth looked in her knitting-book, cast on a bunch of stitches and began knitting like a machine. She asked after Ralph. Anne was startled into stricter attention. She had not realized that Andrew was one of the college cronies, for Ralph had always represented them as rather dim and scruffy, with violent north-country accents.

'Is he about?' said Elizabeth. 'Couldn't he join our party?'

'No hope of that, I'm afraid. He's out on the North Sea.'

Richard in a sou-wester, thought Anne, bright-eyed, grinning, the eternal urchin. Ralph, clutching a rail and staring out to sea, welcoming violence and danger. Mark, labelling his little bottles, explaining methods of preservation, techniques of

acquisition, and sometimes (mourning for his solitude) catching a glimpse of the object of it all. We have all started something, Anne reflected; except perhaps Marian, who sits there reading her book, letting life go past, and doesn't join.

The thought of Ralph depressed her. How dangerous it is to do anything but read a book and not join; but how necessary. She felt a sudden longing for some splendid affirmation; and decided to make it herself. She leaned forward, with her eyes wide open.

'Marian, do come up to surface for half a minute. I've been wanting to tell you, I'm going to have a baby.'

Marian's response was immediate. She got up, walked over to Anne, and, with a certain air of shyness, bent down and kissed her. For a moment, no one noticed that Elizabeth too had got to her feet, but for a very different purpose.

'I despair of you,' she cried, 'this world is no place for those who are in it already. Are you really so light-minded as to condemn another soul to this . . . all this . . . torment? Yes, Paula, I said torment. You believe in the Maginot Line, do you? Just as children believe they can stop the tide. These things are not in our control. We can only make different noises, and if we make the right noise at the right time, we may perhaps get some reputation for influencing events. But the real powers are as far away as the moon.'

Her powerful voice, the rapid pace of her speech, prevented interruption. Edward moved up behind her, but the rest of them were transfixed with a kind of dread. For Anne, the worst horror was not in the tone, or even in sense, but in the fact that Elizabeth was still doing her knitting. Her fingers still moved like pistons, two plain, wool over, two purl, wool over, two plain, wool over, one purl, slip the last stitch, turn, two plain, on and on recurring. And her voice went on and on, a little hoarse and cracked, the same thoughts recurring. Anne fought for detachment. One looks after one's baby, one does not fall through broken chairs, one dodges horrors, shrinks from infec-

tion and makes the sign of the cross to ward off the evil eye. Elizabeth was glaring at her, as she went on speaking.

'Your child, Anne, has no future. Did you know that and take no notice, or did you forget? Have you no imagination? This war is coming to all of us. I can see little children trapped in cellars, mutilated, homeless. . . .'

No, said Anne to herself, that is not my child. With a great effort, she drew together her essential experience of love, and hope and joy, and made inwardly an act of submission to the forces which, indeed, she could no longer control; and was blessed by a sudden, glorious conviction of belief in life.

It was Paula who burst into tears, and fled. Andrew ran after her.

15

ELIZABETH, relieved by her outburst, could not believe that anything untoward had occurred. She was making great progress with her knitting, and regarded the world as a well-disposed, reasonable place. Edward quite annoyed her by observing mildly that, if Anne came again, they must try not to upset her.

'But I was taking quite a natural, normal view. Thousands of people agree with me, but they don't think of saying so, and haven't the guts to act on what they think. Anne would be the last person to let her feelings interfere with rational discussion. You don't do her justice. She was looking extremely well, remarkably so. A first pregnancy at her age is no joke. But if you think I put my foot in it, of course I'll ring up and tell her . . . tell her something. Or *you* could, if you think it's necessary.'

Anne, alone in the brake, was driving homewards. The air was cooling and she began to feel more herself. The afternoon's episode began to take on the bright colours and the theatrical vigour of a harlequinade. Even her own part in it seemed over-acted, as her speculative brain (discarding the haunting image of that dreary baby – only an embryo anyway, not living) re-asserted itself, and cast its brilliant beam on the outer world.

What was happening to Ralph? Did Elizabeth really think that one admitted a moral defeat without ever showing any fight? Was the undergraduate falling in love with Paula? Was he fond of Ralph, and would it do any good? Did he know Richard? What was Elizabeth's knitting in aid of? Above all, why did Paula cry?

Paula was in the orchard, under a tree loaded with unripe apples, trying to explain herself.

'She is quite right, Andrew. There are some circumstances in which one could not, literally could not, involve another being, because of clinging so desperately to what there is.'

'Surely one has to go on,' said Andrew, 'or go back.'

'You mustn't make me cry again,' said Paula. 'Have you got a big handkerchief? Mine's sopping.'

He handed it over. He did not wipe her eyes, but waited and put the handkerchief back in his pocket. Superficially, he was still the attentive stranger, the grocer's assistant who draws attention to a forgotten parcel, the well-trained youth who offers a seat in the train. But at a deeper level momentous and irreversible events were taking place.

After the conversation in the orchard, he found Paula much easier to talk to, and Elizabeth less easy. Paula, for her part, despairing of Elizabeth, decided that she might as well relax and enjoy herself with Andrew. He was too young, of course, to be taken very seriously. But she was sick and tired of the efforts Reggie extorted from her and the prospect of a relationship more direct and spontaneous was very attractive.

For a couple of days Elizabeth shelled peas by herself, knitted like a demon, and raced through her library books as if she were absorbing them through clairvoyance, not print. Paula and Andrew fulfilled the programme of tennis and swimming. Paula learned that Andrew intended to teach in a preparatory school for a couple of terms, and take a permanent job when he had some experience. Andrew began to fill up the features of a remote character with the label of Paula's husband.

They still did not talk to each other in public. Their private conversation, tucked between bouts of competitive activity, was curiously childish. Andrew's prognosis of the use that might be made of his mental equipment, could well have come, with very slight alterations, from the lips of a young lad launching his first model boat. And Paula spoke of Reggie in terms that are more often used about a father. He was a man who made very strict rules; he was always right; he did not always quite understand what was going on, but that was because his mind, naturally enough, was occupied with more serious things.

Reggie was obviously a most serious character. Neither

Paula nor Andrew cast a breath of doubt on this article of faith. But the picture of him was strangely unlifelike; Rio was an incredible distance away; and the word 'husband' can sound very empty, no more than a useful social tag.

In the long evenings, when Andrew looked across the fire at Paula, he never remembered that there was a man (now in Rio) who had been in bed with her, watched her brushing her hair and perhaps, as Andrew once had, fixed the strap of her sandal. In the day, when he hauled her across a mudbank out of the river, or took her arm on the last weary stretch of a walk, he did not remember that they were enjoying a respite from the ordinary world, that the husband would come back from Rio and the job in the prep. school would actually have to be done.

Paula was more practical, but the effect was similar. She knew there was a very short time and she was determined to grasp all she could of ease and happiness. She was not altogether selfish, for she was partly influenced by the far-fetched idea of getting herself in a better mood for Reggie. At the same time, she became more and more fond of Andrew, and more dependent on him. With great adroitness, she contrived to be alone with him for long stretches of time and, if anyone else was present, always sat where he could look at her.

Elizabeth finally took her to task. She burst into Paula's bedroom, and, disregarding the fact that she was busy washing her hair, told her what she thought.

'I won't have you making Andrew unhappy.'

'Who, me?' said Paula, very startled, raising a Greek head, white as marble.

'You know very well who I mean.'

'I haven't done anything.'

'No, you never do. You sit, and stand, and talk in the way that comes natural, and all the men anywhere about are bowled over.'

'You are flattering me.'

'On the contrary. I'm telling you that you're heartless and stupid.'

'Probably I *am* stupid. I thought Andrew was enjoying himself. Isn't he?'

'This has all happened before,' said Elizabeth. 'You are dreadfully upset when you have to send some harmless person about his business. So this time I'm warning you. Andrew is much younger than you are and it will be your fault if he falls in love with you.'

'I've heard,' said Paula, 'that unrequited love is better than no love at all. Andrew, after all, knows that I'm safely married. He is, as you say, very young, and it may be the moment when a romantic passion is just what he wants. In any case, what can I do? Should I wear a mask, sit with my back to the room, or spatter my hair with ashes and my face with tar?'

She regarded Elizabeth with cold indignation, which in no way hid the fact that she was playing for a laugh.

'You're an abominable girl,' said Elizabeth, 'but one of the reasons I love you is because you're so funny.'

'I will try to be good,' said Paula. 'I promise.' She did not say how she proposed to safeguard Andrew's happiness. But she took the first steps at lunch, at which she appeared in dirty dungarees with her head tied up in a handkerchief, and no make-up.

Elizabeth, enraged, longed to send her back upstairs to get properly dressed; but with some difficulty controlled herself. She had no authority.

Andrew saw the new costume as with an almost physical sensation of joy, like a breath of mountain air. Her beauty, then, was absolutely hers, independent of chance and effort, indestructible.

They spent the afternoon mending the swing; and later took turns to give each other high swings up among the branches.

16

THE weather was intensely hot. Storms were reported from other parts of the country, but did not pass the horizon. Only a presentiment of thunder, unrealized, permeated the air. Elizabeth complained that everything was both scorched and moist. She reacted violently to the slightest changes of pressure or temperature. One moment she was over-heated and gasping, the next, having only perhaps walked round the corner of the house to the shady side, she shivered. She took her knitting everywhere. The front was finished, and one sleeve well started.

She was continually digging out Andrew and checking her progress. Paula watched gravely when he stood up for her, faintly blushing, and held out his arm for the sleeve to be laid along it. She was not so much annoyed by Elizabeth's interruptions as envious of her assurance. She felt there must be some infirmity in herself. She could not possibly have taken Andrew by the shoulders to turn him round, or lifted his arm as if it were the supporting rod of a lamp.

Andrew had never before been surrounded by attentive women. Even Marian, whose manner was much colder, occasionally sought him out with an offer of books that had pleased her, or a suggestion for a turn round the garden. Once or twice, as they paced the border, he imagined himself in a socratic society, noble, speculative and leisured. Anne, whose patchy knowledge included more recondite bits, might have cited instead the groves of Lesbos. The moment had come for Andrew to learn from women.

So Elizabeth used him as a protegé; Marian treated him as a friend; and Paula, keeping herself at a certain distance, refused to know what he was to her, but made continual incompleted gestures of approach and withdrawal, as if she had set herself to find out. She believed that she had quite got over Elizabeth's

lecture, which she still thought quite unjustified; but it had certainly left her with a new sense of urgency.

Andrew was very much occupied, and somewhat bemused. Aunt Maud wrote to him from the Norfolk coast where she and Maurice were spending a short holiday. Her letter was full of information, but said nothing. She mentioned the times of the meals, the title of a show on the pier which she had not seen (doubting if it was suitable) and the bare names of one or two other visitors. Maurice enclosed a note with which he had obviously taken no trouble whatever. It was made up of whole sentences such as often occur in letters, and was almost illegible. Andrew could hardly think of these people as his own family, they seemed so flat and dim and distant.

The news came that he had got a good second. Amid the general rejoicing, Marian admitted that she was disappointed he had not got a first; and so put a brighter edge on his real satisfaction. He knew that a second was what he was worth, but it was flattering to hear that he could be rated higher.

'So now,' said Paula, 'you will have to rush around and think about jobs.'

For many years Andrew had intended to teach, and he was well gifted for it. He liked younger people and he had little difficulty in holding their attention, and was visited by those flashes of imagination which convince that knowledge is to be sought, not only received. In the old days, his thoughts of his vocation had the character of a non-visual dream, where relations are strongly perceived, but the agents and objects have no shape. As time went on, the dream acquired bits and pieces of an earthly habitation. Good schools have pictures on the walls, big windows, playing fields. Schools in general have long, echoing corridors, classrooms often have swing doors, there is a masters' common room, bare but with signs of personal tastes, a pipe on the mantelpiece, a cricket bat in the corner, perhaps a fiddle in its case. The other masters had a look of Conway; the headmaster

was a mixture of Andrew's old headmaster and his present tutor, with the virtues of both.

Andrew was not silly about all this. He knew he might find himself in a grimy, rowdy school, where some of the masters were stupid, or lazy, or embittered. But on the rare occasions when he projected his mind into the future, he usually chose to see it in a roseate light. The dream was an indulgence, perhaps not entirely true to life, but at least self-consistent.

Latterly, however, he had tried to re-compose the same picture in the manner of his new surroundings; and it simply did not do. He knew something about masculine congregations, the self-absorbed cliques that develop so naturally, the automatic tact which is demanded over disagreements, the high value of silence in ordinary life, the danger of asking too many questions, and the comfort of appealing to a set of (even artibrary) conventions. All these things were right and proper, and Andrew could not see himself treating them with feminine nonchalance. His fantasy began to show cracks. He no longer liked thinking of it, and, as regards his immediate plans, sank into a state of lethargy.

It would be fair to say that he thought almost continuously about Paula, except that thought is not the exact word. The expression on his face which had so disturbed Elizabeth was as if he were trying to identify an evasive flavour and the movement of his mind corresponded. When he recalled the turn of her head as she stuck a cornflower, without comment, over one ear, or when in imagination he heard her voice say 'let go of my arm now, Andrew, we're near the house' he was not inquiring what it meant, but what it was. This inquiry is of wider import and can never be concluded. Until the energies are re-directed, all other occupations seem base and futile. Andrew, with the obsessed faith of an alchemist who thinks that the common metals in his crucible are turning into gold, felt that he was about to receive the secret of the universe.

The obvious thought that he was falling in love must have crossed his mind. But it was dissociated from his immediate

experience, which was concerned less with the pursuit of an object, and more with the quickening of his perceptions. He might never have seen a girl before, or a blue flower.

Perhaps love ripens most happily when judgment is suspended. Andrew had lately taken to sleeping in one of the punts, and his fitful sleep, broken by the mysterious noises of the night, by the movement of the boat, by changes in light and temperature, merged into a reverie which was all contentment and certainty. Paula, driven to a closer acquaintance with her own objectives, was far more restless. She tossed on her bed, wondering if she should go back to London, or allow events to take their natural course. She was beginning to think, however, that life moved too sluggishly, and was caught in a mood of nervous exasperation which craved some sort of crisis.

Meanwhile Ralph, far off on the North Sea, was enjoying a brief alleviation of all anxiety. He was twisted up in a bunk that was a little short for him, reading *South Wind*. Below him, Richard slept like a baby, his full lips lightly parted so that he seemed to be smiling. Ralph, strong in the assurance that he was the only begetter of this state of beatitude, and could share it, too, glanced at him occasionally, and then read on with total concentration. The ludicrous and melancholy antics of these odd characters had nothing to do with his own life. He followed them with a robust enjoyment which in no way disturbed the lyrical simplicity of his private feelings.

The forms of love are diverse. However ill-starred his choice, Ralph now experienced, just as Andrew did, that enfranchisement of the single isolated self which is not necessarily given by the normal conventional imitation fairy-tales. They can turn out all tinsel and slapstick, while the authentic jewel shines in a setting that is visibly shoddy.

Anne, in bed in the dark, was discussing with Robert the old question of whether anyone would ever fall in love if they had never read about it in books. He, citing the fidelity of geese and the grief of widowed pelicans, held that even in our animal

nature, sexuality was not bound to its immediate needs. 'But animals,' she said, 'at least don't stuff themselves with trashy ideas. No romantic formulae, no attempts to turn poor fish into Ruritanian Counts, no living happily ever after without a care in the world. People seem to expect too much, and the wrong things. And all the time', her smile, unobserved in the dark, did not seem wasted, 'something better does exist.'

17

EDWARD kissed Elizabeth good night, and put her light out. More often than not, they slept in separate rooms, but this arrangement, which so often signifies or causes a breach of physical attachment, had in their case persisted for some years without embarrassment or frustration. On occasions, they could still enjoy passing the night together, and neither was too timid nor too proud to say so. Consequently, they could afford to indulge themselves, alone, in different routines of relaxation. Edward needed very little sleep; Elizabeth needed much more, but often had a good deal of difficulty in sleeping at all.

On this particular night, as soon as she heard him shutting his door, she switched on her light again and got up. She fetched a bundle of papers from the drawer of the dressing table, and, having spread them around her, sat up very straight in bed with a pencil in her hand and a clean sheet of paper on a book propped against her knees.

She was altering her Will; and although not much money was involved, the issues seemed to her of great importance. First of all, she wanted to leave something to Andrew. This was partly because she was fond of him, partly because a little money goes a long way with people who have none, and partly because she enjoyed giving people big surprises. Then there was Paula, whose future seemed so dubious. Would it not be wise and kind to provide her with a little competence, so that Reggie's supremacy, in that sphere at least, was not total?

Elizabeth wrote out two clauses, very competently, in language that her solicitor was not likely to quibble at. But then she came upon the crux of the whole matter. At present, since Edward would inherit the house, Marian, as the unmarried sister, inherited the money; and the new legacies would cut her very short.

Elizabeth was very much annoyed to realize that she could not

confer all the benefits she would like. She argued the case for each person in turn, and found that Marian's was indeed much the weakest: for she had always been capable of earning her own living, and never wanted more than she earned. Paula, on the other hand, had no bent or training for independence; but she could at least be given a chance, with enough to live on for two years. Andrew's case was that, at the start of his career, he was the ideal recipient for a surprise.

Without admitting it, Elizabeth was assuming that the provisions of the new Will were to take effect immediately. This was why she was hurrying to take the decisions tonight, and have some document ready for posting first thing in the morning. There seemed not a moment to lose. If only she could settle what was to be done about Marian.

On the far wall hung a small Constable sketch. Elizabeth, looking across at it, could only see the glint on a corner of the frame; but she could instantly imagine the picture. Just a tree, she thought with delight, just a tree. It was her most loved possession; and it solved her problem. It was worth, in money, only a small fraction of the legacy, but, surely, Marian would understand that in every other way it meant more.

In any case, it was a simple matter to ask her. Marian, starting up from a deep sleep, found Elizabeth standing at her bedside, already talking. Marian rubbed her eyes, then with a schoolgirl's gesture, pushed back across her shoulders the long plaits tied with tape.

'So I want you to have it,' said Elizabeth. 'Take it. Take it now.'

Marian allowed it to be put in her hands, then laid it on the cover.

'It's very kind of you,' she said, when she was at last in command of her normal manner, and so enabled to speak. 'But why? I hardly like to take it.'

'It's instead of the money,' said Elizabeth impatiently.

'I don't need any money,' said Marian. She spoke quite sin-

cerely. She could already afford to buy books and enduring clothes and occasional expensive presents; and to travel sometimes; and she did not think there was anything else worth buying.

'You see, I have altered my Will,' said Elizabeth. She explained how. Marian did not remember that she had benefited before, and tried to explain that she would feel no deprivation if Andrew and Paula split up the sum that was called, for some reason or other, 'your share'.

'But in any case, why alter your Will at two in the morning?'

'Oh, it's quite reasonable,' said Elizabeth hastily. 'Probably Anne's baby reminded me. Someone told me once that the birth seems to make a great blank wall across time, so that you can't imagine what will happen after, or make any plans that seem in the least real; so that you rush round tidying up the house, and settling everything, and throwing out junk, almost as if you were going to die and wanted to leave everything in order.'

'You aren't going to die,' said Marian, in a tone of great certainty. She believed what she said, but it was not, apparently, an influential comment, for Elizabeth agreed readily enough.

'No. No, certainly not. But things are looking very black . . . one doesn't want to leave so much confusion that it's a trouble to everyone. . . .'

Her voice tailed off. She seemed in some doubt about what she was saying; but recovered as soon as she returned to Andrew and Paula, repeating, in great detail, what she had done for them.

Marian did not know what to do. She was perfectly prepared to join in any discussion, however inconvenient the occasion, so long as some purpose was served by it. But she could see no purpose in a long session where nothing new was said and there never had been any disagreement. At last, noticing that Elizabeth looked cold, she broke in.

'I agree with you entirely. I think Andrew will make very good use of a legacy; and Paula can't be left completely in Reggie's clutches. But do, please, go to bed.'

Elizabeth looked as if she had been struck across the face. Marian, undemonstrative by nature and in any case cumbered by bedclothes, could summon up no gesture that would do. A bewildered sympathy was all she had to offer. Elizabeth fled from it.

Marian was perhaps too much impressed by the overt subject-matter. She was accustomed to a student discipline, where speed and accuracy of thought are rightly valued, where one tries to ask the right question and seeks the relevant answer, and often reaches some conclusion. She had made a noble effort to treat the conversation on these lines; and was quite incapable of recognizing what was, essentially, a cry for help.

She examined the charming picture. It was so generous of Elizabeth, a kind thought, a happy thought, but irrelevant. Marian had lived for some years with the conviction that she herself was fated to die young. She did not find this in the very least depressing. It was a calm summary of her attitude to life, which since the death of her only lover, seemed to mean a stretch of useful work satisfactorily done.

She laid the Constable on her bedside table. Elizabeth, in her room, poured out with shaking hand a full dose of sleeping draught. Paula, woken from her first sleep by running footsteps, jumped out of bed.

'I must go home tomorrow,' she cried out loud, 'I must go home.'

18

BEHIND the trees a bank of cloud stood like a wall. Above, the free air was radiant with starlight. The boat rocked. The whisper of the stream flowed into the audible trembling of the aspens.

Andrew was caught quite unprepared. So unprepared — because his thoughts were so engrossed with her image — that the moment was delayed when he said to himself, 'This is she.' Then Paula was standing on the bank. She wore a white military-style cloak which reached from her neck to her heels. Her face was almost invisible, but the shape and carriage of her head were unmistakable — the vision become actual, and so more noble, lovely and more touching.

For the first time, Andrew was struck with an anguish of longing. The cloak fell in heavy folds, but was thick enough to retain the shape of a tent, revealing nothing of the frame that supported it. Yet he suddenly understood her naked shape. Those round breasts, those smooth hips which looked, in a swimming suit, so neat and pretty they might have been turned on a lathe became, now hidden, softer and sweeter, loose and warm as a blown rose in sunshine.

'Are you awake?' said Paula.

'Yes.' Their voices were hushed, yet clear as a ring in fine glass.

'Nobody sleeps in this house,' said Paula, in more ordinary tones, to dodge the magic of the night, and Andrew's breathless silence. 'I thought I'd take refuge out of doors — sleep in the other punt.'

Andrew held out his hand to her. She took it and stepped aboard, but said as she did so, 'Shall we go for a voyage by starlight. I have never done that.'

Andrew watched her settling herself opposite. She wound her arms in the cloak, from the inside, and folded them across her

bosom. A gold buckle shone at her neck, and her feet were drawn up out of sight.

Andrew picked up the paddle, moved to the stern, and turned out into the stream.

'Up or down?'

'Up.'

Out between open fields, they might have been floating in space. The drip of the paddle was like another kind of silence. Andrew was possessed by a strange languor which seemed to carry, also, some distant intimation of power and terror. It was difficult to breathe, impossible to speak, the tranquillity of the moment was so intense, and so fragile. Paula gazed across the water meadows, as if she knew that one look at him would be *too much.*

Andrew's stroke slowed down a little. He was now hardly holding his weight against the stream, and the ghostly landscape was immobile. With a great effort, he set himself again to his task, but now there was a slight irregularity in his movement, just audible as the water broke against the paddle. Paula drew herself together, and frowned, like someone who is trying to catch a phrase of music, which first came bright and clear from the violins, and is now mysteriously echoed and transformed by the wood-wind. She sighed, and raised her head, without turning.

'Are you tired, Andrew?'

'No.' He heaved up the one word with such difficulty that it might have been a groan of exhaustion.

'We could drift for a while,' said Paula.

He shipped his paddle carefully, and stood up, stretching his arms. He was bewildered by a sense of physical oppression, as if he had suddenly grown heavier, or lost a limb, or taken an unfamiliar drug; and did not know what to do with himself, or how to manage. He tried to throw his thoughts outwards to the stars and the water, to the enduring objects of a real world. But they were less actual than a swift, perfect recollection of the

scene in the back kitchen when Elizabeth had dressed him up in dry clothes. He remembered the feel of the silk shirt, and shivered violently.

Paula was looking at him. She had shifted over to the side of the boat and left a space. As he stretched himself out beside her, he was still trembling from head to foot.

'Are you cold?'

'No, not cold.'

Paula disentangled a small, warm hand from the folds of her cloak and reaching out, gently touched his cheek.

'I am in love with you, too,' she said.

As he turned to her she lifted her arm. With a shock of delight, he found that he had seized, not the rough wool, but something as fine and unsubstantial as mist; and then the living body.

Above them the cloud moved across the sky like a shutter. The wind rose. They knew nothing of it. In a late grey dawn they were asleep, wrapped like a single being in the great cloak; and were woken by the first cold drop of rain.

19

ELIZABETH was late for breakfast. As she came in at the door, Paula, with a flush on her cheeks, was describing the morning's storm.

'Andrew and I must have heard it just about the same time. We rushed round the house like mad things, shutting all the windows. There's a leak in the sewing-room again, Edward, we put buckets, but it looks much worse than last time.'

Elizabeth went slowly to her seat, hardly listening. She had woken as if struggling under a heavy weight, and lay in bed for some time, expecting it to lift as the effects of the sleeping draught wore off. This did not happen, and at last, realizing that she was not drugged but in some sort of different mood, she got up and started to dress.

She had difficulty in finding her clothes. They were in the usual places, but she picked them up in the wrong order, and became confused about where she had put them down. A mass of papers on the bed got in her way. She moved them first on to the dressing table, then transferred them to the window-seat, as a final move in a desperate hunt for her comb.

A trickle of rain from the side of the window-frame fell on to one corner of the pile. It did not seem to matter. She walked aimlessly across the room, and ran her finger round the unfaded rectangle of wallpaper where a picture had once hung. She could not recall what it looked like.

Her clumsy gestures, her sluggish vision, were an expression of something that is not quite within normal experience; but she had in no sense lost her wits. She knew perfectly well that the Constable was gone from opposite her bed because she had given it to Marian on the previous night; but a dreadful sense of servitude to time was better expressed if she said to herself, more vaguely, that it had been there once. She could remember, also, with complete clarity, the alterations she had made in her Will;

but they were now entirely without interest. So the papers became unidentifiable, because the effort of associating them with her decisions was no longer worth while. Even her slow exasperating struggle to do up the buttons of her blouse was essentially symbolic. She did not believe that the buttons had grown bigger, or the button-holes smaller, but they did feel like it, so effectively had she projected into them her conviction that life was inordinately difficult. And, by forgetting the picture, she confirmed the conclusion that the world was colourless.

This was what went on: it was not done on purpose. Yet it is possible that a purpose was served for she did at least keep on some sort of terms with the surface objects of life. The practical people who naively suggest to their friends that they should pull themselves together are not always good advisers. The act of will which seems so easy to an outsider may be impossible – one does not know what to pull at, or in which direction – and even if it is possible, it may still be undesirable. If at the back of it all lies a dread of losing contact altogether, a premature attempt to command the situation may be just as dangerous as a hasty snatch at the steering wheel of a car when it runs into a skid.

Elizabeth did not normally believe in giving way to weakness, or in making a general affliction out of some personal trouble. When she was plagued with rheumatism in her hip, she was careful not to limp, lest Edward should feel the pain too. But on this particular morning she had no such scruples. Her every movement, even the details of her appearance – the sagging shoulders, the clouded eyes, a certain carelessness of dress – were an attack on the hearts and nerves of those who loved her. She was visibly suffering.

Edward, looking up from his paper, saw at once that his hopeful plan of allowing her some extra sleep had done her no good. Marian, observing her lift up her cup cautiously in both hands, fought down a wicked feeling of resentment, and then found herself confronted by an unreasoning sense of guilt. Andrew merely glanced at her, wondering if she had heard or seen the

two of them running across the lawn hand in hand. Guided, as it happened correctly, by his own elation, he thought not. He looked back at Paula, in whose person he saw the living glory of beauty and kindness.

Hardly checked by Elizabeth's entrance, she rattled on about the storm. It seemed to Andrew that beneath this gay harmless chatter lay other words addressed to him alone. She was speaking to him of how they had raced round the house, laughing and whispering and kissing, and banging the windows to give themselves cover. On the half landing, where she now reported that a sash-cord was broken, he had held her quietly in his arms for a few minutes breathing the meadowy scent of her hair, and hearing the wind and the rain and the new sound of another heart beating. When they reached her room, she put her finger on her lips and beckoned him in. Then, from her own bed, stretched out her arms to him. But soon she reminded him that it was morning, that people would be waking up, and sent him away.

'We did try not to disturb you,' she said piously to the company now assembled, 'but we had to do a lot of mopping up on the landing. It was blowing in so on that side. It was lucky Andrew hadn't left his window wide open.'

He had, of course; but he had shut it by the time she stole into his room, complaining that she had forgotten to say good morning properly, and that her feet were cold. With his cheek on her breast, he felt down the long smooth curve of her thigh, and the fine bone of her leg. Her feet were small and narrow, and as cold as china. He held first one and then the other, curving his warm palm under the arched instep. At last she sighed, kissed his lips gently once, and left him.

'Did you sleep, Andrew,' she suddenly asked, 'after all the fuss and bother?'

'I think so.' He had slept just enough to feel sleepy still, and he looked oddly ruffled. Paula smiled at him, tenderly. She herself looked bright-eyed and buoyant, completely refreshed and ready for the day. It's a mercy, she thought, that everyone is so

distrait this morning, the darling can't help looking so very much in love. She smiled at him again, yet more fondly. Marian was busy talking about some sketch or other — highbrow, boring talk, unsuitable for breakfast, but it held Edward's attention although Elizabeth did not seem interested.

Paula was a little frightened of her older sister. For the moment, she did not seem interested in anything, but there was no knowing how long that would last. She longed to be alone with Andrew, and considered, almost seriously, the idea of building themselves a tree-house and spending the day in it.

'I don't mind,' said Elizabeth, 'keep it, or give it back. I don't mind.'

'It's a good thing,' said Edward, 'to move pictures about from time to time. One sees them again. I've been thinking of bringing the prints from the staircase in here.'

He was wise enough not to put a question, for it would not have been answered. His tentative remark was allowed to drop quietly into silence. In this silence, Paula suddenly leaned across the table and addressed Elizabeth directly.

'Andrew ought to go up to London and see about some jobs. I rather thought I might drive him. Will that be all right?'

'All right,' said Elizabeth. It was less an assent than an echo of the final words. But it was good enough.

20

PHOEBE and Conway kept up a mild correspondence. It dealt clearly and briefly with news — the itinerary of Phoebe's round tour in Brittany, Conway's average second, his arrangements for lodging in the Iffley Road while taking the teachers' training course — and ultimately settled a date for a sober outing in London. Conway was careful to say that he had to come up in any case to see an oculist, and suggested that it might also be nice to look in at the Victoria and Albert, and go to a film afterwards. Phoebe replied in the same style, remarking that this would be a good opportunity for doing some shopping.

Not for them the desperate plunge under a breaking wave; they chose rather to wait upon a normal tide. Undoubtedly, they got on well together, and that is probably more important than anything else, if you plan your life, like Conway, several years ahead. It was only rather sad for Phoebe that she did not know he already planned to marry her; for she longed to feel herself loved. But she was at least spared those crises of doubt and diffidence which always assailed her if anyone became in the least flirtatious. She had been trained to an exaggerated respect for men as such, and preferred them to behave with dignity. She did not know how to take it if somebody held her hand, or kissed her goodnight, and threw herself immediately into a state of anaesthesia which was baffling to both parties. In this way, she had frozen off several friends, and each time was sorry afterwards.

Conway presented her with no such problems, and the consequence was that she had grown very fond of him indeed. She felt honoured by his friendship, and not in the least surprised or resentful because he did not seem to find her attractive. She had little difficulty in hiding her feelings from him, and to some extent also hid them from herself. It never occurred to her that she could in any way alter their situation.

She was almost completely without artifice. Her face showed that, for it was obvious that she used make-up merely as a concession to public opinion, and without the subtler benefits of vanity. She occasionally tried to do something about her hair, but it was fine and slippery, and on the whole she preferred not to think about it. Her shape was charming, fine-boned and plump, but out of shyness she always chose clothes which made her squarer and flatter.

Certainly, she was a girl who completely failed to make the best of herself; but that was one of the reasons why Conway felt comfortable with her. The women he knew best — his mother and sisters — were incalculable, exacting and dangerous, particularly when they set out to please; and although he was a dogged supporter of equal rights, equal opportunities and equal pay for women in general these demands for special treatment had made him cautious and cool in his dealings with women in particular. Because he could treat Phoebe as an unclassified being, she suited him very well. He was not imaginative and his feelings for her lacked any real understanding or appreciation, but they had developed in the course of time a certain warmth and kindness. On this occasion, he took pains to make sure that his programme pleased her, and worried because she had come out without a mackintosh. It was extraordinarily pleasant to show a spontaneous concern. At home, he was always assailed by a flood of criticisms and complaints first.

Phoebe, of course, thought his arrangements wonderful, and was quite sincere in saying it didn't matter a bit how wet she got. She apologized for her parcels; and Conway, to the surprise of both, found himself carrying them.

This was on their way to supper at a little place in Soho recommended by Ralph. They were the first people to arrive and the Italian proprietor paid them a great deal of attention, partly out of professional habit and partly because he judged from their manner that they were discussing pressing personal questions, and hoped that they would settle them more happily if they were

provided with the right atmosphere. In fact, Conway was trying to work out the economics of Breton onion-selling; and Phoebe was embarrassed because although she had had long talks with several of the onion-men there were great gaps in her information. Conway gazed at her, waiting for some question to be answered, and she shook her head helplessly.

'All right?' said Luigi. 'Enjoying your dinner? Everything quite nice?'

'Lovely,' said Phoebe with a radiant smile. Even Conway, who did not approve of being fussed, was affected by the aura of young love which Luigi imposed on them. He noticed that Phoebe's eyes were very bright, and her wrists pretty and fragile. He himself felt more expansive, no longer the man who went into a defensive, pipe-smoking huddle with his father, but a man who could order another carafe of wine just for the hell of it.

'Oh, Conway, you shouldn't,' said Phoebe. 'We've really finished, and the film starts in twenty minutes.'

'What about this film? Do you really want to see it? I only picked on it because there wasn't anything else. And now it's raining cats and dogs.'

'I do like Charles Boyer,' said Phoebe doubtfully, 'but it's nice here. Only won't they get bored with us?'

'They haven't yet. When they do, we can go to a News Reel. Drink up and relax.'

Phoebe was delighted to catch more time for conversation; only rather astonished because she had never before known Conway change his mind. Otherwise, he was in quite an ordinary mood, and gave her a very dry account of the Mayerling tragedy. They agreed that the film they had missed was most probably sentimental and awful.

In the news theatre, he laughed uproariously at the cartoons and groaned over the travelogue. Phoebe would have thought better of it on her own. The pictures were good, and she could easily discount the arch cheeriness of the commentator. But she could not help being infected by Conway's disgust.

At the end of the evening, he took her to a bus stop in Piccadilly, before making his own way to St. Pancras. For some reason they shook hands. It seemed to Phoebe, at first, that the formal gesture went with her words of thanks; but then suddenly it seemed silly. She snatched back her hand and ran for the bus. Conway made for the tube.

This time, he did look back. And as he saw her threading her way to the third bus in the row, he very nearly turned and went after her. She looked so forlorn and puzzled, and quite incapable of resisting the people who were pushing in front. But before he made up his mind she was on the platform and the bus started.

He was relieved not to miss his last train; but he was not altogether happy about Phoebe. He ought to have seen her home. That was an old-fashioned convention, of course, and she was the last girl to expect it; but he was still depressed by the thought of her long journey, a wretched ending to a nice day. He was puzzled by his own feelings. It was as if he wanted to pick her up and put her down in a cosy room by a warm fire. He began to consider altering his time-table.

21

ANDREW was alone for the first time that day, in a big, rather featureless, room, composed of chromium, esoteric wood veneers, and satin with a high reptilian gloss — the routine job, done by an expensive interior decorator for a top-flight client. That is to say, Reggie's service flat near Baker Street.

Paula, disregarding the ivory instrument on the fireside table had gone off to do some telephoning. Andrew got up languidly from the sofa and went over to the fireplace where some imitation coal gave out light but not heat. Since it was a warm night that was just as well; yet Andrew was so unaware of his surroundings that he leaned against the mantelpiece just as he often did in his own rooms in College and stretched out an ankle before the deceptive flicker. He was more or less stunned.

The journey from Oxford had taken all morning and half the afternoon. They had chosen a zigzag route between the two main roads, with a short stop for a sandwich lunch in a pub and several longer stops in unfrequented lanes. For the most part, then, they leaned against each other and talked in an idle, drifting fashion.

'I should like,' said Paula, 'to go away with you somewhere. Imagine a room with a balcony over a blue lake. Or a little house in the middle of a huge forest. Some place where nobody knew us or bothered about us.'

Everything she said seemed to Andrew loaded with meaning. These remote dreams, while outlawing all thoughts of the practical business of life, expressed a nearer reality — the extraordinary sense of being wholly together. It was as if their bodily union had brought to life all the other modes of human communication and created a more complex harmony of heart and mind. In this little room, with a lowering sky above and the rain beating on the windscreen, they existed out of space and time, safe and satisfied and free.

Except in terms of atmosphere, their feelings about each other evade definition. They were largely, perhaps, reflections of their feelings about themselves. The fragility of their mutual understanding was not apparent. Paula was captivated by Andrew's youth and tenderness and loved herself better because he found her lovable. She hardly saw him as man with a history and a future and thoughts and convictions of his own. And Andrew, having now seen her at her best, gay, confident and generous, was blind to the darker side of her nature, the precarious and shallow character of her feeling, the underyling self-distrust, and the evident flair for deceit.

The blindness of love may be due to complacency or egotism, to a childish preference for fantasy, or a determination to possess and dominate. But there is a nobler source, gratitude. In their gratitude, Paula and Andrew were like-minded. They could not but see perfection in the unknown being who had so perfectly accomplished an unmistakable act of kindness.

They arrived in London at about four o'clock. Andrew mentioned the purpose of the trip, and Paula, who had quite forgotten it, was quick in showing her concern and resource. She drove him straight to the Agency with which he had corresponded, wished him luck and told him she would wait outside for him, all night if necessary. He looked very doubtfully at the Victorian building with a dusty notice directing him to the second floor. Paula wrinkled her nose at it. 'They can hardly fail to know they're lucky to get you,' she said.

His smile, as he waved to her from the doorway, had a touch of arrogance. For a moment, he had suffered the same stage-fright that had gripped him first as a new boy at school and lately as an examination candidate, but it was swept away by the marvellous realization that today he was quite grown-up. He was inferior to no one, accountable to no one, and the world lay at his feet.

This particular corner of it, certainly, was not inviting, for the building was even gloomier inside than out, with peeling paint

on the staircase, and the linoleum curled up at the edges like dry crusts. The incongruity between his mood and his surroundings made him laugh, and then reminded him to compose his face before he went into the office.

The tired old man who peered at him over the top of bifocal lenses appeared to have little interest beyond checking the form Andrew had already filled up. Extra information bothered him, probably because there was no more room on the lines. 'Yes, yes', he said hastily, and closed his eyes. Andrew was beginning to think he was wasting his time (but what of it? there's no hurry, I'm all right) when he heard himself being invited to come for an interview in the morning.

The whole business had taken less than ten minutes but to Paula, the time passed very slowly. In Andrew's absence, she was immediately much less sure of herself. London in the rain wore its most forbidding aspect. It seemed madness to have brought Andrew here. She had not even any clear idea of what she was going to do with him.

After the brief separation, they met again with a certain shyness. Paula's burst of initiative was spent; Andrew, having taken charge again of his own arrangements, wondered where he was going to sleep. Paula seemed disappointed that he knew so few details of his prospective job. She went on asking questions long after he had run out of answers. And then they fell silent.

They were driving up Park Lane, and she was struck by a painful reminder of Reggie. It was in one of these glistening ballrooms that he had announced his intention to marry her. She thrust the memory away, and turned into the Park, telling Andrew that while he was in London he ought to see some of the famous places.

They walked through the rain to the Round Pond. 'I used to sail boats here,' she said, 'when I visited my grandmother.' A cluster of children in ragged jackets were still sailing boats. Further off, between the trees, other children more suitably

dressed endured the boredom of a brisk walk in the wake of nurses and prams.

In the Water Gardens, they found a little shelter. Hand in hand, they walked slowly round the pleached alleys. The dim and melancholy light suited their languid silence. Their happiness was reduced and simplified to the light touch of warm fingers.

Actually, they were both suffering from exhaustion and hunger. The nurses could have told them, as they were now telling their particular charges, that it was high time to hurry home to tea. But Andrew and Paula delayed, tasting a charm and delicacy in this cloistered interval.

Finally, she took him back to her home. He was barely given time to notice his surroundings before she was rubbing his hair dry in a big rough towel, and then combing it, very gently and carefully. 'I love your hair,' she said. 'It's just like a very soft, expensive brush.'

It pleased her to look after him. When he suggested taking her out to supper, she refused, and after a long argument on the house telephone persuaded the restaurant to send up, early, a fabulous dinner. They ate with passion, occasionally breaking into snatches of stilted dialogue to impress the waiter, and gratefully relapsing, when the door closed, into easy and tender nonsense to suit themselves. Afterwards, they sat on the sofa together drinking their coffee.

And then they fell asleep. Paula gave a finicky yawn like a cat's, swung up her legs, and kicked a cushion to the floor. Andrew yawned in sympathy, suddenly overwhelmed by a longing to let go and forget and recover. He was just conscious of her pretty head leaning towards his shoulder, just conscious of her warm and pliant body enclosed in his arm, and then knew nothing more for several hours.

He came to himself gradually. His arm was stiff and empty. Paula was sitting up, rubbing the pins and needles out of her foot. She was completely awake and refreshed, smiling and full of mysterious plans. The next moment she had gone.

Standing by the fireplace, Andrew saw the room from a new angle. She had taken away the coffee tray, and except for the cushion on the floor, there was no mark of her existence, no ornament she had cherished from childhood, no book that she might have read. Even the sofa, stuffed with the latest rubber compound, showed no mark where her weight had rested.

The effect was most unpleasant. It was like a room in an exhibition, conveying no hint of character or personal interest. Certainly not of Paula's. Her room in the country, her own room since childhood, was cosy and untidy. She had told him she hated throwing things away and he had noticed a pile of shells on the chest of drawers, a dusty relic of some long-past holiday.

Nothing of that sort here. Andrew, passing through another stage of waking up, realized that his discomfort was due not only to the pathetic absence of Paula's taste, but to the threatening presence of her husband's. This was Reggie's room, cold, ostentatious and fashionable. An uprush of hatred and jealousy made him catch his breath, and then, receding, left him profoundly shaken. For the first time, he was seeing Reggie as an actual person, and one whom he had injured. He was shocked by the realization of what he had done. So short a while ago he would have believed it quite impossible.

When Paula came back, he was sitting in the middle of the room on a small round wooden stool which was normally used as a coffee table. He did not immediately look up. She was touched and rather frightened by his despondent attitude.

'I love you,' she said softly, pausing in the doorway. She was not certain if he heard her. With unusual self-command, for she was trembling with alarm, she came across the room, took a cigarette for herself out of a silver box and lit another for him. He took it without thinking.

'If you are remembering,' she said lightly, 'that I am somebody's wife, that isn't really your concern. He's left me to look after myself, and I must do it my way. It's not as if he really

cared about me. He doesn't know what I'm like, or what I want.'

'What do you want?' said Andrew. His glance, full of anxiety and confusion, was strangely reassuring. He was not, at any rate, likely to leave her easily or instantly. She sank down on the sofa, within reach, but did not yet touch him.

'In the first place,' she said, 'I want you to have some more sleep, and do well at your interview tomorrow. I've just been ringing up Marian to tell her you've got to stay for it. They seem to think Elizabeth is ill, and are quite relieved we didn't turn up. I said you would go straight on home, so as it turns out, you can stay here as long as you like.'

'I ought to go home.'

'Do you want to?'

'No.'

The unwilling fervour of his tone broke down her control. She was persuaded now in her own mind that her life held nothing of value, except for the love that had suddenly sprung up between them. She could not bear the thought that it might run to waste. When he looked up at her she was quietly weeping. 'It's only,' she said, 'that I don't want to be left alone.'

He knew then that the only unforgivable treachery was towards her. Kneeling at her feet, he was ashamed of his doubts, ashamed of the conscience which had made him speak so harshly.

'I shall stay,' he said, 'of course I must stay. Because I love you.'

22

FROM Paula's point of view, the service flat was a perfectly good imitation of the imaginary tree-house. It was a niche, a shelter, a place she had never particularly cared for, but now liked much better, because it was the place where she could be with Andrew. He, however, could not get over his dislike for it. Only in the bedroom, which breathed the same evasive scent that haunted her room at the cottage, could he forget, sometimes, that he was an intruder; and afterwards, the longing to take her away was stronger than ever.

This ambition could not be indulged, for it needed money, and so far he only had prospects. His job was assured. The Headmaster, a gaunt old man with pale long-sighted eyes and a deceptively vague manner, had liked him, and engaged him on the spot. So naturally he and Paula celebrated in style, and he was left with only a couple of pounds in the world, and his fare home.

'What does it matter?' said Paula. 'What's money? I've got some.'

'I like using my own,' said Andrew, smiling but determined. There was no argument, for Paula gave way at once. For the time being, any idiosyncrasy of his was delightful to her, if somewhat mysterious. He did not possess a hat; he hummed tunelessly while shaving; he gave money to barrel-organists but not to ladies with sprigs of white heather; and he liked the places she had visited so unwillingly on half-term holidays – the National Portrait Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Tower of London.

Her prejudice against them melted in his company. She had no sense for beauty of form, but she loved colour and was readily fascinated by ingenuity of design, in clothes or furniture or weapons. He seemed to help her to notice all the things she did enjoy, and kept up a flow of anecdotal commentary which made her forget that she had always found Art and Culture very

boring. The peaks of happiness, however, were a spangled evening at a fair on Clapham Common, and a hilarious pilgrimage to the Isle of Dogs (for the sake of the name) when for no particular reason everything seen or said appeared inordinately funny. They spent the whole afternoon in the little riverside gardens watching the shipping move up on the tide past the noble front of Greenwich Hospital, and falling into helpless laughter at a word or a look.

They used the car as a matter of course: but Paula, who liked to think she was helping to reduce their standard of living, secretly congratulated herself on saving bus fares. They had most of their meals in a rubbishy little café, built of slats and canvas, on a vacant lot round the corner. The proprietor and his wife were friendly and sluttish and talkative, and ready to produce egg and chips or sausage and mash at any time. Paula took a great fancy to the place, it was so exactly the opposite of all that Reggie approved. Andrew liked it, too, and enjoyed paying for their food at prices he could afford. It was mainly used by workmen, who regarded them as a newly married couple; and sometimes they almost believed that they were.

Once or twice, they thought of routing out Conway from his home, or Harry from his Hospital in East London; but they never did it. They were quite happy by themselves, and did not need friends. Andrew only just remembered to send a note of thanks to Elizabeth; and to say he was sorry she had been ill. But neither he nor Paula really believed in her illness. They took it for granted that most illnesses pass off in the night, like bad weather.

Elizabeth was actually much worse. It was difficult to interest her in anything, even in the necessary food and drink; and in a very few days she had grown noticeably thinner. The local doctor looked solemn, and prescribed, but in a roundabout way gave Edward to understand that he was quite at a loss.

Edward took up the whole burden himself. Marian, who intended to be kind and useful, did not have the knack. She

asked questions — shall I read to you? Would you like to go in the garden? — which Elizabeth could not answer. Edward, who offered an arm or opened a book and began, had more success. Over a stretch of time her wavering attention was occasionally caught, and the time passed not entirely empty.

On Edward, too, fell the whole burden of decision. Marian was all for action. The unreason of the whole situation irked her. 'There must be somebody who understands it. It's futile to go on as we are. Do you realize, Edward, that you've read eight chapters of *Middlemarch*, and she doesn't remember the name of the heroine? You must take her to a specialist. I know it will be difficult, but it ought to be done.'

'It will be such an ordeal for her,' said Edward.

'Will she notice it much?'

There was no means of knowing but their instinctive judgments were opposed. Marian, who thought of suffering as a form of consciousness, assumed that, in so far as Elizabeth let herself be treated as a thing, she shifted her unhappiness to the people who had to look after her. But Edward, although more severely tried by the business of putting her coat on or getting her upstairs, felt that being a thing was in itself a kind of torture compared with which his own troubles were trifling. As far as he could, he wanted to keep her away from situations which betrayed her state. The idea of an ordeal haunted him. He tried to explain to Marian more exactly what he meant.

'But if it's really so hard for her,' she said, 'why do we keep on bullying her to do the ordinary things? Wouldn't she be better if we left her lying in bed? She never wants to get up.'

This council of despair did not appeal to Edward either, but he did not quite know why. He only felt that there was still some virtue in the smaller ordeals that she could, with some help, compass. The problem was not to choose between a right way and a wrong way but to find a point of toleration between two intolerable extremes.

He remained equable and vigilant, but there were moments of

course when he doubted his own insight. Then, he clung to the saving thought that this crisis, like the previous one, would pass. His role was the unheroic one of keeping the way back into normal life open; and waiting in patience until she was ready to take it.

He knew his own capacities, but he forgot that he could not altogether keep out the rest of the world. The young man who drove the grocer's van turned up one evening with a sack of gas-masks. Finding no one in the house, he came round to the back.

'Sorry to interrupt your reading, sir, but this job's urgent. We may be needing them any minute. Good evening, ladies, sorry to butt in and all that, but the evening's my only time. It won't take long.'

He was already taking out the sizes he judged suitable. Edward, whose first impulse was to go indoors, was held back by the knowledge that Elizabeth hated being left; and was relieved to see that she was regarding with indifference these objects of horror. She looked at Edward as if she expected him to go on reading, even while Marian's mask was being fitted.

'It feels awkward,' said the young man, 'but you get the hang of it. Breathe natural, that's all.'

'Natural!' cried Marian, as with the mask off again, she took a deep breath of real air. 'It's abominable.' The young man flushed, as if at a personal criticism.

'Just a job,' he said. 'Got to be done.'

'Of course,' said Edward. But, with Elizabeth's eyes on him, he could not allow his own face to be turned into a brutal parody. 'Would you leave them?' he asked.

'It's not regulations,' said the young man. 'They're not a bit of use only if they fit right. And we've got to be ready any minute, any minute they tell us.'

'My wife hasn't been well,' said Edward. The young man, reluctantly, agreed to make an exception. Clearly he believed they were choosing the bigger risk.

For the moment, Edward was firm; the risk of gas in a small

country village was negligible; but afterwards, he admitted to himself that there were unpredictable risks against which he could provide no defence. He had been thinking in the wrong scale. He had been wrong to think there was no hurry. The great ordeal was imminent.

Elizabeth knew it, too. She made no comment at the time, except to ask if the box left on the table were hers; but hours later, on the way upstairs to bed, she referred to it in an oblique fashion. 'So many people,' she said, and then paused while she slowly mounted the second flight. At the door of her bedroom she completed it — 'Thinking about death.'

Edward recognized an echo of his own fears; but that was not the worst. He thought he caught also a note of longing and relief. It was this that forced to him make up his mind. Marian was quite right. Something would have to be done.

So Paula, woken too early by the telephone at her bedside, learned that they were coming to London, and would like to stay with her. She was not pleased. Andrew had talked several times of going home, but she did not want him to go yet.

'And Edward is such a fuss-pot,' she said to Andrew, 'he asked me twice if we had a rubber hot-water bottle.'

23

THE other passengers in the train were much struck by Andrew's cheerfulness. They were full of prophesies of doom – one alleged he had seen an anti-aircraft gun sink through the pavement. 'Just the one gun we had for that part of London, and there was nothing to hold it.' Another had been digging trenches – 'Better than nothing, I suppose, but not much.' An elderly woman had a crippled nephew who had been evacuated to the country, poor little mite. They all took it for granted that the time had come.

Andrew almost hoped it had. 'We should have taken the initiative sooner,' he said. There was a gasp of astonishment. When? Where? How? He reminded them of Abyssinia and Spain. For years we had been telling everyone that we could be trusted to give way at the last minute. It was a few seconds before his meaning was taken; then the bewildered silence changed to a silence of disapproval. It was broken by the woman.

'That Hitler's been getting himself ready for years and years. He's just waiting to give the word. And then we're for it. Little children and all.'

'I still think he only wants to get what he can without fighting,' said Andrew obstinately, 'and we're letting him get away with it.'

'We've got to be realistic,' said one of the men, 'we've got to trust the people in the know. We're a small country after all. We haven't the weapons, we can't keep ourselves fed for more than a week. It stands to reason we've got to play for time. It's all very well you lads talking big, but I was in the last, and you'll soon be bellyaching, just like we did.'

Andrew shook his head, smiling. It was hopeless talking. They were all convinced that Hitler was about to attack; and believed that only a miracle of some sort could stop him. Andrew wanted to ask if they had ever heard of a miracle being worked

by moaning and cringing; but checked himself. He was in no mood to be set right, at enormous length, by these timid old fogies. He wanted to think.

He was feeling wonderfully vigorous and confident. He wanted to be a party to calling the big bluff; and if it came to a fight, well then he was ready to do the fighting. He was still smiling as he gazed out of the window. One of the men looked cautiously over his paper. He was inclined to doubt the sanity of someone who still found something to smile about.

Andrew, too, was surprised at himself. The parting with Paula had been sad and difficult. They did not expect to see each other for some time. He had got to settle in his new job; Reggie would be sailing for home in a few days; and in a few hours Paula would be busy coping with Edward and Elizabeth. The idyll was over; time was moving on again.

Andrew did not admit to a feeling of relief; but he did know he was glad to be out of the flat. In a vague way, he assumed that at some uncertain time, when he was earning a proper living and when Paula had somehow slipped out of Reggie's clutches, they could meet on some other terms. He did not care to be any more precise. He was still in love, and loved; pleased with himself, and incapable of misgiving about *her*. All that was unpromising and discreditable in their relationship clung about the thought of the place.

He was not yet aware of the resolution it had taken to preserve this unnatural dichotomy. There had been dangerous moments. 'You mustn't worry about the porters,' she had said, 'this place is a rabbit-warren, nobody notices anything. Besides, we often have visitors.' He had instantly closed his mind to the disagreeable idea of gossip, and to the more painful truth that gossip was a triviality compared with other issues too grave to be brought to the surface. His own condition of dependence, for instance, was a wretched business in itself. But it was disguised by the fact that she was happy to leave all day-to-day arrangements in his hands. He could not help discovering that she was startlingly

ignorant, but imagined he had awakened an eager natural taste; and he noticed with particular tenderness that she had no idea how to get about London and was a perfect fool about crossing streets.

Fending off doubts sucks up a great deal of energy. As he travelled further and further away from the flat, which had become a symbol of doubt, his energies expanded with extraordinary vigour. For a while, enjoying a sense of physical well-being, he watched the passing landscape with delight. Then he borrowed in turn all the available papers and set himself to catch up with the news. When that was accomplished, a frantic longing for movement drove him into the corridor where he could stretch and fidget. His impatient thoughts darted here and there. He tried to decide what books he should take away with him; wondered how his friends were making out, whether Conway had come to terms with his new landlady, and whether Ralph had really done any work. He felt sure that this time he would get on better with his father; worked out how much money he would need for clothes and pocket money, and how it could be paid back in instalments over six months; and planned to take Maurice for some long bike rides. He looked forward to getting home with keen anticipation, and was only troubled about fitting in everything he wanted to do.

Paula was not so happy. Since Elizabeth appeared prostrated by her journey, the visit to the specialist was postponed for a couple of days, and the delay weighed heavily on everyone. Paula tried to be a good hostess, but she had no talent for running an invalid household. However much time she spent parleying with the restaurant the meals still looked pretentious, but she did not know how to cook anything herself. Edward, who could turn his hand to any practical job, made her feel incompetent, and Elizabeth frightened her.

She wanted to be alone with her own thoughts. She could have tolerated, perhaps, a girl-friend of her own age who was prepared to listen and admire and agree; but continual small

demands, which interrupted but did not distract her, made her nervous and listless.

She recovered her spirits only when she shut herself in her own room and composed loving little notes to Andrew, or worked on the present she was going to send him for a keepsake. This consisted of a small wooden box with a view of Dieppe (1860) on the lid, which she was fitting up as a hussif. Between midnight and three in the morning, she took endless pains arranging and re-arranging pins, needles, darning wool and shirt buttons in graded sizes; and sticking on the inside of the lid a silhouette of herself which some gifted amateur had once done at a Garden Fête. She enjoyed the feeling that she was sending him out, properly equipped, into the world.

His first letter came just after she had dispatched the parcel. The opening sentences made her tremble with pleasure, but as she read on, sheet after sheet, the world became oppressively actual. Andrew was obviously having quite a good time without her. Because he felt less involved, and more confident in himself, his relations with his family had become more straightforward and comfortable. Even his father seemed to recognize that he was now grown up, and welcomed the presence of another man in the house, with whom he could discuss politics and the technical problems of Civil Defence.

These things were no more than implied in his spirited account of what he was doing, but it was enough to make Paula feel that she was getting a meagre share of his attention. What did it matter to her if Aunt Maud had signed on as Air Raid Warden? Or if Maurice had fitted a three-speed gear on his bicycle?

The next page began better. In a few clumsier sentences, Andrew tried to say how wonderful it had been for him . . . he had never imagined . . . nothing would ever come up to it. He made several happy references to the places they had visited — the Whispering Gallery, the George in Southwark, Ken Wood and the Docks. Then he went on to say how eager Maurice had been to hear all the details of their explorations. 'I've promised

him a trip to London in the Christmas holidays. It ought to be great fun taking him round.'

But not for me, thought Paula. I shall be back in the old treadmill, with Reggie bossing me about. She imagined he had already set out for home, and the thought of him creeping towards her over the globe made her want to run away and hide. But she had nowhere to run. She was not aware that she was jealous of Elizabeth, but she still felt barred from the cottage, because nobody would want her there just now. She was ashamed of appealing to the school-friends who sometimes sent her Christmas cards; and however ardently she indulged the dream of throwing in her lot with Andrew, she could not get it to look like a practical plan. In two days, he told her, he was to travel down to the School with a bunch of little boys. Paula managed an unwilling smile as she imagined an elopement tangled up in such an equipage.

She was by herself, for Edward had at last taken Elizabeth to Harley Street. She lay down on her bed and let herself drift into a trance of self-pity. All ways of escape were closed, and she saw herself bound for life to a man who no longer meant anything to her.

This conclusion was natural enough, but largely false. She no longer believed that she was in love with Reggie, but nothing had happened to change the long-established habit of emotional dependence. She thought it was sorrow made her cry, but it was really terror and confusion. She dreaded Reggie's disapproval. After all, he was the only person on earth who had ever told her distinctly what she ought to do.

If only Andrew were older, she thought; but as soon as she tried to imagine him confidently settled in life she did not like him so much. She roused herself to re-read his letter, and this time found it more appealing. It was so obvious that he had wanted to tell her everything, collected all sorts of bits and pieces for her, just as she had collected needles and buttons for him. She no longer envied his good spirits, and was touched by the

vivid description of how he had helped Maurice to change his back wheel. She could just see him pretending to help and actually very much enjoying doing it all himself.

She was sorry now she had cried when he left. He was so very young, it hardly seemed fair. She wished she had been able to behave more in the style of a great lady, graciously content to kiss and part, prepared to cherish in secret the lovely memory of a brief and glorious episode. The idea charmed her more and more. That was how it should have been; and perhaps even now it was not too late. If only she could see him again, soon, it might still be possible to re-form past events in a fashion that brought out their full romantic beauty and at the same time made it very much easier to face Reggie.

'I have given him up,' she said, aloud, in calm yet mournful tones. The sound of her own voice made her regret that she had no confidant. It was hard having to keep everything to herself. She had never felt in greater need of sympathy, and she had no reason to fear advice when she was so clearly doing right.

She began a letter to Andrew, and tore it to little pieces. She could not find the right words for all she wanted to say, her feelings were so mixed and contradictory.

24

ELIZABETH appeared very much better that day, and Edward had great hopes that the visit to the specialist would turn out merely an expensive method of dissipating his fears. He sat in the waiting-room, turning over the pages of *Punch*, feeling almost happy. Before his dismissal, he had seen that Elizabeth did not seem to have too much difficulty about answering the doctor's preliminary questions, and he felt convinced she would make a good impression.

When at last he was recalled, it was a slight disappointment to find that he was not taken back to the consulting-room, but to a small ante-room, where the doctor awaited him alone. Edward was invited to sit down. The doctor removed his twinkling glasses, clasped his fingers, and appeared ready for a long confidential chat.

'I can relieve your mind on one point,' he said, 'there is no question of certification.'

Edward would hardly have been more shocked if he had said exactly the opposite. The whole issue was so unexpected and so painful. The doctor was surprised that he gave no immediate response, for he had formed a good opinion of him at first glance and did not think him the type whose chief concern is to get their relatives shut up and off their hands. He noticed, however, that he looked frail, and concluded that the whole situation might have been a little much for him. His notes on the case already contained one observation—'Elderly husband—physique poor'—which was relevant too. He liked to think that he took full account of the family situation before giving his advice.

Edward had the greatest difficulty in picking up the thread. The distinction between neurosis and psychosis did not seem to the point. He interrupted to ask about the possibilities of treatment. The doctor mentioned insulin shock, but did not speci-

fically recommend it — only if the condition should become more severe or unduly protracted.

'You think there is a danger of that?' said Edward.

'It is hard to tell. These things take their course. She may be well again in a week, or it may take much longer. The great thing is to have her well looked after and under proper observation. I can recommend a private nursing home, where I can keep an eye on her myself. . . .'

Edward had a vision of bare walls, high beds, arrogant and off-hand nurses; and of Elizabeth vainly seeking a familiar object or a friendly hand. 'I think she would be happier at home,' he said.

The doctor spoke of the benefits of professional nursing. Edward remained obstinate. 'I can look after her very well,' he said.

'One has to guard against certain risks,' said the doctor. Edward learned that in cases of this sort there was always a possibility of suicide.

He still refused to commit himself before he had talked to Elizabeth. But he promised to consider most carefully the great advantages of the nursing home, and the great responsibility he took upon himself if he did not send her there.

Paula did not hear them coming back. The carpet, like thick moss, muffled the sound of footsteps, and her room, with an almost sound proof door, was at the end of a long corridor. Edward took Elizabeth straight into the big room, settled her on the sofa, and drew up a chair for himself. With her hand in his, he explained gently that she needed a real rest, and did his best to describe the nursing home in the doctor's own laudatory terms. Elizabeth nodded once or twice, as if to show that she had heard all this before, and not to express any sort of agreement. More than anything, she seemed to be puzzled. When he had finished she only said: 'But why?' Edward repeated his arguments, of necessity leaving out the best one. 'I don't understand,' she said.

She looked unhappy, but above all it was her expression of bewilderment and suspicion which touched Edward to the heart. They had lived so many years in mutual understanding, and now he felt he was failing her. 'I don't like it,' she said, withdrawing her hand.

At that moment Paula, searching for a stamp, interrupted them. She asked how they had got on. Elizabeth's trembling hands made a small, empty gesture; Edward rose to his feet.

'I am taking her home tomorrow,' he said firmly, 'but I must send the doctor a note. Will you stay with her, Paula?'

Paula followed him with her eyes as he left the room. It suddenly struck her that perhaps he could set her troubled mind in order. With the prospect of a prop to lean on, she gained a little energy for looking outside herself. She found Elizabeth another cushion, offered her tea, handed her a magazine. Elizabeth let it drop on to her lap.

'I don't want anything, thank you. I would rather be left alone.'

Paula did not think of questioning this plain statement. She had tried to be useful but it was no good. She supposed she was an ineffective person, prone to stupid mistakes, and an obvious victim for the blows of fate. Feeling isolated, ignorant and unloved, she again thought of Edward. The knowledge that he was alone and available tugged at her; and finally she went to look for him.

If he had given her the chance, she would probably have told him everything, discarding the transparent fiction of a friend in trouble, and the idealized version of her own story which was all feeling and no fact. Edward would have been shocked, but not necessarily surprised. His natural kindness and his real concern for her would have compelled him to treat her seriously. With a little intelligent sympathy, she might have reached a better understanding of her own inner conflict; and would almost certainly have been reminded that if she had really broken off relations with Andrew it was foolish to see him again quite so soon.

All this is conjecture. Edward's first thought was that Elizabeth needed him. When Paula began to explain, diffidently and vaguely, that she herself wanted to talk to him about something quite different, his own anxieties suddenly flared up in a burst of anger. 'Surely you could have stayed with her for a minute or two,' he said, 'or do you never think about anyone except yourself?'

Paula, who had never seen him angry before, was horrified. She felt herself completely abandoned, with no one to turn to. She wrote a despairing letter to Andrew, imploring him to come up to London for one last night.

Such a request could only be refused by someone very cautious or cold-hearted; not by Andrew. The mere sight of her writing on an envelope made him ache with longing.

25

REGGIE very much liked the atmosphere of a luxury liner. It provided a small, temporary world where money counted, and he could whistle up a circle of impromptu friends who did not know too much about him. A sea voyage, he was wont to say, is the only way I ever get a real holiday. He meant that it gave him pleasure without responsibility, stylish surroundings for eating, drinking and betting, women in their smartest clothes who would go to any lengths to avoid boredom, and bevies of attendants whose cynicism made them all the more evident and obliging. It is true of course that the cabin class usually includes a few standoffish characters who tend to pick and choose; but they are properly punished, as soon as good fellowship is established amongst the rest, by being left to themselves.

It was with great regret, therefore, that Reggie changed his plans and came home by air. His motives are irrelevant and too tortuous to be described in detail, but it is worth mentioning the two main influences, which it is convenient to call the stick and the carrot. The stick was a woman, travelling by boat, who had slapped Reggie's face in Valparaiso and the carrot was a poor weed of a metallurgist, travelling by air, with whom Reggie wished to arrange a chance meeting in order to bribe him out of one company and into another. The imminence of war did not affect him either way, because he did not believe in it. If he had, the probability is that he would have taken the third alternative, and put off his journey altogether, until he had sized up how things were working out.

The first stage of the flight from Rio was choppy. Reggie had a wretched hangover, and felt no better after being violently sick. The metallurgist, in spite of his stooping frame and his yellow skin, was cheerful and self-contained. He commiserated over Reggie's first spasm.

'What did you say?' asked Reggie, raising his veined bulging eyes.

'I said, jolly bad luck.' He knew better than to say it again. For the next half-hour, he concentrated on the latest German methods for hardening steel.

It was a poor opening. But Reggie recovered quickly as soon as they ran into better weather, and embarked on conversation. Observing that his companion was reading a technical paper he mentioned the value of scientific work, hoped that it would in time acquire a better status, and explained that the firm in which he was interested was offering quite exceptional rates of pay for exceptional people. The metallurgist remarked that he himself had always been very fairly treated; from which Reggie concluded that the salary he had to over-bid was higher than he'd thought. That did not seriously bother him, for he was satisfied that this man's experience was worth a high price; but he did find it difficult, with very little encouragement, to keep the talk moving at all. It became intermittent. Reggie took snatches of sleep, and the metallurgist, much relieved, got on with his reading.

He believed that Reggie, like the child in the seat behind who persistently breathed down his neck, was suffering from boredom, most probably due to a lack of any keen practical interest. He was sorry for him, in a rather detached way; but he did not want to waste time listening to him.

Through several skirmishes, Reggie crept further and further into the open. He could not make out if his intended victim was extremely wily or extremely dense. At last, thoroughly exasperated, and conscious that he himself was not at the top of his form, he made what almost amounted to an offer.

The metallurgist looked very startled, for it was nearly double what he was getting. A quick calculation convinced him that either the firm was up to no good or else that its financial control was so cock-eyed that it would soon be down the drain — or possibly both. He shook his head, and gave vent to his mixed

feelings of embarrassment and scepticism in a crow of laughter. The next day he changed his seat. His place was taken by a taciturn old man who lent Reggie some paper-covered tracts and then left him to them.

One way and another, Reggie's journey was extremely wretched. The weather over the South Atlantic was tolerable, but the third day's flight, from Africa northwards, was unpleasantly bumpy. He was bilious, although not actually sick; and he was disagreeably startled, several times, by a clockwork mouse shooting out between his legs. He arrived in a miserable temper, started an argument with the custom's officer and so got himself charged the maximum duty on a number of small items, and missed the chance of ringing up Paula, because he had contrived to be first in the queue and was then, through the ill-will of others, the last out of it.

He thought it quite likely that Paula would be away, and he did not much care. He had lately begun to think of her as a bit of a disappointment. She had no gift for being one of a crowd, and he wanted some sort of cheerful party to take away the taste of the journey – men who could be impressed by hints of big successes, and women who were lively as well as pretty. After a party of course it was nice to go home with Paula, one felt a bit more in the right mood. But he wasn't up to a rousing welcome in the late afternoon; not on a thundery day, battered by a long flight with tiresome people.

Reggie was feeling his age. The porter who carried up his luggage dumped it in the hallway, and vanished. Why the hell doesn't he take it straight through? thought Reggie, and was about to let out a yell to fetch him back, when he was distracted by the sight of Paula's keys lying on the table. How often have I told her? he thought, and she leaves them lying just where anyone could pick them up and put them in his pocket.

He was the only person who had ever done so. He did it again, planning to confront her with them, and strode along the passage, breathing heavily and flushed with exasperation.

Perhaps he already felt some sort of warning. It was certainly damned odd the way that fellow had made himself scarce without waiting for a tip; and it was not like Paula to do her hair or change her clothes with the door shut. Reggie flung it open with an angry flourish, and surveyed the room.

It was in great disorder. Paula's things were scattered about the floor, and Andrew's, laid more neatly over the back of a chair, were yet more conspicuously out of place. Reggie drew a hissing breath and turned his eyes slowly to the centre of the scene, his mind already forming the stereotyped and vulgar phrase, 'the couple on the bed'.

For a few seconds, nobody quite grasped what had happened. Paula and Andrew looked very like two children caught at a midnight feast, whose astonishment and alarm might at any moment tip over into giggles. In a silence that seemed eternal, the brightness left their faces. Reggie heard his heart thumping. He understood that this was not just a couple on the bed but his wife and her lover.

The first movement was as difficult as shifting an enormous weight. After that, it became quite easy. Reggie, although large, was not particularly powerful, but on this occasion the force of his rage controlled his unwieldy body. He took three long strides across the room, reached out with his massive hand and took a firm grip of Andrew's springy hair, swung his head forward and brought it back with brutal violence against the bedhead.

His original impulse was entirely murderous; he wanted to knock the boy right out. But he was checked by the sight of Andrew's naked shoulders, revealed as the sheet slipped back. The fine, light moulding of the bone, the polished skin, conveyed so horrible a sense of outrage that he drew back, throwing down the battered head as if it had been a lump of maggoty meat. The feeling of thick living hair remained against his palm. With an expression of great disgust, he made as if to rub it off. At last he spoke.

'You'd better get up and get your clothes on. You, too, Paula. I'll talk to you then. I haven't finished with you, either of you. Come on, Paula, get moving, it's not a bit of use hiding under the bedclothes, it's too late in the day to pretend you're one of the housemaids or a drab off the street corner.'

He flung the last words over his shoulder as he left the room. Paula poked out a pale and stricken face.

'Did he hurt you, Andrew? It made the most fearful bang.'

Andrew was not conscious of pain. He was surprised to feel a big swelling on the back of his head, and attributed his dizziness to the moral predicament. His mind rocked between shame and guilt on his own account, and anxiety for Paula; between hatred for this blundering beast she had for a husband, and contempt for himself. Dominating everything, was a sense of hopeless inadequacy.

'I'm all right,' he said.

'I'm terribly sorry,' said Paula, her voice shaking. The words had a light and tinny ring, like toy coins.

'I must get you out of this,' said Andrew. He was already in shirt and trousers, and hunting for his second sock. As he straightened his back, everything turned blue and misty in front of his eyes, and he had to sit down on the end of the bed. Paula, who had not yet moved, kept her eyes fixed on him, in a last attempt, against all the evidence, to see him as a man who could dominate events.

The evidence was too strong. He put his head in his hands, struggling to regain at least some physical balance; and then, in a cautious fashion, put on his socks and shoes.

'Why don't we just vanish?' said Paula. 'We could get down the fire-escape.'

Andrew gave a savage tug at his tie. 'I mean it,' said Paula. It was as if she had uttered the shout that starts the avalanche, opening up new vistas of terror and confusion. A gust of rage, turned for the first time against her, held him in sullen silence. He dared not risk a second shout, and waited, mechanically

combing his hair, until he could trust himself to speak calmly. Then he went over to her and took her hand.

'We shall have to see it through,' he said.

'I can't.'

'My darling, we must tell him what we mean to do.'

'I don't know.'

He stroked her wrist. Even now, it was possible to waken in their tired nerves a ghostly echo of trust and understanding. But they got no help from it.

'What can we do?' said Paula, 'Reggie is going to do something to us. I don't want to know what it is.'

Andrew got up. It was a relief to find that the giddiness was passing off.

'The sooner we know, the better,' he said. 'I'll go and talk to him first.'

26

REGGIE was standing in a commanding position by the mantelpiece. He waved Andrew to a chair, and pointed to a tumbler on the table beside it.

'It's the last drink you'll get in this house, but there it is. I'm an upholder of the good old-fashioned conventions and I don't drink alone.'

Andrew shook his head. The brave words he meant to pronounce were choked back before Reggie's cold stare and bantering voice. The conflict had been shifted on to new ground, where his resolution instantly deteriorated to the trifling gesture of refusing a drink. Reggie smiled, genial as a cat with a mouse, and rocked on his heels.

'Well,' he said, 'it was a fair cop.'

'I love her,' said Andrew, flinging out the one possible plea. Reggie looked at him reflectively.

'You mean, it wasn't one of those sudden impulses? It's been going on some time?'

'Yes.'

'Not a pretty story, is it?'

'No, but — '

'Yes?' Reggie remained gentle and attentive, conscious of his own power. After a short interval alone, he was quite able to subdue his immediate savage response to insult and deprivation. He had received a wound that would never quite heal over; but for the moment he could concentrate on the tactics of the situation, for it was of a type, after all, which normally he much enjoyed. He poured himself another drink, and cast a sceptical eye on Andrew's untouched glass.

Andrew was tempted to snatch the initiative and ask Reggie what sort of a husband he thought he was. Pompous, negligent, cruel, with flabby muscles buried in unseemly fat and a skull that shone like a door-knob. He was prevented, not by fear or

by the weakness which came over him whenever he moved his head, but by an unexpected feeling of pity. He was not capable of holding up a mirror to anyone so horribly unattractive.

This was Paula's husband. Andrew leaped to the conclusion that the marriage was over and finished. His own lack of money or prospects no longer seemed important, set against the pain and damage of a monstrous union. His flesh crept at the thought of it; and his uneasy conscience snatched at the conviction that there lay all blame for the weakness and subterfuge that had lately enraged him.

'She's not happy,' he said, 'I want to take her away and look after her.'

'You haven't made much of a success of it so far,' said Reggie. A slight alteration in his expression made Andrew aware that he had taken a false step. He had no idea what it was, until he noticed that there was a glass in his hand and a taste of whisky in his mouth. Reggie pressed home his advantage.

'Up till now,' he said, 'you have looked after her at my expense. That's natural enough I suppose. I don't know you but my impression is that you're hardly out of school and haven't much behind you. So no doubt it's convenient for you to occupy my house and eat my food.' He broke off to reach for the cigarette box and, finding it empty, took out his case, which he offered with a wide sweep of the arm. 'Come on, take one. I'd sooner give it you. I was relieved to find that you didn't care for cigars.'

Andrew did not move. At a stroke, Reggie had deprived him of all capacity except for tasting unsuspected depths of wretchedness. The justice of the charge, however garbled, was still unanswerable. Reggie lit his own cigarette and blew a neat smoke-ring.

'So Paula wants to run off with you?'

'Yes, that is . . . '

'It could be managed,' said Reggie blandly, having taken full

note of Andrew's hesitation, 'I've no particular prejudice against acting like a gentleman. If it meets the case, that is; and there's where you haven't altogether convinced me. While you've enjoyed these easy circumstances, it's quite likely you thought she was fond of you . . . '

'She told me so.'

Reggie put his hand over his eyes. The thrust he had invited struck home. For a moment, he regretted his choice of weapons. The satisfaction of reducing an enemy to psychic impotence is a poor thing compared with the pleasure of tearing him limb from limb. There was a dangerous gleam in his eye when he next spoke.

'It strikes me I've done about enough for you. If Paula leaves me I shall start proceedings at once. And don't forget, she hasn't a penny of her own.'

'That doesn't make any difference.'

'How old are you?'

'Twenty-one.'

'I should have guessed younger. You've put me in a very awkward position, you know. Even if Paula hasn't learned how to behave herself, I can't let her mess up her life for good and all without lifting a finger. What have you done with her anyway? It's about time I heard what she's got to say.'

'She was just coming.'

'I've often heard that before, and I know what it means. I'd better hurry her up. Then we'll all know a bit better where we stand.'

'I've told you nothing but the truth.'

'Very likely, but not much of it. Besides,' Reggie paused on his way across the room, 'you have to remember that I've known Paula a lot longer than you have, and it's possible I know her better.'

Andrew's diminished personality, enfeebled by guilt and doubt and by a shattering blow on the head, had drawn some support throughout this ordeal from the notion that Reggie was

an entirely odious and despicable character, blown up to impressive size by arrogance and wealth. But at this moment, he appeared as the ordinary, puzzled family man, struggling to do his limited best with the whims and foibles of an unaccountable wife. Andrew felt even smaller.

27

HUMAN affairs seldom keep the classical rules. It is easy to fix a mask of tragedy on one side of the stage and a mask of comedy on the other; but in life the province of the Muses is not distinct. At times of gravest tension a farcical element, inherent in the very nature of an aspiring species, is always ready to break out. The self-seeking zeal of a dumb animal — a swallow or a vole or a tiger — does not make it ridiculous; but man, reaching for the moon, becomes a figure of fun when his braces snap.

Andrew has already had to put his socks on in very trying conditions when he would have wished to concentrate on essentials. Reggie has done rather better. No one has hit him, the carpet has not been pulled out from under his feet, and although his way of dealing with things is not agreeable, he has preserved a style of some sort. Considering the provocation, this is a matter for self-congratulation. He has succeeded in keeping the initiative, and when he has handed out enough punishment, he is nicely set for arranging a settlement on his own terms.

He was caught short by the discovery that Paula had disappeared. Andrew heard doors banging and ragged shouts. He got up, uncertain whether or not he should join in.

Reggie reappeared with a very red face. 'Where's she got to?'

'She was there just now.'

'Well, she's gone.' Reggie's hand hesitated over the telephone. 'I wonder if the porter noticed which way she went.'

'Was the window open?' asked Andrew.

'The window?' said Reggie.

The two of them made an awkward and unpractised team. But Paula had certainly vanished and they were presented with an unwelcome common interest. It was imperative to find her. Reggie made no move to stop Andrew going to the bedroom;

and indeed, after a moment's hesitation, followed him into it. The window had been thrown right up

'She must have gone down the fire-escape,' said Andrew.

Reggie stood with his hands dangling, the picture of a man at a loss. 'I ought to have known,' he said. Andrew would have liked to think that he was merely upset by being outwitted, but his face showed genuine anxiety. Andrew, too, was frightened. He had last seen Paula in a mood that might be caught by any desperate notion.

'Get out, can't you,' said Reggie suddenly. 'What are you hanging about for? She'll turn up again in her own time. I've had about enough of this. Yes, all right, take your things, but don't dawdle. Get on with it, for God's sake. I'm through.'

Andrew had left his trunk at the station and only had a small case. Reggie stayed to watch the packing, rather as if he were keeping an eye on Paula's ivory-backed brushes; but he did allow Andrew to go by himself to fetch his razor from the bath-room. It was the best opportunity that offered for reflection, and Andrew did linger on purpose, trying to see a little more clearly what he had to do and what he might expect.

The larger issues were obscure. He thought about Paula, imagined her standing alone in the bedroom, her head tilted like a wren, her scattered wits beating about for a way of escape. She would open the window, run down the iron staircase, with no thought in her head beyond the urgency of getting away. Having reached the side-street, she would let her feet take her... Of course, that was the way she must have turned. She had gone to the café.

His relief was mixed with a feeling of a lower kind. It was splendid to be one move ahead of Reggie, and to get a chance of talking to Paula alone. He finished his packing at high speed, with Reggie observing every movement. They were both longing to be rid of each other.

They did not say goodbye. Andrew, his case in one hand and his mackintosh on his shoulder, returned Reggie's stare in silence. He had nothing more to say.

But then Reggie, at one sweep, forgetting his dignity and his contempt for the interloper in the nagging pain of his own miserable condition, threw everything into reverse.

'How soon,' he said, 'ought I to inform the police?'

He had not intended to ask Andrew's advice. The words came out against his will. But they forced Andrew to abandon his purpose.

'There's no need,' he said grudgingly. 'I think I know where she is.'

Thus it was that they were compelled to walk through the streets together, from the brisk, rich thoroughfare to the slum streets huddling behind it. Reggie's face lengthened at this new evidence of a disorderly life, but he made no comment – except on the horrible stench from a fishmonger's dustbin.

The café was full. They did not at first see Paula, until the proprietoress leaned over the counter at the back and called out to her, 'Here's your husband coming, love.'

She referred, naturally, to Andrew; but naturally it was Reggie who led the way between the tables.

'Come on, I'm taking you home.'

'I want to stay here. I don't want to talk to you.'

Reggie edged his way round the table and sat down opposite. Andrew, meanwhile, was finding a nook for his case, and then got involved with the proprietoress who had beckoned him over for a whisper in the ear.

'She's not herself, I can see that. I made her a hot strong cup of tea and she hasn't hardly touched it. You get her to drink it up and then make her have a bit of a lay-down.'

Andrew was well aware that he was being watched from a distance. 'There he is,' said Reggie, 'what about him? It's up to you.'

'I don't want to speak to either of you ever again.'

'You can't stay here all your life. Where else could you go? Where does he live, this lad, and what's his job?'

'He's a schoolmaster. He's going to live in the school.'

Reggie raised his eyebrows. 'Looks awkward,' he said. He had intended to destroy his rival by a display of superior force but now a better plan was forming. Paula herself should be the agent of destruction. He signalled to Andrew to bring over two cups of tea, and pulled out the chair beside him.

Andrew wished he could catch Paula's eye, for surely he could find some meaning in the way she looked. But she kept her head bent, unwilling to be drawn into any communication with anyone.

'Are these cups or flower-pots?' said Reggie. Andrew gave a nervous laugh. Paula clasped her hands round her cup as if to protect it. 'Well,' Reggie went on, 'I've talked to your young man. I don't know his name by the way, not that it matters. He seems to have some big ideas.'

'Please, Reggie, tell us straight out what you're going to do to us.'

'My dear girl, I can't do anything. The best offer I can make is to walk right out of your life and leave you to it. I gather you've made some plans.'

'Listen, Paula,' said Andrew, 'you could always go to the cottage, while I look round and try to fix up something.'

'I don't think that plan's any good.' She had summoned up courage now to look at Reggie, and seemed unable to look away. Andrew was out in a corner, unnoticed.

'Try and look at it from my point of view,' said Reggie, 'I can't do with a wife who tells me she's in love with another chap.'

'I never told you that.'

'That's his story, for what it's worth.'

'It's not true any longer. I'm not in love with anyone. It's all been a mistake, always.'

'I can see that. You shouldn't ever have married.'

'I couldn't help it. Please, Reggie . . .' She stretched her hand out. He gave it an absent-minded pat, and let it fall back on the table. Andrew was roused to a final effort.

'Paula, my darling. . . .'

'It's no use, Andrew. I want to stay with Reggie – if he will let me.'

Andrew went out alone into the brilliant evening. It was some time before he noticed an unusual animation in the streets. Excited groups, talking and laughing, were gathering at the news stands. He bought a paper, and learned that Mr. Chamberlain was back from Munich, with the answer to prayer in his pocket.

He walked over towards Paddington, looking for a cheap hotel. Everywhere, people were reeling and gesticulating like drunkards, their faces contorted with a senseless joy. He felt himself a creature of a dark, contemptible world, ruled by fear and greed and ignorance, betrayed by the illusion of peace and the illusion of love.

28

'So we've staved it off,' said Mark. 'That's all.'

He did not give Anne any more formal welcome. The surprise he might have felt at finding her reading on his window-seat so early in the morning was swamped by more urgent emotions. He had been visiting the owner of a radio, and the spoken word, following close on the morning newspapers, affected him like repeated blows on the solar plexus.

'And it's all been done,' said Anne bitterly, 'by selling out on our friends. I used to think of the Czechs as decent middle class people with an impossible language. But now I think of them as friends. I don't see much chance of persuading them it's all for the best. Even if we can persuade ourselves. Do you think they have any hope of surviving?'

'They're supposed to understand the Germans.'

'Better than we do, probably. We're such suckers for wolves in sheep's clothing. We even get mesmerized into dressing up as lambs ourselves, which isn't at all suitable. Or is it?'

'We don't seem to have made up our minds.'

'By the time we do, we shall have lost all our friends. And at this rate most of them will be dead.'

Anne's dominating feeling was of shame, not fear. She had little doubt that she would be the first to bolt under the table when a bomb dropped, but it was not her nature to panic beforehand. For the moment, her imagination ran on in an impersonal and detached way. 'And then it will be our turn,' she added.

'It doesn't bear thinking of,' said Mark curtly. The thought of death, which had lately pressed so closely on us all, made him shrink and tremble. He had been trained to face facts, but not to contemplate mysteries.

'All these young men . . .' he began; and paused, stricken. Anne, turning to him, was brought into a new orbit by his doomed attitude and pallid face. She remembered that the pur-

pose of the visit had been to 'see that he was all right'. Poor Mark, it was sad for him to be ugly in a small way, to feel his lively kindness negligently received, and to mourn over the fate of those who could forget him so easily. . . .

'My two brothers were killed in 1916,' he said, 'almost on the same day. No one told me, I found out from reading the telegrams, and the look on people's faces. I went and messed about with a tank I was fixing up. And then my father and my uncle came out into the yard. I suppose they couldn't stand the atmosphere indoors. It was a very bright day, I remember, and my uncle's shadow on the wall had a queer look, like Mr. Punch. My father took a pencil out of his pocket, and drew in the outline, and then turned my uncle round to look at it. They both laughed like mad, and then they fetched me over and I laughed too. Funny how one remembers that sort of thing. But you can't be surprised that I was as pleased as anyone last night.'

'So was I. It's a relief, really, to be able to admit it. I'm glad I came to see you, though I really ought to be buying groceries and changing library books.'

'Don't go. Not yet.'

'I shall have to, my dear, if you go on walking up and down like a caged lion; it makes me feel in the way. And if you sat down, you'd have a much better chance of getting your pipe lit.'

He did as he was told, with a slight air of relaxation. His hand was steadier as he held the match to his pipe, and some colour came back to his cheeks.

'What have you been reading?'

'Two interesting and important books, two versions of life that couldn't be more different.' She picked them up, and balanced them in her two hands, as if she were weighing them on a scales. '*The Death of the Heart*, by Elizabeth Bowen; and *Brighton Rock*, by Graham Greene. Civilization and Savagery. The worm in the bud on my right, and the harrowing of hell on my left. I wish I knew which way we were going to turn. These seem to be the choices for literature — to get more and more

subtle or more and more brutal. It must be a symptom; but I still think I see a lot of people about who are neither wraiths nor monsters. And some of them are simply good in a plain way.'

'Not many, I fancy.'

Anne smiled. 'At least one. You don't know him, but his wife, who's a friend of mine, is having some sort of mental illness, and he is looking after her. He stays with her all the time – someone told him she might try to kill herself – and she hardly talks to him. He puts her in a chair alongside while he digs the garden and if she starts crying, in the slack sort of way that seems to be part of the disease, he just goes on digging, because that seems to soothe her better than fussing. Nobody even knows how long it's likely to last, but he is rather hopeful, and never even admits that it wears him out, too. I wonder at such fortitude. It makes me feel puny and selfish.'

'And she?'

'I haven't seen her. She was angry with me, about something that doesn't matter, just before she fell ill; and they don't want me there. I should like to help somehow, but I can't.'

'We are all so helpless. I can't even concentrate on my work. And I'm getting a new bunch of students in a couple of days, so it's the least I can do to be ready.'

'If I go away now, could you settle down?'

'I might.'

'You are lucky, you know, to have a profession. I always want to do too many things at once.'

He looked at her suspiciously. 'Have you stopped writing?'

Anne shrugged her shoulders. 'For the moment, yes. But you don't need to be sorry about it. I'm certain there is going to be a war, and in the meantime, I want to get on with my life.'

She put her hand on his shoulder. 'Goodbye, Mark. Did you see I brought you some dahlias? They don't make any difference to the course of history, but notice them.'

29

THE compartment was crowded with little boys — well-brushed, well-fed little boys, with the bloom of favoured young women, and the loud spasmodic energy of gibbons. Andrew stood back as they jostled for a last wave. Then the scrum round the window broke, and they poured back over him. He took a middle seat.

'Have a toffee, sir?'

'Isn't it good, sir, that the war's been stopped?'

'You're an ass, Potters. You can't stop something that hasn't started. You can't, can you, sir?'

'My grandfather, sir, says that Goering's a lot better than the others. He's a bit of a swank, but he's keen on nature and a jolly good shot. My grandfather thinks he'll make Hitler see some sense.'

'Is it true, sir, that if Hitler attacked us, the German army would rebel?'

'Mutiny, ass. Soldiers and sailors can't rebel, can they, sir?'

'Jolly good thing if they did, anyway. How many aeroplanes would you say Hitler could send over all at once?'

'He's not going to do it, now, ass. He isn't, is he, sir?'

'My uncle says he's just putting it off. But anyway, we'll be able to make some tanks and things. Mr. Churchill says . . .'

'Well, sir, my grandfather's a member of parliament, and he says Mr. Churchill's a damned nuisance.'

'Shut up, ass, you mustn't swear. This isn't the holidays.'

'Well, it isn't school. And I was only saying what my grandfather said.'

'My uncle says people like your grandfather will be changing their minds in two ticks. And all those blasted Reds will look silly as well.'

'The Reds have been fighting fascism for years and years. I read it on a paper in the bus.'

'Then why did they crab rearmament? My grandfather says the reason we aren't ready is because the country hasn't supported the Government. Why didn't your beastly Reds get a move on if they wanted to do some good?'

'They fought Franco anyhow.'

'Yes, but Franco's on our side.'

There was a moment's pause. 'Are you interested in politics, sir?' said a piping voice.

'Yes, of course. But I've got a job to do. I must start learning your names. Sit down, could you? I shall get them mixed up if you keep on moving about. I'm starting in that far corner. You're Potters, aren't you?'

There were shrieks of laughter and a burst of scuffling and rib-punching. Several boys stood up, and sat down in different places.

'Oh, sir, that is funny. He isn't really Potters. We just call him that because he's mad.'

'All right, all right,' said Andrew amiably, 'I'll have to see for myself whether he's any madder than the rest of you. What's your real name?'

'Smith, sir.'

Andrew wrote it down. That was Smith, the boy with dreamy eyes and a sunny smile who had only spoken once. He turned to the boy with a grandfather, the chip of the old block, who called people asses, and said that Potters was mad. 'Yours?'

'Painswick-Boddington, sir, but don't blame me.'

'I wouldn't think of it. Now you?'

'His name's Beasley, sir,' said Painswick-Boddington, 'but he's got a stammer.'

Young Beasley smiled angelically and breathed deeply, before making an attempt. 'B . . . b . . . beasley, sir.'

'Thanks very much, Beasley. Next?'

'Collingwood, sir.' This was the boy who read newspapers on the bus, 'Do you think we'll swim, this term, sir?'

'I haven't the faintest idea. You?'

'Smith, sir, Smith Major.'

'He was born two minutes ahead, sir,' said Painswick-Boddington. 'Doesn't it seem unfair? And he isn't mad at all. May I shut the window now, sir? There's a tunnel just coming.'

Instantly, eleven agile creatures threw themselves over towards the window. The tunnel closed on top of them.

'I say, isn't it dark?' said an appreciative voice, which Andrew thought he could attribute to Potters. It was a step forward, a sign of progress. He repeated to himself the names he already knew, and visualized the faces that went with them.

In the darkness, he felt the grip of his misery tighten. It seemed impossible that he could ever be more than an automaton, performing the necessary movements with a frozen heart and a clouded mind. He welcomed the returning daylight, and looked round the circle of faces with an interest already tinged with affection and gratitude.

'But you're all sitting in different places now!' said Andrew, taking his cue from their expectant gaze, and acting astonishment with a touch of irony.

'You know me,' said Painswick-Boddington.

'Yes, you, and Collingwood, and Smith Major and Smith Minor.' He picked them out. Smith Minor was revealed hunched in a new corner, with his face on his arm.

'He's feeling sick,' said Painswick-Boddington. 'He always does, didn't his mother tell you? We often have to hold his head out of the window.'

30

CONWAY liked his new digs. He had no objection to lace curtains or bead mats, and he did not often look at the pictures which represented, according to Ralph, the *liebestod* of Victorian art and morals. It was a pity that the table was round, and wobbled on its single leg; and it was a nuisance moving the fern off it when he wanted to work. But the landlady was a decent old soul and a generous cook; and if it made her happy to move the fern back every morning, he hadn't the heart to fuss.

After a couple of weeks, two other influences combined to strengthen his attachment to the place. The first was an object — a shaky upright piano. This he had regarded at first as no more than a clumsy type of shelf, but it had occurred to him one day that it would be interesting to see if he could pick out some tunes on it; and he found he could. So now he was provided, on the spot, with an ideal type of relaxation. It was a complete change, but did not demand nearly so much time as rugger, or even squash. His ear was good, and once he had established a tune he amused himself by putting in the bass, and discovered for himself a number of useful chords. Ralph twitted him with taking so much trouble over inventing something already known to all; but Conway was naively relieved to be told that his inventions were 'right'. Phoebe was secretly delighted that a thin end of a cultural wedge had entered into his soul. He told her that he planned to deal with Art generally somewhat later in life.

She visited him regularly; and that was the other reason why the digs suited him. They provided a sort of home in which Phoebe without any very definite invitation was already playing the part of a wife, at least as regards mending socks and scrambling eggs. Sometimes she brought her own work — the *Faerie Queene* lasted her some days — and then two or three hours

would be spent in silence. On other occasions she helped him over jobs for the Labour Party.

This was a peak period for political activity. In the suburbs of Oxford, council house tenants were rebelling against exorbitant rents, encouraged and supported by an able opposition party on the City Council itself and by a broad Left Wing (Marxist to Liberal) in the town and the University. Stay-in strikes, pickets and processions were the practical demonstrations of the popular front, as well as mass meetings to rouse public concern for the other victims in Spain and China. The prospect of a by-election raised the tension to a feverish pitch. Both candidates were well known — the Liberal-Independent was the Master of Balliol and the Conservative had lately been president of the Oxford Union — so that the political issue was somewhat confused by personal judgments; and the voters who knew at the start that they did not much care for either candidate formed quite a large group. As time went on, however, principles dominated personalities. There was too much at stake for the Right to hesitate over Mr. Hogg's aggressive brilliance, or for the Left to doubt if Mr. Lindsay's Liberalism was tough enough for the times.

Conway and Phoebe were checking through a list of canvassers when Ralph called. It was an interruption, but not unwelcome. Conway observed immediately that he had been hoping for a word with him.

'That sounds sinister,' said Ralph, 'is it? I only wanted to have a look at your lovely pictures. I'm mad about this lady who's dodging behind the balustrade. Her admirer looks wonderfully strong and silent, has he just got off a horse, or is he attempting to give her a good beating? I notice that her hair's coming down, and her flowing garments don't look any too safe. But which of them, do you suppose, dropped the kittens?'

'Do be serious,' said Phoebe.

'If I must,' said Ralph sighing. He looked with apprehension

at Conway, who began to speak in the even tone which suggests rehearsed sentences.

'We wondered if you had any influence with that friend of yours who turned up looking like a racing tout for Monday's demonstration. It was a stupid thing to do. We want all the help we can get from the undergraduates, but if they make themselves conspicuous it gives the University an excuse for being firmer.'

'It's just high spirits,' said Ralph, 'he fancies himself in a check cap.'

'The object of the exercise,' said Conway, 'is to get results, not to give people opportunities for showing off. It doesn't bother me if he gets into trouble with his Dean but I do take a poor view of his making life difficult for the rest of us. It's not easy, you know, collaborating with all and sundry and there has to be some give and take. It can't be worked if certain sections don't play fair.'

'Is there some other grouse?' said Ralph.

'As a matter of fact, there has been a query about yesterday's meeting. The whole collection was supposed to be for Aid to China — the Labour Party took nothing. But there has been a suggestion that the Communists were working on a different system; certainly the total was much less than we expected. Your friend was very active, I noticed, and it did occur to me that he might be able to throw some light.'

'You want me to ask him how much he pinched?' said Ralph, intending a joke.

'That's nonsense. We just want to know how we stand. . . .'

So did Ralph. He set off at once, glad of an excuse to force some sort of issue, yet very doubtful of his ability to keep his head or his temper. It was easy enough to be flippant and defensive with Conway, but Richard was a much more difficult proposition. Since the beginning of term, Ralph's confidence in him had been ebbing away but he did not love him any less. On the contrary, frustration and jealousy and bewilderment had

given his feelings an obsessive character which sometimes made life seem almost unendurable.

It was a pity Conway mentioned the cloth cap. Ralph had been present, among others, when Richard first tried it on and obliged the company with an unpublished version – song and mime – of the Raggle Taggle Gypsies. The turn was a *succes fou*, but Ralph, who cherished a memory of tenderness so direct and happy that it seemed like innocence, was set miserably at odds with himself. He had never been more alive to Richard's ambiguous charm, but he was outraged to see it made into a public spectacle.

Ralph had come up in a serious mood, prepared to pursue his political education as well as this engrossing friendship. Richard, however, was already tiring of the party line, which involved work and discipline, and the antics which Conway complained about were a last fling. He was developing other interests, some of whom were in attendance at the cloth cap incident. For Richard, they represented a step up, for they came from a social layer that was wealthier and more distinguished than the one that produced Mark's scientists. They were non-political intellectuals, tolerant, civilized and witty; and several of them owned cars. Ralph felt very shy with them, and suspected that the only side of Richard that they really appreciated was his talent for buffoonery.

Ralph was relieved to find Richard, for once, alone. Richard gave him an easy opening by boasting about his extraordinary success in collecting money.

'There's a fuss on about that,' said Ralph, 'apparently nobody knows quite what happened to it afterwards.'

'Oh, dear, were my efforts wasted? It *is* disheartening. Of course, I didn't really know what the collection was *for*. I just did my bit. Has it all gone to support those two friends of yours who are living in sin? A worthy object, I'm sure, but I vaguely thought it was all for the usual things like party funds and medical supplies.'

Ralph was not to be distracted into arguing that Conway and Phoebe were above reproach, both morally and financially. 'The whole lot was supposed to go to Aid for China.'

'If you say so, my dear, no doubt it's true. But do stop going on and on.' He hummed a tune, and began sorting through a pile of photographs. 'This is rather nice of me, don't you think?'

Ralph refused to look at it. 'You must see it's hopeless trying to run things jointly if one can't be trusted.'

Richard suddenly became peevish. 'Do stop being a pest. I've noticed it growing on you lately and it makes you much less nice.'

'I can't help that.' Ralph was beginning to lose faith in his first idea that the money had gone into the wrong funds, and regretted his inept joke to Conway – it was quite possible that Richard had indeed kept some for himself. He certainly needed money to keep up with his new friends, and he was behaving as if he had something to hide.

'It's a great pity you have to be so nasty, Ralph. You know it's no good trying to make me answer if I don't want to.'

This had long been true. But Ralph found himself committed to seeking a new approach to a stale situation. He did not succeed, but it was Richard who put an end to the hopeless attempt.

'You don't mind if I go out, do you? I've got to see a person about a thing. Stay here as long as you like. Now I'm on the ground floor, I expect everyone to use me as a waiting-room and left luggage office. Goodbye.'

Ralph looked at the photograph which was still in his hand. It seemed to show him the real Richard, gay and friendly and kind. Ralph was still prepared to think that his other phases, however disturbing, were only some kind of disguise, a mistake that could be put right.

After this episode, however, Richard was quite firm about avoiding Ralph. He had become a bore.

31

'SLUG stew, I see,' said Painswick-Boddington.

Andrew looked down at his plate; and saw, amongst the carrot and onion some glistening lumps which did indeed remind him of slugs. Smith Minor, with an air of great embarrassment, began sorting everything out into different piles at the edge of his plate.

'Actually, they are edible,' said Painswick-Boddington. 'The Head is a great expert on fungi. We always survive. The first mouthful is the worst, because they look so ghastly. But they taste quite good.'

Andrew was not squeamish. He tasted and agreed. Looking down the long table, he saw several boys making disgusted faces, for form's sake. They were all eating as steadily as usual, with the exception of Smith Minor.

'He likes them too, really,' said Painswick-Boddington, 'But his mother says he mustn't touch them. There was quite a row about it.'

His manner was that of one man of the world to another. Andrew, though indebted to him for a great deal of information about the school – and a certain amount of amusement – was not disposed to give him indiscriminate encouragement.

'I don't think it's my business, is it? Or yours?'

The boy appeared abashed. The masters who made a routine of taking him down a peg would have been astonished; for they thought him incorrigible. His intelligence and capability were not denied, but a lad of thirteen obviously should not be so inquisitive and so voluble. The theory was that he had been hopelessly spoilt at home.

He recovered quickly. 'Did you know, sir, that some of them turn blue when you break them in half?'

'Blue is the colour for poison,' said Smith Minor, in an undertone to Beasley, who smiled, and went on eating.

Andrew was beginning to doubt if any ordinary, average boys existed. Smith Minor was just as odd as Boddington, in a different way. He was extremely backward, and had so far resisted all attempts to teach him to read, and was therefore, at the age of nine and a half, at the bottom of the bottom form. He was very easily embarrassed and confused, but he was well liked; and although he was often teased, one or other of the boys usually stood up for him, before things went too far. Lately, a strange, muted friendship with Beasley (who was much cleverer, but isolated by his stammer) had given him more assurance. In the spaces between organized work and organized games they drifted together, poking about at the edge of the pond, or poring over pieces of stick which might be turned to some useful purpose.

'What's happening about the Feast of Grace this year?' asked Painswick-Boddington. 'I see it comes on a Sunday.'

'The Feast of Grace?' said Andrew, searching through dim memories of the Church Calendar.

'Oh, of course, you couldn't know. It's a speciality of this school. The Head's father was a friend of W. G. Grace, who was a cricketer in the olden days, so we keep a day for him and have an expedition. Last year we went to the factory at Swindon, but you couldn't do that on Sunday. Then we have a special supper when we get home, with apple dumplings.'

Andrew smiled. After a fortnight's experience, he could appreciate the special character of the school. The time-table was stringent, but it was broken by fairly frequent celebrations and treats, some of them fixed by a strict tradition, some of them movable feasts, and some impromptu. The younger boys, for instance, those in their first year, were 'Given a birthday'. A cake was baked for them, with sugar icing, and they could choose who was to sit at their table — a privilege which carried with it an extra free period. Another tradition, rarely enjoyed in fact but vivid in imagination, was that of watching eclipses of the moon.

The Headmaster held no particular educational theory. His

principles, it seemed to Andrew, could usually be summed up in some proverb or catch phrase — 'Play the Game', 'If it's worth doing, it's worth doing well', 'Manners maketh man'. So Andrew's first impression was of a sincere but limited personality — a run of the mill schoolmaster — and it was only later that he discovered that in practical matters the Head was unusually sensitive, flexible and ingenious. It was obvious that the boys throve on this particular mixture of order and zest.

That afternoon, Andrew was not teaching. In the empty Common Room, he settled down with a pile of books to correct. As often happened now when he was alone, the pressure of the present relaxed and his mind lay open to confused and ambiguous memories. They were not all embittered. Sometimes he would feel again the unflawed delight of those golden moments when love was all spirit and imagination; and sometimes he was overwhelmed by a sensual memory so precise, so violent and exclusive that no other mode of experience seemed genuine. With his whole body trembling, he was ready to believe that love was nothing but a rage for possession, decked out with poetic graces that stank of hypocrisy.

Yet he knew he had not been cynical or grasping. He remembered their drive to London. Even then, an aura of innocence had hung about them, for they were not yet touched with fear or shame. Out of the night's triumph, he had brought a feeling of heroic pride, and with it the ambition to penetrate all mysteries. Looking at her face, he had imagined the territories of experience which made her private world, and he was apt and eager to test his love, already wise in the contours of her body, in this more delicate and more protracted effort of discovery.

The final scene, shameful and ludicrous, rose up to mock him. It was impossible to salvage anything. Reggie had rubbed it all between his square strong finger tips and turned it to dust.

Andrew found a temporary relief in hating Reggie; but it became no easier to love or respect himself. As he pictured those staring, rather bloodshot eyes, and heard that brutal voice, he

could not altogether forget the presence of another figure, an abject creature that he only wished to forget.

One thing might have saved him; if Paula had found some means of showing that the tie between them still existed. Occasionally, he tried to persuade himself that she was only playing the part dictated by circumstances; and, remembering how formidable the circumstances were, that seemed possible. The arguments were good, but he could never quite believe the conclusion. He had seen with his own eyes a woman who was totally different from the woman he thought he knew.

She had sent him one short note, saying that she was alive and wretched and begging him not to write 'because it will only make things worse'. Circumstances, one might say, were too powerful; yet Andrew could not help noticing that she had no curiosity about what had happened to him. The note had no beginning or end, no messages, no love.

Andrew looked at his watch; he had corrected one book in fifty minutes, and was utterly exhausted as if he had been walking all night on city pavements. His reveries were always the same, with no coherence and no meaning. A shadow of pain and terror pursued the brightest images.

He could not understand himself. Sometimes, in desperation, he appealed in imagination to the people who knew him best. 'But you knew you were doing wrong,' said Aunt Maud. 'Bloody bad luck,' said Ralph, 'but there are lots of other girls.' 'Oh, I *am* sorry,' said Harry.

'Yes, yes, yes,' said Andrew silently. 'It was wrong, but that's not all. We were unlucky, but that's not all. We are to be pitied, but that's not all.'

He wished he knew what Elizabeth would say. She had liked him, and she loved her sister. Would she have the art and experience and tenderness to find the thread that could lead them out of the labyrinth?

The frail hope appeared only to dissolve. Obviously, Elizabeth would now see him merely as a disturber of family peace, a

brash and irresponsible lad who had abused her hospitality and betrayed her friendship. He could at last hear her voice, telling him so.

He could supply no answer; yet he did feel a certain sense of injustice. He had not acted alone. It did not occur to him, however, to shift the larger share of blame on to Paula. He saw her as a victim too and was prone, through all his crises of self-doubt and self-pity, to worry about her.

Because he had no idea what her life with Reggie was like, or what she would now think or feel, this anxiety, like the rest, was formless and barren. He felt there ought to be something he could do, but he was marked out as the person who could only do more damage.

The school bell rang. Doors banged, a rustling in the corridors and voices, proclaimed that the boys were speeding into their next phase. Andrew stood at the window, with his hands in his pockets. I can only be certain of one thing, he reflected sadly; it is all over.

The Headmaster, wearing his round fishing hat, appeared on the terrace. The boys gathered round him, like a headlong stream checked in a broad pool. They were evidently off on a fungus hunt, for they were equipped with baskets and bags and haversacks. The Head waved his arm and set off across the lawn. Several of the older boys walked beside him, talking gravely; and the rest formed groups of their own, giggling or scrapping or darting here and there like minnows.

Andrew's mood, attacked by the spectacle of vivid life, began to lift. He smiled as he watched young Beasley and Potters Smith trying to walk like native women with their baskets balanced on their heads.

32

NEITHER Paula nor Reggie had spoken for two hours. Ever since dinner, they had been sitting one each side of the imitation-log fire, in silence. Paula, although she had a book on her lap, was visibly without occupation, but seemed to lack energy for finding any. Reggie was looking at papers. From time to time, he licked his thumb to turn over a page; and once he got up to draw the curtains. Between whiles, he drummed with his fingers, lit cigarettes, and stubbed them out unfinished. Paula watched his movements, with unhopeful curiosity, and lowered her eyes whenever he happened to look up.

She was puzzled and frightened. The mysterious doom which she awaited was still held in reserve. Reggie had not plunged into one of his rages. Indeed, she could remember no period of their lives so free from surface eruptions. Ever since he brought her back from the café (three weeks ago now), he had been busy about his own affairs, and apparently quite uninterested in hers. Their intercourse was cut to a minimum. He mentioned arrangements, but only for the purpose of ordering meals. Otherwise, he came in and out without warning and without comment. She felt she was on trial, but the drift of the proceedings was hidden.

At first, she made a few forlorn efforts to please him — ordered his favourite food, and put on the clothes he most admired. He ate what he was given without remark, and continued to speak to her as if she were a machine for recording messages. For long stretches, as now, she believed he did not remember she existed; yet the sense of being on trial did not abate. She was being tried in absence. The life and identity of the creature sitting opposite him was shrinking away.

Day by day the ice had thickened. Paula had waited very patiently for him to say or do something in his old manner; and had given him no easy openings. It did not for a moment occur

to her that he, too, might be completely at a loss. She was quite ready to believe that Andrew was inadequate and undependable, but she could not alter her identification of Reggie with initiative, decision and power. She believed that he was carrying out some well-matured plan.

The strain was crushing. Her attention was always ready but found nothing to engage it; and her initial anxiety, which was at least fairly specific, gradually became a pervasive doubt which soured every moment and sapped her energy at source.

Her life had always been aimless, but under Reggie's direction it had at least been busy. Now the days were empty, and the effects of vain brooding were augmented by a physical languor which came at least partly from physical causes. Her sleep was brief and disturbed. In his absence, she did not bother to eat, and she seldom went out of doors. Even within doors, her activity was much restricted. Under Reggie's eye, she turned clumsy, and the habitual movements which might have supplied the minimum of occupation, seemed dangerous. It was an ordeal for her to pass him his coffee, because the cup rattled so on the saucer.

On this occasion, she had left him to fetch his coffee for himself. She had poured it out, and then picked up her book. Her eyes, racing over the lines of print, conveyed no meaning to her brain, but her pose was pre-occupied. An insubstantial reverie floated between her and the single words which occasionally caught her sight.

She could not, however, ignore Reggie for more than a minute or two. The realization that he had not picked up his coffee threw her into a panic of agitation. She wished, now, she had been bold enough to pass it, for the omission could only be repaired by an effort that was quite beyond her. The obstacles had grown. Reggie's silence and immobility conveyed a disapproval that froze her in her seat.

The minutes passed. She let her book lie. This disapproval of Reggie's seemed to her perfectly just and correct. She supposed he would put it aside when he felt inclined, and she knew

she would have to endure it until that time came. She had behaved very wickedly and deserved punishment.

Reggie got up and straightened the curtain. On his way back to his chair, he gave a contemptuous glance at his cup of tepid coffee. Paula realized that she had done the wrong thing again, and felt more wicked still.

These harsh judgments of herself gave her a kind of satisfaction, by suggesting that she could tell the difference between right and wrong and wanted to be better. Unhappily, however, there was very little strength behind her conviction. Her intentions were largely concerned with keeping out of trouble, and her judgment was not her own. In big things and in little she accepted quite uncritically whatever she supposed Reggie's opinions to be.

On his way from the window to the chair he passed quite close to her and a startling sense of his physical vigour, so suited to his moral ascendancy, came to her. She thought of his powerful shoulders, his great round neck and his massive back with a kind of awe; and she remembered that for three weeks he had not touched her.

Here lay the heart and centre of her misery. It had seemed to her, as he walked her back from the café with a policeman's grip on her elbow, that he was disposed to establish his right of possession in the most brutal and obvious fashion. She was terrified but acquiescent, even welcoming. She expected to be hurt and was in a state of nervous apprehension that invoked a longing for pain and tears, and for the reassurance inherent in the punishment.

Instead, Reggie had directed her to her room, and had then left her. She guessed he was looking at his mail, and she heard him telephoning. Some time later, he moved his luggage into the spare room, not pausing when he passed her door, which she had left ajar; and he had slept alone since. On the infrequent occasions when they were out together, he no longer took her arm; and he did not help her on with her coat.

He seemed to be reminding her of all this when he looked down at his coffee. His contempt was directed at her, and condemned far more than the single act of negligence. She, herself, like the coffee, had become somehow repellent. The disagreeable phrase 'Damaged goods', haunted her. Reggie might still decide to throw her away.

For any woman, the situation would have been wretched. Paula's special misfortune was that there was nothing in her nature to stop her playing, in the most limited and sterile fashion, the role of an inert victim. Some women can still enjoy drama, even when it means suffering, and particularly so if they have friends who will listen. Some women might have been sustained by the notion that Reggie, also, needed helping over a bad patch; and some might have taken the desperate course of counter-attacking. Others with more resource and independence might have shifted the terms of the issue by leaving Reggie altogether; and others might have been adroit and resilient enough to ride out the storm without taking fatal damage.

Regret or rage, a sense of justice or of strategy, generosity or cynicism, might have supplied some motive power; but Paula did not have these qualities. Moreover, she had very little common sense. She knew, for instance, that Reggie aspired to become an Alderman of the City of London, and was not happy about his chances; but she did not realize that he was likely to go to inordinate lengths to avoid an immediate scandal. However humiliating the thought, it would at least have given a little time for recovery; and taken the edge off her most pressing terror, which was of being thrown, literally, in the street.

Reggie was well aware that he was the prisoner of his ambitions, and the knowledge fed his indignation, somewhat masking the fact that he was influenced by other motives as well. He had a reputation in business circles for being clear-sighted and ruthless about cutting his losses. But he never enjoyed doing it, and in fact never did it at all except where he could collect something on the side. He had been known to sell a bankrupt concern from

his right hand to his left; and, in less fortunate circumstances, he somehow contrived to manœuvre opinion so that an enhanced reputation for sagacity rose like the reborn phoenix from the initial error of judgment.

In his present predicament, these operations were impossible. If he had made up his mind at once, he could certainly have relied on the judgment of the courts, but even then he could never have been certain that the sympathy of his friends was not tinged with irony. Most of them were avid readers of the Sunday press and were certain to know the worst the moment it was published.

Reggie thought about his legal position a good deal, and it is mentioned for that reason. But it is not suggested that his actions were dictated by intellectual arguments — although he was inclined to believe that they were. In fact, he had reached his present deadlock through a series of emotional upheavals.

Immediately after the crisis, in which his nerve had been steady and his mind collected, he was shaken by the first symptoms of inner conflict. As he tightened his grip on Paula's elbow, unnecessarily, to cross an empty side street, he decided that he was going to take her home and give her a good beating. He was satisfied that in so doing he would be exercising his rights, and persuaded himself that he would also be performing a duty. On this exalted plane, he considered the project in a mood of righteous anger which was not unpleasant.

The idea became more and more fascinating. Paula's arm was limp, her face averted. He understood he would not get any sort of response easily. The conception became gradually more practical, detailed and ingenuous.

After some while, he suddenly realized that he was indulging in a fantasy that was verging, to put it most mildly, on the abnormal; and he was very much shocked. His picture of himself as a normal man — even a superlatively normal man — was dear to him, and here was another blow to it, following fast on events which had already raised some criticism of his self-estimate.

He sent Paula to her room because he wanted to get her out of his sight, and so shelve everything. He read his letters for as long as he could, and had several hearty conversations with acquaintances. The routine steadied him. The idea of a beating was finally rejected; and he was tempted to call it a day, and pop into bed with her just as he always did. Poor little worm, he thought, she did look scared. He could not help being pleased with her for that pathetic appeal to be taken into favour again. The impulse to teach her a lesson, and the impulse to give her the surprise of her life by behaving with angelic magnanimity, struggled within him.

The open door decided him. It would do no harm to keep her guessing for a day or two. He remembered that she never knew when it would pay her to stop snivelling, and he suddenly felt much too tired to cope. He had been travelling for two days, and had missed his dinner.

Incidentally he was also suffering, physically, from shock. He felt very cold. He put himself straight to bed, and regretted afterwards that he had not filled himself a hot-water bottle.

The effects of shock wore off, but by that time they were both committed to a line of conduct that was hard to alter. In Reggie's case, a practical difficulty was that he had almost no experience of dealing with women in a purely non-sexual fashion. His briefest contacts — with typists, shop-girls, or barmaids — had an air of breezy flirtation, and for the very briefest — with the proud or distinguished — he substituted a performance of old-world homage which was quite sickening. On the mezzanine level the wives of his friends got their backs slapped and their hands held as a matter of course.

He had no idea how to say good morning to Paula. A bear's hug in bed, a tweak of the ear as he went by, a flop of shaving soap neatly deposited on the tip of her nose, were the sort of gestures that came naturally. Saying good morning, just out of the blue like that, was pretty well impossible. He could hardly get out the words. Even if he happened, on waking, to enjoy the

fleeting illusion that some magic solvent had taken the sand out of the works overnight, his first sight of Paula's white face dispelled it.

Good night was worse. As the hand of the clock moved up towards midnight, the practical man in him was often tempted to cut the cackle and get back to ordinary life; while the habituated lover (who was by no means extinct) was tempted to relax with the woman who had often given him remarkable pleasure.

Two other characters opposed the recommendation to mercy. The first had better be called the moralist, since it represented what Reggie took to be a moral principle. He felt it was probably wrong to possess a woman — other than a prostitute of course — too quickly after another chap. He went on to conclude that it was impossible for any man — such as himself — who was taking up a stand in support of morals.

The suggestion of impossibility was double-edged. A virtue can be an infirmity seen from another angle. Reggie was hardly conscious of this, but he did not behave like a man supported by high principles. He was very uneasy and rather frightened. He shrank from the ordeal.

This fourth aspect of his nature might, without too much injustice, be called the Infant. But it was a sophisticated infant who could find good reasons for any deprivation. He blamed Paula, and was given good support by both teams. The moralist quoted the past, and the lover and practical man were extremely critical of her present behaviour.

The cold coffee clinched it. What could a man do with a girl who couldn't put herself out even to pass a cup? It was enough to put anyone off. She never had been able to pull curtains straight, but this new trick suggested that she was trying to get at him. He was determined not to be bullied. He was terrified of being trapped into giving more than he got.

After straightening the curtains and casting a charged look on the symbolic cup, he had great difficulty in settling down again. He contemplated his young wife, and observed that her appear-

ance, like her manners, had deteriorated. Her jacket could do with a brush, and there was a smudge of mascara under one of her eyes. Brooding on his wrongs and sufferings, he gradually worked himself up into a foul temper.

Two hours had passed. There was nothing to indicate that anything was ever going to happen. They were tied and bound by their afflictions, incapable of showing or recognizing the desperate plea for mercy which rose from every thought and action – however base or feeble – like bitter incense.

Reggie drew in a deep breath, and let out a shout.

'For God's sake, haven't you got anything to do?'

'No.'

'I'm getting a bit fed up with watching you moping about like a dying duck in a thunderstorm. Snap out of it, can't you? Considering I've let you down so lightly, you might make a bit of effort.'

'What do you mean, Reggie?'

'What I say. This has got to stop.'

Paula gazed at him in consternation. Then ran, weeping, to her room.

That night she locked her door; unnecessarily, as Reggie had no intention of bothering her. She lay on her bed sobbing, and murmuring to herself. 'Oh, Andrew, Andrew, I must have some-one to be kind to me.'

33

'EDWARD, I am better.'

Instantly awake, Edward raised his head and stretched out a veined hand. Elizabeth sat down on the side of his narrow bed.

'Splendid,' he said, 'splendid.'

'You don't sound very surprised.'

'You have been getting better for some time. I'm glad you've got to the stage where you can begin to enjoy it.'

She looked at him with particular pleasure and tenderness. His hand, in hers, was cold, dry and bony; his long neck, jutting out of his shapeless pyjamas, was brown and stringy; and his thin grey hair had twisted itself into a pathetic quiff over one polished temple. But his smile was still gay and young – the hopeful, simple-hearted smile of a nature apt to welcome blessings and to suffer mischance without resentment.

'Why are you up so early?' he asked.

'Looking at things. Writing some letters. I have been so neglectful. Of you, too.'

His forefinger tapped a merry tune on her wrist.

'You have no need to be sorry.'

'I *am* sorry. It's inevitable.'

'Dear, we have had so many happy times together. We can't grumble over a few weeks that weren't so good. That would look as if the rest didn't count. I always remember how very happy you have made me.'

He spoke, not easily, but as if he were searching for the simplest and clearest words. And the old worn phrases, so often debased, shone with candour. Elizabeth sighed and smiled.

'Do you really, Edward. Even when I . . .'

'Hush, dear. You know quite well that I mean what I say.'

'I do love you.'

'That's my particular good fortune. Now you must get off my right leg and allow me out of bed. It looks like a lovely day'

'Wonderful. Smelling of hoar-frost and leaf mould. Dress quickly, and then we can go round the garden before breakfast.'

Elizabeth felt as if a fog had lifted. The crunch of earth, the gleam of moisture on leaves turned to the sun, the cold brilliance of the air, were evidence of wakened senses. Edward, too, celebrated her return to life by the gaiety and eagerness of his mood.

'I must show you this,' he said, 'I must ask you about that. Come over here a minute, I rather thought of taking down this old sty, which we'll never want, and using the bricks to extend the wall — at an angle, so that we get a south face at last. We ought to grow some peaches.'

Marian was eating her breakfast when they went in. She noticed the glow on Elizabeth's face, but her pleasure and relief, unlike Edward's, were touched with uneasiness. Her preference was for effects with visible causes, and a spontaneous recovery, she felt, was somehow not quite trustworthy.

Elizabeth, since waking, had thought of a number of things she wanted to do. Her life seemed cluttered with loose ends, letters she had not answered, knitting she had not finished, and affections she had used without replenishing. Among other duties, she felt she ought to tell Marian that she was grateful for her patience, and knew how much it cost.

The words were on her lips, but it suddenly struck her that Marian did not like that line of talk. Elizabeth recalled the curt embarrassed manner which had been her response and defence ever since childhood; and realized the unreason of her own assumption that Marian would get used to natural behaviour in time. Marian's natural behaviour was quite different. It was expressed by a neatly-folded newspaper, smooth hair, beautifully-cut tweeds of a sombre colour — and decent reserve. I ought to apologize, thought Elizabeth, for being such a bully all these years. She laughed gently. Marian started.

'What is it?'

'A joke against myself — better kept private.'

A couple of days later, Elizabeth went over to see Anne.

This was also a move towards reconstruction, in some ways more difficult, in others very much easier. Anne had no preconceptions about what should, or should not, be said; but Elizabeth, while determined to make some reparation for her jealous anger, was very dubious about how she would feel when she saw the visible effect of pregnancy.

It was evident in Anne's movement. She got up awkwardly and gave Elizabeth a kiss of welcome. The tension was immediately relieved. Anne's mental tolerance and ease did not normally spill over in affectionate gestures; and the touch of her warm lips was a high compliment and a substantial proof of friendship.

It was early afternoon and the long room was flooded with light. Elizabeth looked appreciatively at the glowing chintz, a close flowing pattern of birds and flowers; at the china mugs on the mantelpiece, and the jar of spindle in the window.

'I always like this room very much,' she said.

'I love it. And I see more of it now; as I'm instructed to put my feet up in the afternoon.' She glanced at Elizabeth and went on. 'It's nice of you to come and see me. I'm grateful; and pleased too because it means you're better.'

This was a very characteristic skirmish. She scorned to draw people out, but she believed in providing opportunities. She suspected that Elizabeth wanted to talk about her illness, and might prefer to do it with someone outside her family. Also, she might want to relieve her mind of the memory of their last painful meeting. So Anne was trying to convey that any of this was feasible, although not necessary, and that she herself bore no malice. At the same time she threw off a reminder that it was now impossible (as anyone could see for themselves) to pretend that the baby did not exist.

'And Marian?' she said, leaving it.

'Busy and equable. The same as usual. Edward is in tremendous spirits. I'm afraid I've been a great load on his mind.'

'Oh, of course. You must both feel you are coming out of a bad dream.'

'Not quite. It's true, I did feel lifeless and helpless, as one does in some dreams. But all the time, I was doing some terrible things.'

'I don't imagine they looked so terrible to other people.'

Elizabeth stared down at her clenched hands. 'Do you mind if I go on talking about it, Anne? I feel so puzzled. You know these horror stories, where someone lies paralysed, but sees and hears everything? I was rather like that, except that the paralysis wasn't in the body, it was just a stubborn reluctance to speak or move. And I suppose it must have appeared as if my mind wasn't active. But that's not so. I think I noticed more than usual, and understood more. If Marian asked me to come in to a meal, I knew very well she got frantic with impatience if I didn't come, and tortured herself trying not to hurry me, but I wouldn't stir till Edward came to fetch me.'

'Couldn't, perhaps?'

'I don't know. How can I say? I felt I couldn't, but that might have been pretence. The strongest feeling was that I didn't want to. Well, perhaps that wasn't so serious. But after I'd seen the Doctor, I behaved so abominably to Edward. You see, they'd decided between them that I might try to kill myself; and I knew quite well that was at the back of it when Edward tried to persuade me to go to a Home. But I kept on asking him why, why, why; and I knew all the time, somehow or other. I don't know how I came to be so cruel. If I hadn't the courage to do as he said, I oughtn't to have forced him to take a decision like that, alone, just because I was so upset. I could have let him know that it was brave and kind of him. Such a small thing for me to do; and I couldn't, I didn't want to.'

'A large thing evidently,' said Anne, 'I'm sure Edward would understand that.'

'He doesn't know. He's so happy that I'm better, it would be misery for him to go back over it; and yet it's important for me. It's ridiculous to say such things are caused by an illness; they just come out because it's a good chance.'

'You must mind very much being weak,' said Anne, 'just as I

mind being clumsy. I always prided myself on moving nicely.'

Elizabeth looked contrite. 'This isn't at all the way I ought to be talking. I don't know why it all burst out. I'm sorry.'

'But I should be so sorry if you didn't,' said Anne, 'I don't propose to spend my time thinking beautiful thoughts and staring at the Venus of Milo. I want to go on as before, thinking about anything that happens to arise. I can't say anything that's much to the point, because I'm always so sleepy. But I can listen.'

'Do you remember Andrew?' said Elizabeth suddenly, 'You met him at tea once. I found the pullover I was knitting for him, and wrote to Paula for his address. But she hasn't answered. That may not mean anything, because she hardly ever writes letters; but I can't help worrying about them. Is that far-fetched?'

'They seemed rather taken up with one another.'

'They left us at the same time. She was giving him a lift but it was odd she didn't say anything about him when I saw her next. Or perhaps it was just accidental. I was ill, there was a lot going on, and I had tried to interfere in a clumsy sort of way earlier. Andrew is really such a child still, and Paula is, too, and she can't have been happy with Reggie. I wish I knew if they are all right.'

'People usually are,' said Anne lazily, 'or wrong in the way they like. Would you really mind if that marriage came apart? Wouldn't she be better off without him?'

'I wish I could think so,' said Elizabeth. She collected her bag and gloves, and stood up.

'You are quite right,' she said, 'I hate feeling weak. Perhaps my illness was a kind of reminder that I am a weak creature, like anyone else. There may have been that much sense and meaning in it. Thank you for listening.'

They kissed warmly. Elizabeth suddenly looked very shy, and hesitant. 'When I've finished this bit of knitting, shall I do something for your baby – a jacket or something, whatever babies have?'

'It would be very good of you,' said Anne. They both smiled.

34

PAULA waited till she heard the front door shut, and dialled a number.

The telephone of the hostel hung in a passage, and the lively and handsome student who happened to be passing heard its warning click and snatched off the receiver. The call was not for him. He went on to the refectory, and looked round.

'Anyone seen Harry? There's a lady with an upper class voice asking for him.'

Someone whistled. 'A dark horse,' said someone.

'Has he gone? or must I go and look for him?'

'Try upstairs, Charley; and run. Mustn't keep the lady waiting.'

Charley paused in the passage to give the lady a little encouragement. But his dulcet telephone voice, which was always accompanied by a suitable smile, on this occasion lacked magic. 'Do please try and find him as quick as you can,' she said.

Harry's room was empty. Charley hammered on the door marked 'Bathroom', and shouted:

'Is that you, Harry? There's a maiden in distress on the telephone.'

'It can't be for me,' said Harry's muffled voice.

'She's very definite. It's you she wants, and quickly. Let it not be said that the doctor got there too late.'

'I can't think what you're talking about,' said Harry, emerging ruffled. 'I don't know any girls.'

'Well, you'll have to deal with her. I couldn't make any headway at all. She wouldn't even tell me her name.'

Harry ran downstairs. 'Who is it?' he said. 'Who? Who did you say?' A plaintive whisper gradually thickened into words.

'I'm a friend of Andrew's. We haven't met; but I want to see you. It's very important.'

'Oh, yes, Andrew. I've been meaning to get in touch with him. Is he in London?'

'No he isn't. That's why I hoped I could see you, because you are a friend of his.'

'Well, of course, if there's anything I can do, but I don't quite understand what you want. The line isn't very good.'

'I want to see you. I know it sounds funny when you haven't heard of me even. But please.'

'All right then. What about the end of the week?'

'Oh, dear. I was hoping you would have some time today.'

'I do get off for a couple of hours in the afternoon.'

'That would be much better than nothing. How do I get to you?'

Harry was seized with panic. A shuffle of feet round the corner suggested that Charley was delaying over his mail, and listening.

'You mustn't come here. It's miles away from everywhere. Where are you?'

'Baker Street. I wish I could ask you here, to a meal or something, but it's all a bit difficult. Couldn't we meet somewhere half-way?'

'Could you get to Charing Cross station?'

'Oh, yes. I am sorry to be such a nuisance, but I can explain. . . .'

'Half-past two? The Strand entrance?'

'Yes, thank you very much.'

'That's all right. But wait a minute, how shall I know you?'

'I'll wear a red coat.'

As Harry walked past him, Charley raised his eyes.

'You believe in treating them rough, I note.'

'I didn't know what on earth to say to her. I don't know her. She says she is a friend of a man I knew at Oxford.'

'She was in quite a stew, I thought. You'd better look out.'

'I wish I knew what for.'

'If I might hazard a guess . . .'

'Let it alone, will you? I want my breakfast.'

Charley's teasing advice was not helpful. Harry would have

been shy and awkward in any case, and the seed of suspicion made him more so. It was unfortunate that Paula, out of nervousness, was dressed up and made up to excess and the red coat emphasized her pallor. Harry's suspicion burgeoned.

He took her to the station buffet, and collected two cups of coffee. They sat down opposite each other, both waiting for the conversation to start.

'I am sorry about dragging you out,' said Paula at length. 'You do seem to have got the most terrible cold.'

'It's not a cold,' said Harry thickly, 'just sinuses. I hope to get something done about them in the spring.'

'Is it an operation?' said Paula, 'I do sympathize.' The relief of being with someone who wasn't Reggie was having quite a good effect. She was genuinely sorry for Harry, because of his terrible sniff, and because he looked an unfortunate person, like herself. The feeling was not reciprocated. Harry thought she spoke in a very affected way, and looked like a tired tart. Under the table, he rubbed his sweating hands on his sticky handkerchief.

'Well,' he said, 'what news of Andrew? How's his new job?'

'I don't know. I haven't seen him for weeks. That's why I wanted to talk to you. You could help us, if you wouldn't mind.'

'I don't see how I can. Really, you know . . .'

'Andrew and I were so dreadfully in love,' said Paula.

'I suppose so,' said Harry uncomfortably. He scooped a mess of skin off his pale coffee, and laid it in the saucer. Paula floundered on. 'And you see, I don't want to get Andrew into any more trouble.'

'That's nice of you,' said Harry, warming a little. Now that he was getting used to Paula's appearance, he could see that underneath the paint she looked wretched and rather ill. A dreadful position for her, of course, only he could not imagine how Andrew . . . his friend Andrew. . . .

He made an effort towards detachment. He could think about Andrew later. For the moment, he must try and do what he

could for this poor unhappy girl. He tried to imagine that he had the protection of a white coat, and the massive authority of his hospital behind him; and went on very earnestly:

'I am sorry for you; but I am sure you will find that you have the courage to go through with it. There are people who will look after you. Only the first thing you ought to do is to tell Andrew.'

'Tell him what?'

Understanding caught them simultaneously. Paula let out a nervous giggle, and Harry blushed puce. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'it seemed the obvious thing.'

They sipped their coffee. A woman, passing, caught her handbag on Harry's chair and had to be unhooked. Struggling with the strap, he cursed himself for being so pompous and clumsy.

'I'm married,' said Paula. 'So you see, Andrew and I had to part.'

'Well, yes, I can see that.'

'Only I don't see why we shouldn't go on being friends.'

She looked at him hopefully. He frowned, staring down at the table. She did not sound very convincing.

'What does Andrew say to that?'

'He doesn't know I want it. You see, there's my husband. But if Andrew wrote to you, and then you sent it on, he wouldn't be nearly so likely to notice.' Harry looked very puzzled, and Paula hastened to elaborate the plan. 'You see, a London postmark is much more ordinary. And I could give you some envelopes, with stamps.' Harry sighed deeply, and sniffed. 'I could give you a paper pattern — a blouse or something — and the sort of envelope the shops use for them; and then Reggie wouldn't notice anything.'

'It sounds horribly complicated.'

'It would hardly be any trouble at all, for you.'

Harry leaned back in his chair and looked at her. It seemed to him that Andrew had done very well in getting himself out of this dubious position. The silly creature was not even in serious

trouble, and the way she perked up at the prospect of making more trouble, was really nasty.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'No.'

Paula took a minute or two to recover from her surprise. So this was the man who would do anything, Andrew said, for anyone.

'What harm would it do you?'

'That's not the point. It's true, I wouldn't want to be involved in that sort of, well, intrigue; but don't you think you ought to try and look at things more calmly, and do the right thing by your husband?'

'I have tried. You don't know. I haven't explained properly. Anyway, it's no good.'

She was beginning to cry with disappointment. Her scheme for arranging a poste restante was not the only one that had fallen flat. She had also had, at the back of her mind, a hope that Harry himself would become a friend and a support, with a hand that could be held and a shoulder that could be cried on.

He felt he ought to say something else. But she looked so angry, he was baffled. Then, when she took up her compact and began to work, competently, on her face, he decided she wasn't worth it. This action, a routine to her, appeared to him to epitomize the frivolity of her whole attitude.

She got up. 'It doesn't really matter that you've let me down. I shall think of something. You can't stop me.'

That evening, Harry made several conscientious attempts to write to Andrew, but he could not settle on what he wanted to say. His sympathies were balked by his instinctive dislike for Paula, and by his total ignorance of what had actually happened. Moreover, he still did not know her name, and he could not think of anything suitable to call her.

35

THE Feast of Grace was shifted to a Thursday. Andrew, given the choice between a visit to Stratford and a free day, chose the second. He decided to go to Oxford and try to look up some of his old friends. He was sufficiently himself again to know that he needed a change from the cheerful society of children, and the fascination of common-room gossip.

As he left the station yard, he felt a familiar lift of the heart. This is Oxford, this red brick, this advertisement for Cooper's marmalade, these porters standing outside the L.M.S. Railway station, which no one ever seems to enter, this long row of small drab houses, with occasional shop windows crowded, in the village tradition, with small toys and mysterious sweets.

Election notices, displayed in almost every house, reminded him that time had moved on. The world was changing. He himself had changed. But the sense that he belonged here returned to him as he stopped for a moment on the bridge over the canal. The sun was shining. On the towpath, with the splendid trees of Worcester College gardens behind them, two little girls were competing over a lop-sided doll's pram. Further off, a workman was jerking his bicycle up on to the foot-bridge. Andrew heard a big clock striking, and the noise of shunting trains.

He went on his way up Walton Street, towards Ralph's lodgings. Beaumont Street, so calm and elegant, gave him his first vista of the historic city; but his imagination had already taken its flavour as he walked the approaches. He knew it so well.

A cluster of young women, with bicycles, came out of the back gate of Somerville. He looked for Phoebe, not because he particularly intended to see her, but because it seemed to be a day for meeting people.

'And it's not much better back to front,' said one.

They were all strangers. But Andrew, politely waiting till they got across the pavement, felt a little warmth falling on him from

their smiling unobservant faces; and he liked the enigmatic phrase. Ralph, no doubt, could supply a story for it.

Andrew hoped he would be in; but if not, it didn't matter. He could go over and look for Conway, taking the course past the Observatory, and down the Giler and the Broad; and then New College Lane to Magdalen Bridge. Andrew recited the names to himself with pleasure. It was a day for wandering with no absolutely fixed object.

Ralph, however, was there, to be astonished and delighted.

'My dear boy, I can't say how pleased I am. How's everything? And what do you think of my new place? The old girl was a maid in a big house, and some of the furniture got pensioned off with her.'

He waved a hand at the black oak tallboy, and the wicker chair with a faded linen cushion, and the photographs of old-fashioned children, some of them on chubby ponies. Andrew expressed approval. 'And you seem to be doing a lot of work. I oughtn't to stop it.'

'But you couldn't have come on a better day. All sorts of people are going to be here for a lunch of sorts. We're celebrating Conway's engagement.'

'Oh, good.'

'And the election, of course, perhaps prematurely. You know that.'

'As a matter of fact, I forgot it was today. You've no idea what a private world a school is.'

'But the town's plastered with posters. What on earth were you thinking of?'

'Other things. It seems so odd to be back here; but the oddest part is that I feel I've never been away. Has there been a lot of excitement? Have you been worked to death?'

'Actually, I haven't done much. Politics are all very well, but they don't touch the heart of the problem. The real trouble is that we know so little about what goes on in people's minds.'

'Fair enough,' said Andrew, with some feeling.

'And half the time medicine only tinkers about with symptoms that are not physical in origin. Asthma, migraine, duodenal ulcers, and probably a lot more. It's a bloody swindle. I hope to specialize in Psychiatry and do an honest job....'

'I've no doubt it needs some sensible people,' said Andrew, 'it's a subject that seems to have a fatal fascination for neurotics and cranks.'

'Don't be too hard on them. After all, if one's dealing with mental suffering, it may be an asset to know what it feels like.'

'There are limits, I should have thought.'

'Well, we're none of us perfect. I'm a network of neuroses myself, but I'm beginning to know something about them.' He sighed. His recent studies, thrilling in themselves, had not alleviated his most harassing doubt. He still asked himself the question – will I ever be able to love a woman? Through the ruins of his love for Richard, he groped in darkness, remembering the emptiness of his earlier flirtations, and hardly comforted by the equable tenderness of his present friendship for Anne and Phoebe.

'I'd like to go and look at some bookshops,' said Andrew, 'if you want to put in some more work.'

'Nonsense,' said Ralph, immediately cheered by the prospect of action. 'I'll come. I'd like to. And I must buy a few more oddments. We shall be six. I asked Mark and Anne.'

He began shifting books off the table on to other horizontal surfaces, already piled high. 'Tell me about your school. Is it Waugh or Isherwood? Or are there some new prototypes?'

'It's a nice place,' said Andrew, 'I doubt if any of the boys will be driven to take revenge, and so far as I know none of the masters drink.'

'Quite useless for literature,' said Ralph.

All the same, Andrew's account of the Head, and Boddington and Beasley, amply filled their walk. Ralph laughed and questioned. Andrew expanded happily, very conscious of the familiar aspect of the streets and the ease of old friendship.

As they walked along the Broad, his speech suddenly halted. That small green car, parked out of line with the rest, was surely Paula's? His pulse hammered; and a sweet-sour sense of her hidden presence plucked at some quiescent nerve. He turned to look into the window of Thornton's.

'There's nothing much here,' said Ralph. 'Let's go in.'

Andrew went on staring at the broken reflections of the passers-by, waiting and searching, with a certain dread, for that one fugitive figure.

'Come on in,' said Ralph. He turned, and almost collided with a woman whose remote expression, as she stepped aside and looked beyond him, changed suddenly to a kind of stricken amazement.

'Andrew.'

'Paula.'

A long pause. 'I was just going to buy some books,' said Andrew.

'And I was buying a map. How extraordinary.'

They had no more words. Ralph decided to take charge. He introduced himself and observed that the world was a delightfully small place. Paula gave him a brittle smile; Andrew seemed incapable of movement.

'Would you care to join us for lunch,' said Ralph, 'that is, if you haven't any other plans.' He looked meaningly at Andrew. Now's the moment, my boy, if you want her to yourself. But Paula was quick to clutch the only straw in sight.

'I'd love it, if it's all right. I haven't really got anything definite.'

'Then in the meantime,' said Ralph, valiantly hauling on the weight of their embarrassment, 'perhaps you'll come and help us choose our books.'

He took himself off to a far bay, leaving them to a half-hearted fingering of the children's section.

'Look here, Paula, did he rush you? You don't have to come to this party.'

'I want to come. He's nice.'

'And you can still bear the sight of me?'

'Oh, I wanted to see you. More than anything. Do look at Mrs. Tiggiewink, with all the washing. She was always my favourite.'

Andrew took the book from her hands. 'Or we could both get out of it?'

'Could we? If I'd known that . . . No, it doesn't matter. We ought to look ordinary. Did you like Peter Rabbit? I hated it. Because of Mr. McGregor.'

'I never read them,' said Andrew rather stiffly.

'It's all right about lunch,' said Paula, with apparent inconsequence. 'I ought to get to know your friends.'

No books were bought. On the way back, Ralph kept up a stream of chatter. They were alone only for a minute while he visited his local grocer.

'Will you come for a walk after lunch?'

'That would be wonderful.'

'By ourselves.'

'That's what I meant.'

There was nothing wrong with the words, but her voice, so cool and light, roused in him a kind of weary impatience. He saw himself acting as if impelled by an urgent and secretive love, only for the sake of completing some distressing duty. What, after all, could they say? Yet Ralph, pausing before he broke in on them, clearly felt the aura of dedication.

'Come along, children, we're late.'

He strode ahead, whistling, and hugging two quart bottles under each arm.

36

PAULA had never in her life been to a party like this. To begin with, the food was arranged hugger-mugger in the middle of the table, and you could not tell where to begin. There were apples, black olives, potted meat, hot sausages, yoghourt, potato crisps, all sorts of cheese, and a bowl of tinned sweet corn. Then, most of the people were acting in an inexplicable way. Ralph fussed rather over getting a cushion for Anne, and it seemed so odd for a young man to be concerned about someone having a baby. Then the ugly man, Mark, who was so sarcastic, and evidently very clever, said 'my dear' just like a typist, to anyone; and Phoebe was so delighted with her moonstone ring, which looked to Paula like something out of a cracker.

Anne was the most puzzling. Paula was not pleased at meeting her for various reasons. It is one thing to come boldly out into the open, quite another to encounter there a family friend; and although she was not frightened of anything particular (since she was doing nothing wrong at the moment) Anne's mere presence disconcerted her. She resented being reminded about babies; and the fact that Anne seemed changed, and was obviously trying to be ordinary and friendly, instead of peculiar and superior, was bothering.

'Are you staying at the cottage?' she asked, leaning across Andrew.

'No. I was going on there later.'

Conway, from the other side, silently handed her a thick slice of bread. She took it, although she did not feel at all hungry; and accepted some cider from Ralph, because it was so much less awful than beer. Beyond Conway, she could hear Phoebe chirruping away. 'Conway hates yoghourt. He doesn't want to live to be a hundred.'

Mark, across the table, made a sad face. 'Ask him again when he's ninety-nine,' he said.

'Our expectation of life is going up by leaps and bounds,' said Ralph, putting down his bottles, and going back to the seat between Mark and Phoebe. 'Soon it will be more than anyone can bear.'

'Particularly the lads of thirty,' said Conway, 'who find that they have to support four grandparents, unaided.'

'That will be us,' said Ralph cheerfully. Mark put his elbows on the table and his face in his hands.

'Conway has got the statistics on his mind,' said Phoebe. 'He says we have all got to have three point seven babies, to keep up the replacement rate. Well, I don't mind.'

Conway, evidently feeling he had neglected Paula, turned to her and observed. 'The population is getting hopelessly unbalanced.'

'But I always thought there were too many people, except in Australia.'

'No, you see, the point is . . .' He embarked on an explanation that seemed to have no beginning or end. She stared at him, crumbling her bread, until Andrew came to the rescue.

'When's the wedding, Conway?'

'We rather thought August. But this is a bad time for making definite plans.'

'But we can't bring our lives to a standstill, because of Hitler,' said Anne.

'That's what I say,' said Phoebe, 'if Conway goes off to the wars, I'd much sooner be safely married . . .'

'You don't really know what you're talking about,' said Mark.

To Paula's astonishment, nobody appeared in the least deflated.

'Have you cast your vote yet?' said Anne.

'No, I'm leaving it till the last minute, so as to give myself the illusion of choice. I dined in Hall last night, and everyone was wearing enormous rosettes, like horses at a show.'

'Whose?' asked Andrew.

'A slight leaning towards the Left. My college is progressive.'

'And you?' inquired Conway.

'Oh, I shall vote against the Government. But I wish I knew what I was voting for.'

Paula felt she had been silent far too long, and was disgracing Andrew. 'Isn't it better,' she said timidly, 'to depend on the people who were brought up to run the country?'

No one seemed to know what to do about this utterance. Conway made a stiff face, like a partner at a Hunt Ball who discovers you don't know any of his friends, and Andrew gave a harassed laugh.

'The trouble is,' said Ralph, 'that they haven't been brought up properly. They can't see why any of the other children should be allowed to play with any of their good toys.'

'Little beasts,' said Anne. 'No wonder the other children snatch. Good luck to them, I say.'

They were obviously talking down to her. Paula endured it for several minutes, then rose.

'Andrew. I ought to go.'

'I'll see you on your way then.'

No one else moved, and no one asked if he was coming back. The farewells were brief, and the talk became a little over-acted. As they left the room, Paula heard Phoebe saying something about social justice. Ralph, who was anxious to scotch the out-of-date distinction between his two sets, poured out more drink, and like a good host, led the talk round to scientific method, where he hoped Mark and Conway would find some common ground.

37

'I'M afraid they must have thought me very stupid.'

'It doesn't matter.'

'I oughtn't to have gate-crashed, really.'

'It doesn't matter.'

'Are you very cross with me?'

'Oh, for Heaven's sake leave it. How are you?'

'I'm in an awful muddle.'

'I suppose it's what we deserved.'

'Do you feel muddled, too?'

'Of course. What did you expect?'

'I thought . . . Well, it must have been awful for you, but you did get away.'

'Not with credit.'

'Oh, that. Yes, I suppose it is something. But you haven't got anyone to bully you.'

'Is Reggie being quite impossible?'

'You know what he's like. He doesn't see anyone else's point of view.'

'Poor chap. It's a lot to expect.'

'Are you sorry for *Reggie*?'

'Sometimes. When you talk about points of view.'

They were walking very slowly down the fenced path by the city refuse-tip, pursued by the permeating, acrid smell of smouldering rubbish, and hardly noticing the still, dark water and the pale reed-beds on the other side. Occasionally, their shoulders touched and they jerked apart.

'You don't seem to understand, either.'

'It was you threw me out.'

'I had to. I didn't want to.'

'But you'd do it again.'

'Well, I wouldn't have to. I just want to be friends again, Andrew.'

'It seems so impossible.'

'I don't see anything wrong with being friends. Even Reggie wouldn't mind that.'

'You think so?'

'Well, not so much. Or he wouldn't have to know.'

'It all sounds rather hopeless, doesn't it?'

'Oh, Andrew, you don't understand how hopeless everything is anyhow.'

They crossed the bridge over the weirs and went on upstream, very slowly. In bits and pieces, Andrew was shown the real misery which Paula was suffering; and shown, too, something of her stubborn and hopeless attachment to Reggie. All her efforts to draw him nearer seemed also to drive him out into coldness and solitude. When, obsessed with her theme, she took one crooked step and lurched against him, he felt he had been jostled by a stranger.

'Do you see how it is now?'

'Yes, I do see. I wish I were more use. But you will have to make it up with Reggie somehow.'

'I wish I could. I feel I might, if only I didn't feel so miserable.'

The road bridge came in sight. A flight of starlings crossed the river, compact and single-minded, following the set route to the roost.

'It's going to get cold soon. Shall we turn?' She turned obediently.

'This would be a nice walk, for people who hadn't muddled up their lives.'

'You oughtn't to be quite so tragic about it. People do get over things. I know they do. And to hell with it, this is a marvellous place, whatever you happen to be feeling. Just look at it.'

'The trees are enormous.'

It was beginning to get dark by the time they reached the field turning to Binsey. Andrew, impatient to finish, walked a little faster. Paula stopped in her tracks.

'Is it a pretty village?'

'You can see all of it, except the church.'

'May we go and look? The lights are pretty in those tiny windows.'

It was almost dark in the chestnut avenue leading to the church. Paula, caught in the mysterious hush of evening, was silent. Andrew walked silently beside her, with an empty heart.

The long talk had been worse than useless. Nothing had been healed; too much had been exposed. Among the quicksands of her shifting and fragile emotions, he had discovered the insufficiency of his own. His heart was a stone.

He looked at her shadowy face with a new and sudden impulse of pity; and suddenly, the fantastic notion came to him that perhaps they had been too timid in choosing talk. He touched her on the shoulder. She turned her head, and smiled.

The flaming hope guttered. The same scent, the same cheek, smooth as a fresh leaf, the same pliant waist, the same slight arms clinging; and it meant nothing.

'It's no good,' said Paula, 'it isn't the same.'

38

RALPH opened the door to them. 'I'll fetch your car for you if you give me the keys. There's a rush on. Anne will explain all about it.'

Anne was alone in his room. 'Elizabeth wants you to go over to the cottage as soon as you can,' she said.

'How does she know I'm here?'

'I told her of course. Because when she rang me up she was in a great state about what could have happened to you. It seems your husband imagined you were spending the day there; and wanted to talk to you. Elizabeth didn't even know you were coming, so she was caught rather short. She says she didn't altogether follow what he said, but it seems likely he's driving down.'

'Oh, damn, damn, damn and blast,' said Paula.

'Well, yes,' said Anne, 'it does seem a bit unnecessary. Anyway, I was able to relieve her mind about accidents.'

'Was that what Reggie thought?'

'I don't know. But you'd better show up in good order, to demonstrate that all is well. I made you a cup of tea.'

'I think I'm going to faint.'

She sank into the wicker chair. Anne sent Andrew out to the scullery for a glass of water; and then, seeing that Paula had not actually collapsed, followed him.

'I could take her home with me, and leave Elizabeth to pacify Reggie, if you think that's a good idea.'

Andrew let the water overflow the glass, without noticing. A look of fear came into his unhappy eyes. He was in no condition to take even the small responsibility of giving advice.

'I can ask her anyhow,' said Anne. She laid her hand on his sleeve, in the lightest, briefest gesture of sympathy. 'Turn the tap off *hard*, would you? It's liable to drip.'

When he got back, Anne had made her offer. 'You mean I might keep out of Reggie's way for a bit?' said Paula.

'No, I didn't. What I meant was that if you wanted to finish with Reggie for good, you could start now.'

'Me?'

'Yes, you. If you once made up your mind . . .'

'Is that what Reggie will think if I don't go home?'

'Probably.'

'Then I must go. I ought to go at once.'

'Ralph won't be back for a few minutes. Just try to relax a bit.' She held out the glass.

'I don't want any more water. I'm perishing with cold. I'd rather have tea.'

Andrew poured a cup for her. 'We may as well have some, too,' said Anne.

'I'm awfully sorry, Andrew. I did think I would drive you back.'

'Don't worry about me. There's a train at seven.'

'I feel awfully queer,' said Paula. She looked from one to the other with an odd, secretive smile. 'It would be funny, wouldn't it, if I really did have a smash *now*? I easily might. That would show everyone.' She began to giggle.

'Stop it,' said Anne. 'Drink your tea and don't chatter.'

'None of you are very nice to me,' said Paula. Her voice trembled, and it was difficult to know whether she was laughing or crying. 'Was that my car?'

'I'll go and see,' said Anne. Andrew took Paula's cup and set it on the table. He was beginning to shiver too. Someone had tried to light the fire, unsuccessfully. She stared at the charred sticks. . . .

'I do hate saying goodbye. Especially when it hasn't been a nice time. You were quite wrong, Andrew, about things getting better.'

He took her limp hand. 'Were you ever fond of me at all?'

'That is just what I wanted to ask you.'

'Are you ready?' cried Ralph from the doorway. 'I think I'd better take charge of this operation. I'll drive you home, Paula, and hitch-hike back. You stay here as long as you want, Andrew. Anne says she's got to go and cook supper for five people, but you can find yourself some books. Come along, Paula.'

She got up, clutching at her handbag. Andrew saw something sliding to the floor, and caught at it. 'Don't forget your map.'

'I don't want it now. I only bought it to find out how to get to your school.'

He was left to the empty room; conscious only of a sullen anger at the thought that she might indeed have broken in on his new stronghold; and then of an overwhelming sensation of relief.

39

DURING the slow passage through High Wycombe, Reggie began to regret his impulse, and even to doubt his judgment. But it was odd of her, surely, to go off so suddenly. Her note only said that she'd got to go and see her sisters, but so far as he knew, she hadn't heard or seen anything of them for weeks. Prowling round, he discovered a letter from Elizabeth in the drawer of her dressing table. It was mainly chat, of the affected kind they went in for in that family, but she had ended up by asking for an address.

So Andrew was still about? Reggie felt quite confident in his hunch that her disappearance was explained. He remembered telling her at breakfast that he would be out late, and she had merely nodded. Surely she would have mentioned her own plans then, if there wasn't something a bit hole-and-corner about them?

He had come home for some papers. On the pretext that they were mislaid, he put through a call to the cottage. He was not surprised to find that she had not shown up; but (since his suspicions included Elizabeth) he *was* surprised that she was not ready with a good story. He did not use his own. His pent-up anger, suddenly provided with an object, made him almost inarticulate. He crashed down the receiver; gave himself a stiff drink; and then set about reorganizing the rest of his day so as to allow some time for looking after his private property.

Over the first stretch of the road, his rage supported him. Then he began asking himself why he didn't just let her go quietly, and, finding no rational answer, he began to wonder if he hadn't been a bit hasty and would end up looking a fool.

He drove mechanically. With High Wycombe well behind, he could not bring himself to turn back. Better know the worst, he thought. He recalled that she had been crying, off and on, for two days, and felt almost remorseful. He didn't know what

the hell he could do about it, but he wished there was something. He even experienced a fleeting anxiety. The thought of her dead in a ditch was very unpleasant, and he thrust it away. She was a bloody bad driver, but there was no real reason for her buying it on this occasion any more than any other. It was just the sort of thing that sister of hers would suggest, in order to increase the confusion.

He was both relieved and disappointed to see her empty car outside the cottage. He smoothed his tonsured head, straightened his shoulders, and knocked. Elizabeth opened the door.

'Come in, Reggie. This is all rather silly, I'm afraid. Paula was lunching with some friends of ours in Oxford, and the lunch went on rather late, you know how it is.'

He followed her into the sitting-room. Curse these people, he thought, reacting violently to a touch of the grand manner in Elizabeth's speech and movement. It's like her impudence to play the hostess at me.

'Do sit down. That's the most comfortable chair. It seems we were both over-anxious.'

'Where is she?'

'I didn't think she was looking at all well, Reggie, and I sent her straight to bed. I'm very glad you decided to come, although it's all been a great nuisance for you, I'm afraid, because I do want to talk to you about her.'

'I wouldn't mind saying something myself.' Reggie's indignation was in fine fettle, but he was a little hampered by an old weakness that he had lately forgotten. He had married above his station.

That, possibly, was one of his deeper reasons for clinging to the marriage. The sharp, enterprising lad who had fought past others with less brains and more influence, was very susceptible to the intangible charms of an unquestioned birthright. He loved and he hated. He hated Elizabeth for her damned impertinence; and envied her nerve. She showed it again.

'Yes, of course. What did you want to say?'

'How much do you know?'

'I have hardly talked to Paula. As I say, she has not been here very long, and she's not an easy girl to talk to at the best of times. We both know that. But in any case, I'm more interested in what's going to happen now. You're naturally very angry with her, but I don't think she's well enough to see you just at present.'

'So you're protecting her?'

Elizabeth almost smiled. 'Up to a point. But I've no doubt she's treated you abominably; and I'm very sorry.'

Reggie looked at her in amazement. 'But you knew all about it, didn't you? You knew the man? And now you say you're sorry because they've been found out. I don't know where I am with you people. I don't know what's going on. I ought to have had more sense than to marry one of your artistic, cultured sort with no morals. Paula's not high-brow, thank God, but she's got all the rest. And you sit there trying to gloss it up, as if it was in one of these modern books.'

'You are quite wrong about me,' said Elizabeth coldly, 'I'm not trying to justify anything. I believe in a settled and civilized way of living – possibly more than you do. If you are imagining that Paula was brought up in a Bohemian sort of background, you have invented it for yourself. It's quite possible that you have condoned far more irregularities than I have even heard of.'

Reggie ran his finger round his collar. 'It's a different thing,' he said in a choking voice, 'if you can't trust your wife.'

'My dear Reggie, I know this has been quite appalling for you. If you want to divorce her, do it. If you want to forgive her, do it. But do it properly. And please, please don't shout at her.'

'I haven't been shouting,' said Reggie, modifying his voice.

'I don't mind it,' said Elizabeth, 'but Paula is terrified of you. She was in a frightful state when she heard that you were coming down for her.'

'Didn't she plan to come back?'

'She had no idea of doing anything else. She was upset because you were angry.'

'I wish she had a bit more spunk.'

'I often have, too. But it's no use, Reggie, that is the way she's made; and when she behaves worst, I believe she's often driven into it by some sort of fright. If you want her, you will have to be kind to her.'

'I suppose I see what you mean,' said Reggie, grudgingly, 'but what do I get out of it?'

'I am getting more and more certain that whatever she does, you are the person she is most deeply attached to.'

It was Reggie, finally, who asked if she would keep Paula for a little while, so that he could think things over and they could all have a bit of a rest. He felt strangely unsure of himself. The unsettling idea that there might be faults on both sides had been introduced, and although he could not really accept it, it created an unfamiliar disturbance in his mind.

Elizabeth told Edward that she thought she had done the most one could hope for. 'But it was rather horrible, I made him feel small, not very fairly. And some of the time, I almost liked him.'

40

RALPH had to walk most of the way into Oxford; but he did finally get a lift from the outskirts. He was dropped at Carfax. Outside the Town Hall, a large crowd was dispersing.

'What's happened? Who's in?'

A large, red-faced man with a bowler hat on the back of his head, stuck up two thumbs. 'We've made it all right,' he said. Ralph pursued his inquiry. 'Better luck next time,' said a lean young woman with a check scarf. 'Tory win again,' said a small man with a crooked Irish face. It was impossible to tell what he thought of it.

Ralph pushed his way through, and finally caught sight of Phoebe and Conway. 'Hi, there, you two, cheer up, the world isn't coming to an end.'

Phoebe looked at him sourly. 'It's all very well for you, you don't care.'

'I put a different emphasis that's all. This isn't the big battle.'

'You haven't worked for it the way we did,' said Phoebe. She was tired and disappointed, and sorely displeased by Ralph's flippancy. Even Conway was annoying her, by being calm and reasonable.

'In another few years,' he said, 'the tide will run our way.'

'I wanted to see it start now,' said Phoebe. 'There are too many people about like that stupid girl of Andrew's. And for some extraordinary reason, Ralph asks her to lunch.'

'She's not a bad girl when you get to know her. Unfortunate more than stupid.'

'You and Andrew are a pair of suckers,' said Phoebe. 'Just because she's pretty.' Conway took her arm, with the protective kindness of a husband whose wife is right-minded but tactless. Ralph waved his hand, and left them without suggesting that they were probably going the same way.

He reflected that Phoebe was a much nicer person than Paula,

but she was not so interesting. No doubt looks did have something to do with it. Phoebe's square workaday face expressed a kind and conscientious nature, but gave no suggestion of depth and distance. In Paula's face, all was implied and nothing revealed.

Ralph admitted to himself that she was very attractive, but he used the word impersonally, as if he were applying it to an *objet d'art.* What really attracted him was the fact that she was in trouble, and the suggestion of something irregular and shady at the back of it.

Poor old Andrew, he must have been right out of his depth. That, however, was apparently over, and a good thing too. Ralph was very fond of Andrew, but he could not see him feeling his way through the caverns of a dark soul.

Ralph's own competence remained untried for several days. Then, when he returned from the labs one stormy afternoon, he found Paula waiting in his room. She had not, evidently, been there long for she had not taken off her mackintosh, and her hair was plastered with rain. She looked like a boy of sixteen, and jumped up from the hearthrug with something of a boy's long-legged gaucherie.

'Is it all right, my coming to see you?'

'Lovely. But if you'd given me some warning, I should have been here. Take your coat off, and I'll blow the fire.'

'It was just chance. I'm partly at a concert, because Elizabeth keeps pestering me to get out and do something. But it was the sort of music that batters you. I couldn't stand it.'

'All the better for me, my dear. In a minute, we'll be able to make toast. Did I get you home in time, the other night.'

'Yes, it was all right. Reggie and I are having a sort of holiday.'

'My friends tell me that's a good plan.'

'Do you mean Anne? Did she tell you all about me too?'

'A bare minimum. Just enough to be useful. I wouldn't walk eight miles in the dark without any incentive.'

'Eight miles? How ghastly. I *do* thank you.'

'It was nothing, really. I'd do it again, but I hope it won't be wanted.'

'Well, Elizabeth says Reggie is calming down.'

'Good. Could you take hold of the toast while I make the tea?'

It seemed natural for Ralph to pour out. He sat in the big chair, and Paula curled herself up opposite, on the floor, with a cup on one side and a plate on the other. Her hair, drying, was beginning to lift into short close curls; and Ralph, as he held out his hand for a piece of singed toast, was very conscious of the piquant mixture of angel and tramp.

'Ralph, what do you think about love?'

'In theory, I approve of it.'

'Please don't laugh. I really want to know.'

'It's so hard to know where to start. There are so many disguises.'

'Do you mean you think it's all pretence?'

'Far from it. Our feelings are real all right; but we often call them by the wrong names.'

'Do you mean you agree with the people who say love is just sex?'

'I suppose I do, but only if you define sex very broadly, including all sorts of drives which are not overtly sexual.'

Paula frowned. 'That seems to take you back to where you started. I keep on thinking of much simpler questions that I can't answer. For instance, is it possible to love two people at once? And why do people fall out of love, just as easily as falling in?'

'I think one often falls in love with a dream of one's own,' said Ralph, now wholly serious, 'and it doesn't stand up to reality. Or else one's needs alter, and the dream seems silly.'

'I didn't *need* Andrew exactly. I just liked him very much. We used to get on very well, in every sort of way. And then I suddenly fell in love with him, but it wasn't just sex, we didn't stop getting on.'

'Why should you?'

'Well, you see, I've always loved Reggie, but we can never think of things to say to each other.'

'That's tough.'

'Probably it's all my fault. And of course Reggie is livid, because of Andrew. And you see, he knows everything. He probably thinks it all much worse than it is, because of course I'm not in love with Andrew any longer.'

Within a few minutes, she had embarked on telling Ralph *everything*. At last she had found the perfect confidant, a tolerant attentive listener, with whom she was safe from reproaches and from ridicule. He heard her out in silence, occasionally poking the fire, and once filling her cup.

'So you see, Ralph, this isn't really a holiday. I feel more like a girl who's been sent to a reformatory.'

'You only think that because you've mixed Reggie up with God.'

'God? I don't believe in God. Or at least only very vaguely.'

Ralph leaned forward, and, watching her puzzled face, tried to explain what he meant in simple language.

'You see, my dear, a great deal of what we think we know about life was learned when we were quite small children, and however grown-up we look, most of us have a lot of childish ideas and feelings which become more and more hampering as time goes on, and things don't fit so well into the nursery pattern. For instance, a little boy who is very attached to his mother, may go through life searching for someone exactly like her, and may decide that no one comes up to it. Or he may be so jealous of his father, on her account, that he thinks it's wicked to love anyone else, because it seems to him, in the childish part of his mind, that it's an attempt to take his father's place.'

'Is this real life, Ralph, or is it some sort of science?'

'It could be called the Oedipus complex, but it wouldn't help.'

'I don't honestly see where it fits in. Do your scientific books say anything about girls?'

'Roughly, the same thing in reverse. A girl can be so hopelessly in love with her father that she wants the other men in her life to be imitations of him. But it gets complicated, because some parts of her mind are more independent and pull in the opposite direction. Then the trouble is that the father you love is also the authority you are brought up to respect.'

Paula hugged her knees and gazed at him with half-shut eyes, still puzzled, still sceptical.

'I'm sorry. Am I very pompous and earnest about riding my hobby-horse? It's really all quite homely. You know the way the kids get round their mother most of the time; but the big rows are handed over to Dad, and what he says goes. For the rest of your life, you're likely to feel bad if you don't do what father tells you.'

'You may be right in general. I don't know. I wasn't brought up like that. I don't even remember my father.'

Ralph lay back and laughed. 'Now I think of it, I don't remember mine either.'

'Does it spoil the theory? I hope not. Even an explanation that I don't properly understand makes me feel less peculiar. Will you tell me some more another time? Elizabeth says I ought to look at the Ashmolean, and it would be much more fun if I came to see you too.'

Ralph gave her a standing invitation, and their friendship progressed with great rapidity. It remained, however, no more than friendship. Their interest was not so much in each other, as in the minute analysis of Paula's marriage, of her own attitude to it, and of the scrappy clues that she could provide to the enigmatic character of Reggie.

Ralph, influenced by a mixture of compassion and curiosity, was not troubled about waste of time; Paula was delighted to spend all the time she dared with him. She asked nothing better than to air and examine her pre-occupations in the company of someone who thought her worth bothering about.

She kept up the habit of sitting on the carpet, and sometimes

leaned against his knee. Sometimes he held her hand, in a firm and quiet grip, as if she were a child who had woken screaming with nightmare. Sometimes, he let his hand lie on her head. It seemed to him that the exorcism was beginning to work. From his point of view, their intimacy was entirely non-sexual. He had great need of affection, and, his whole capacity to love locked in frustration, he was able to give her what she seemed to want without fear.

'I like sitting at your feet,' she said, 'I feel so safe.'

41

THE conference was partly a get-together for British manufacturers, and partly an outing for associates from overseas. Reggie, who had considerable interests in this particular industry, had presided over one of the early sessions, and was invited to the final celebration.

In the vast room, there were many faces he recognized, and there was a comfortable familiarity about the proceedings — the swift, impersonal service, the long high table with covers on one side, and an agglomeration of small round tables packed between it and the far wall. The food and wine, exactly what he had expected, went down very easily. His neighbours on the less distinguished section of the high table were genial and their talk, a characteristic blend of optimism and complaint provided him with a certain amount of useful 'background' information.

He was quite glad Paula was still away. This was the sort of show she always hated. She used to get quite excited about dressing up and then acted dumb for the rest of the evening. Exasperating girl. Reggie stopped listening to a speech which was beginning to seem interminable. He contemplated the long ash of his cigar, with his lips slightly pouting, and thought about his young wife with unusual tolerance.

He was actually beginning to miss her. He was tired of being enraged, and surprised by the thoughts that strayed into his mind whenever he was off his guard. He found himself thinking, for instance, that one could hardly blame her for looking as if she were going to die of boredom when she listened to this sort of speech. It was rude, it was inconvenient, it didn't go down well with the rest of the crowd, but all the same, it was bloody natural.

He only wished he knew what she did enjoy. She was such a kid, didn't know what she wanted half the time, and couldn't say. Just hung around waiting for something to happen, and then sulked if it didn't suit her.

With mixed feelings, he recalled that he was supposed to frighten her. He told himself sternly that a bit of a fright now and then never did any woman any harm; kept them in order. Yet the recent failure of this fine system was obvious, and he was beginning to wonder if it hadn't gone wrong some time ago. He suddenly remembered with startling clarity how gay and sweet Paula was when he first knew her; and how quickly marriage changed her. The rare, incalculable charm, which seemed to set her apart from other women, did not survive.

Did he really shout too much? Could it be that his disappointment was matched by hers? Reggie fidgeted; and his left-hand neighbour glanced at him with sympathy. Someone was telling a long joke in broken English.

At last they were released. The company rose, and hastened up the double staircase to the bar on the balcony, while the waiters, in well-drilled teams, began shifting the tables off the dance floor. Reggie greeted acquaintances, keeping a sharp eye open for one or two useful contacts he was anxious to re-engage.

After a couple of drinks, he disentangled himself from the smaller fry, and went off to have a look round. Hullo, Reggie, how's it going? So-so, mustn't grumble. Hullo, Reggie, haven't seen you since your trip. Nice work, that.

He smiled and chatted, thinking of himself as a big, easy-going man, with friends everywhere. He was introduced to wives and daughters, smiled and chatted, and moved on. Then suddenly, he came to a stop.

'Hullo, Hazel, it's a long time since I've seen you. Where've you been hiding? And what have you done with Bill?'

The plump, red-haired woman who was leaning on the balustrade turned a startled face.

'Didn't you hear, Reggie, Bill died last August.'

'Good Lord, I'm awfully sorry. I don't know what to say, Hazel. Good old Bill. He was one of the best.'

'Yes, he was. I miss him horribly. I've been moping at home ever since. But the Steins dragged me along here, because Tilly

said I needed a change. Only I don't feel like enjoying myself. Bill and I always went everywhere together.'

'What happened, Hazel?'

'Some sort of stroke. He asked for it, I suppose. His sister was always at me to make him cut down the drink. But I hadn't the heart. Live and let live, that was our motto; and if Bill wanted a short life and a merry one, then that was his business. We did have some good times, Bill and I.'

Reggie was now leaning on the rail too. They were almost of a height, and could talk in this position with a great sense of privacy. Poor old Hazel thought Reggie, that was a nasty knock for her, but she's got what it takes. Her courage and loyalty impressed him; they seemed to spring from the same vigorous personality as her bright, wiry hair, and her large, mobile mouth.

'The family won't speak to me now. But I nursed him myself for six weeks. Good thing I'm strong as a horse.' She shifted her elbows. Reggie noticed that her shoulders were smoothly rounded, as if with dense muscles.

The band struck up. 'I don't suppose you feel like dancing?' he said anxiously.

'I might as well try,' she said. Then gave him a generous smile. 'Don't mind what I say, will you? I'm just warning you, I'm a bad bet.'

'I'm quite prepared to risk it,' said Reggie gallantly. He just noticed the Steins bearing down on them with drinks, but did not wait.

They both danced well. 'I'm not so heavy as I look, am I?' she said.

'Light as a feather.'

'It's nice, too. I'd forgotten I liked dancing.'

They lapsed into silence. Reggie, his left arm tightening, experimented with more complex steps, and Hazel floated into them with unhesitating ease. Reggie saw the Steins, a benign elderly couple, watching them. Tilly smiled and nodded, evidently gratified that her plan was working out so well.

The four of them watched the floor show. Hazel, relaxed and flushed, laughed till she choked over the tiny comedian; and told Reggie that the dancing was lousy: 'we could show them'. The Steins watched the whole performance very gravely. They did not want to break up the party, but liked to get to bed by midnight. Finally Tilly, after a whispered consultation, asked Reggie if he would look after their guest and see her home.

The arrangement pleased everyone. The Steins departed unobtrusively, and Reggie and Hazel went on to a club. Reggie, making the most of the evening, ordered champagne and oysters.

'This is just what I needed,' said Hazel, 'I've been living on snacks, and hardly ever see a soul.'

She ate and drank greedily, and Reggie watched her with approval. There is some satisfaction in spending money on a woman who likes what she gets. His approval was accompanied by a curious feeling of respect, partly caused by her bereavement and partly by the fact that she obviously knew her own mind, and could back up her opinions with considerable force, both mental and physical. Behind her, the be-ribboned cherubs on the walls looked very pallid.

'You're married, aren't you?' she said suddenly.

'Yes, but my wife's out of town. She hasn't been well.'

'Sorry about that. What's the trouble?'

'Nerves, I suppose.'

'That's bad luck. You don't look as if you could do with a sick wife.'

'It's a great worry. She's difficult. . . .'

Hazel, a little tipsy by now, laughed ironically. 'Come on, tell me she doesn't understand you.'

'Well, she doesn't.'

'And do you understand her?'

'Can't begin to.'

'Shall I pop in one day and knock your silly heads together?'

'It's past that.'

'Tell me about it, if you want to. I may laugh, but I'm sorry.

I struck so lucky myself. And you're a nice chap, Reggie, but perhaps you needed some managing.'

'What about live and let live?'

'Oh, of course, I ban nagging. But most men need a good deal of jollying along, and a brisk row now and again clears the air. You ought to have seen Bill and me chucking the plates about. A waste of good money it was, but worth it. We always knew we'd have a good time making it up afterwards.'

'We haven't got around to making it up.'

'Want to?'

'If she behaves.'

'You'll make me cry in a minute. Such a nice chap, and your wife doesn't behave.'

'You see, it was like this . . .'

'That's all right, dear, tell mamma. Only don't play with my foot at the same time. It isn't nice. One or the other, son, not the two together.'

She smiled at him amiably, her green eyes slightly glazed. Reggie drew back his foot obediently, and began to unburden his mind. She seemed to be listening, and occasionally murmured something. But as he plunged further into his story, he left no gap for her comment. He might have been talking to himself, while she stared at her glass, and rolled the stem between her fingers.

'Well?' said Reggie, his impetus exhausted.

'You did have bad luck, Reggie, coming home like that. But from what you tell me, she doesn't sound like your type at all; and that was bad luck for her, right from the start. You might have guessed you were biting off more than you can chew.'

'I thought she'd grow up.'

'You can't ever count on that sort of thing, life's taught me that. It's no use expecting anyone to change their habit of mind, unless it might be yourself.'

'I've made a lot of allowances,' said Reggie defensively, 'I'm ready to take her back.'

'Yes, on a new contract, with a lot of extra clauses. Sounds a bit grim to me. Can't you put a bit of heart into it?'

'Why should I?'

'Because nothing else works, that I know of; and I hate to see a good man wasted.'

Reggie sat more upright. 'She's not an ordinary girl,' he said. 'I'm not perfect, but I haven't been a bad husband. This wouldn't have happened with another sort of woman. If I'd married you, for instance. . . .'

'Too true it wouldn't have happened. I'd have come along to South America with you, to see the world and keep you out of mischief. Catch me missing a good trip. Get the bill now, will you dear, I must get on home.'

'The night's still young,' said Reggie, 'now that I've told you all my troubles, there's still time to enjoy ourselves.'

'Not just now, thank you dear. I'm lonely and I like you and I'm half way sozzled; but I've enough sense to know I've done enough trouble-shooting for one evening.'

'It's done me good. When shall I see you again?'

'This year, next year, some time.' Reggie looked very crestfallen, and she laughed. 'I'm only telling you it doesn't do to take too much for granted. But don't worry. I've loved meeting you, I hope I see you again and hear how you're getting on.'

Reggie had some difficulty, afterwards, in summing up the general sense of the meeting. He felt both chastened and refreshed; eager to set his affairs in order but very doubtful how to set about it.

He woke next morning with a wonderful feeling of energy, but no further enlightenment. Throughout a busy day, he thought occasionally of himself and Paula. For the first time, he seemed to see the two of them down a long perspective, pitiably ill-matched, tugging at each other's nerves, and incapable of speaking the same language. For the first time, too, he was conscious of an odd kind of guarded sympathy for her.

He thought also about Hazel. A fine woman, a woman who

made you feel comfortable, because you knew where you stood. Moreover, she liked him, and said so; she took an interest; she wanted to know how he was getting on.

Her influence was very powerful, but it pushed him in two ways at once. He wanted to come up to her expectations by doing the decent thing; but she had set a standard of easy intimacy which he could never hope to attain in his present marriage. He hung for some while in doubt. Then, late that night, composed his last letter to Paula.

It was quite a sensible and friendly letter, and probably one of the most candid statements Reggie had ever in his life made. He said that he would have been prepared to forgive and forget, if he were convinced that it would bring happiness to either of them. But, after long reflection, it now seemed to him that their temperamental incompatibility was too great to bridge, and that any attempt to do so would only cause prolonged suffering. He was generous enough to admit that he too might be somewhat to blame; and reminded her that she was still young enough to make a fresh start. He wished her luck; and proposed to make things easy by supplying her with evidence.

The evening post had gone, so he walked to the post office with the idea of catching an earlier collection in the morning. The night was cold and raw, but he strolled home as if it were a summer evening. It was a long time since he had felt so well.

Hazel could not complain that he had been cold-hearted or cautious or stingy. It was the sort of impulsive, injudicious letter she might have written herself. He had handed Paula everything – the cash and the credit, and even the opportunity for a promising defence on grounds of collusion. He laughed aloud when he thought how green his lawyers would turn.

They needn't worry. Paula was bound to snatch at the chance. In an impossible situation, he had constructed a face-saving way of escape for her. And for himself.

42

'THE thing is, Ralph, I feel much better about Reggie since we had all these talks. I know I've always been a perfect ninny, and encouraged him to push me around, and didn't know what to do with myself when he wasn't there. I see all that. And I believe you when you say that understanding oneself is half the battle. I'm sure I can behave a bit more sensibly now. And although I keep on explaining to you that it's *impossible* to be nice to him if he's in a mood, I might try sticking my neck out if you really think it would work. Only the thing is. . . .'

She got up and stood on the fender, frowning over the communication that had somehow got blocked.

'Is it difficult to say?' asked Ralph, 'or difficult to think?'

'It's just embarrassing. Ralph, do you worry about whether people like you?'

'If it's somebody I'm very fond of.'

'That's just it. Normal people worry sometimes, but I do it always, about practically everyone. I expect you would say something happened to me in my cradle, and I do know it goes back almost as far as I can remember. Elizabeth and Marian were so clever. They shone. And I was just dumb. I knew I was pretty, but I didn't seem to get anything for it. I wasn't the one person for anybody.'

'You told me once you had nine proposals.'

'It was seven really. And the funny thing was they didn't seem to make much difference. I thought it was a kind of whim, just as Elizabeth's friends would play with me for a bit, when I was younger, and then get caught up again in grown-up conversation when I wasn't looking. I still went on thinking nobody liked me much, even when I was engaged to two people at once.'

Ralph moved the fire-irons to a safer position. 'How did you manage that?'

'For the same reason. I thought they would be annoyed if I said No. We were none of us very serious, and they never found out. Reggie suddenly appeared and everything else lapsed. You see, it was all so unexpected, I didn't think he'd noticed me at all. So when he did, I felt quite certain that he must like me.'

'I've no doubt he did.'

'Yes. But you see how it is. All my good resolutions will be quite pointless if he doesn't like me now. My whole life will be pointless.'

She tottered on her perch. 'Do sit down,' said Ralph, 'you're on the point of catching fire.'

'I'm restless.'

'Come on.'

It was impossible to say whether she mis-read the invitation, or whether she felt a need for some close and re-assuring contact. At all events, she put herself down on his knee and dropped her head on his shoulder.

He couldn't have been kinder. 'Do you want a good cry?' he said, feeling for his handkerchief.

'I don't know. I want something. I feel such an outcast.'

'If you're as nice to poor Reggie as you are to me, he'll like you all right.'

'You do think of the most comforting things, Ralph.' He felt her relaxing. She was very small and light. He could imagine picking her up and putting her down as if she were a kitten; and, like a kitten, she caught his affections without in any way stirring his senses. He let his right hand come to rest on her bony, boyish knee, and his left hand on her waist, which gave, he noticed, a pleasant impression of flexibility, like a well-oiled hinge. He was perfectly comfortable and contented. The offer of a shoulder to cry on had evidently been well-timed; it had forestalled the tears.

'But Ralph,' the muffled voice came from almost under his chin. 'You have been such a help to me in so many ways. And

when I go back to Reggie, I won't be able to tell you things, and ask your advice.'

'You'll have to make your own way some time, my dear. And after all, you can write to me. I won't forget you.'

'Do you promise?'

'I don't mind promising, but there's no need. You must never forget, Paula, that I'm your friend. I like you, I shall go on liking you. I don't mind what you say to me, nothing you do makes any difference, you can depend on me absolutely.'

She settled closer against his arm, enjoying a wonderful sense of ease and security; and he let her light curls brush his cheek, enjoying the knowledge that he had made her happier. They were quite silent for some minutes. Then, in a sleepy, smiling voice she spoke again.

'Sometimes I think everything else has been imitation and pretence, and that you are the only person in the whole world who really loves me.'

While she was speaking, she turned round so as to put her arms round his neck. He suddenly felt the curve of her breast pressing on his ribs and her long thigh slipping under his inert fingers. The obvious thought, *this is a woman*, suddenly took shape in his mind for the first time, and brought with it a sense of terror and disgust so profound and so violent that it was quite beyond control. A pricking sweat broke out on his forehead and he gave an animal cry, somewhere between a gasp and a groan.

To Paula, he looked like a madman; and his words, when at last he found them, conveyed nothing more than the simple, brutal gesture of rejection.

'Not you, not you,' he muttered; and tipped her off on the rug like a piece of unwanted luggage. Then he got up and stood with his fists pressed against his eyes, shaking from head to foot.

Frozen with shock and anxiety, she stared up at him, without moving. Several minutes went past before he gained courage to look at her while, through the maelstrom of emotion, through

the unreasoning conviction that he had been betrayed and deceived, his habitual self groped for the familiar decencies. And at last he was able to speak.

'I'm a lot crazier than you are, Paula. I shall never love anyone the way you mean it. I haven't got it in me. You'd better get back to your Reggie as soon as you can.'

'I'm sorry, Ralph. I don't know what I did, but I'm sorry.'

'It's nothing to do with you. This is all my fault.' Paula, unaware that she had masqueraded through his imagination in the guise of his other love, only understood that he was trying to let her down lightly. And it seemed to her that he must have forgotten all she had ever told him, if he could cherish so foolish a hope.

'I suppose I was just a whim,' she said. 'You see how it is. That's what always happens to me, except with Reggie.'

'You must go back. Don't wait to be asked. Just tell him you're coming, and then go.'

'Yes, I'd better. I don't seem to be much use to anyone else.'

He made no response, and to her that was confirmation enough. But she tried once more. 'Are you all right?'

'I've made a fool of myself, that's all. I shall get over it.'

'I wish I could understand.'

The sight of her face, puzzled, innocent and sad, turned towards him from the door, touched a nerve of pity in him. But there was nothing he could do.

'Don't try. Forget it. Laugh it off.' And he did indeed, giving a crow of laughter, whose mocking echoes pursued her as she fled.

She drove home slowly, thinking out what she should say to Reggie. As soon as she got to the house, she saw his letter and for a moment imagined that he too had regretted the estrangement which brought nothing but disaster with it.

'You're late,' called Elizabeth. 'Come to supper.'

'Just a minute.' She ploughed on through the aggressive, irregular script. So Reggie had finished with her too. She did

not take in much else, except that he seemed absurdly optimistic about her chances of a fresh start.

'What are you laughing at?' called Elizabeth.

'Reggie's made a joke. A raw joke, it's not at all funny.'

'Bring your letter in. The soup's getting cold.'

'I shan't be a minute. I left something in the car.'

She closed the front door behind her, and closed the garden gate. Then she started the car and drove off. She did not want to go back the way she had come, so she took the by-roads towards Cirencester. It was raining, but she had not waited to put up the hood. The rain beat upon her face and mingled with her tears.

43

THE big car coming out of Cirencester had one occupant. He was a middle-aged actor, a sensitive and gifted person whose prospects on the stage had been strictly limited by the shape of his body, which was exceptionally large, round and heavy. He had, however, been consistently successful in character parts, on stage and screen, to which he usually gave some real character; and his voice was well known on the radio, where he could speak, invisibly, the great parts for which he had the understanding and the instrument.

His life was happy. The ambition to play Hamlet had been put away long ago, just as children give up the ambition to fly. Because he was reliable and generous, he was popular with his fellow actors, and in one particularly lunatic film production the large, inchoate team might have burst apart if he had not provided a small island of sanity. He had many friends; he loved his wife; and at last, after several disappointments, was hoping for a child.

The night was cold. A thin soaking rain was falling. As he left behind him the last scattered houses of the town and turned off the main road he was surprised by the darkness. He drove carefully. The surface was treacherous, and his range of vision was uncertain, confused by shadows and reflections.

He saw the headlights of another car coming up over a hump. He dipped his own lights, then flashed a signal. The distance was hard to judge, but the glare was already making bright patches in the rain, and hiding the line of road and hedge.

He flashed again, more as a reproach than a warning, for he did not yet scent danger. However, he slowed a little, and drew over to his own side of the road.

He had misjudged the further distance. It had seemed at first that the car was not going very fast. But suddenly, at a slight curve in the road, and with a different angle of light, he realized

that it was bearing down on him, fully lit, at a desperate speed and swinging from side to side.

Till the last minute, he thought he could squeeze by. But then he saw a glimpse of verge, and a looming hedge, within a few feet of the approaching wheels. He drew dangerously close to it, his large, careful hands moving neatly and automatically. He felt the jerk of his own brakes, savagely applied, and heard or felt something hit him in the rear; and was then knocked out by a stunning blow in the solar plexus.

He woke dizzy, hearing a penetrating voice – a vile mixture of midland and cockney – squealing against his ear.

'You all right, mate? What's this going on? I been trying to get your door open, but can't shift it.'

The actor turned his head with caution. A match scratched, and he saw a narrow face, small twitching eyes, a row of ruined teeth, a faded muffler.

The actor winced from the light. The man let it burn on to the tips of his calloused fingers, and then swore briefly. 'No blood, at all events,' he said, and struck another match. The actor lifted his hands. They were not quite steady, but they worked. He stretched a leg, and found that that worked too. The other leg seemed immobile, but, as his senses returned, he found that it was only rammed against the gear lever. 'I think I'm all right. But what happened?'

'Couldn't say. I come along and find you in this mess-up. You got good brakes, I can tell you that. I seen the skid-marks.'

'There was another car,' said the actor. He was starting to edge his way uphill out of the driving seat, trying to keep his dizzy head level.

'I'll say. Ran up on a heap of gravel, and turned half-over like.'

'But the people? There must have been people in it?'

'Looks like they've hopped it. Flash car it was, might have been pinched.'

'We must go and look. I'm all right.'

'Sure?' The man scuttled round to the far door, and with surprising gentleness helped the actor out. 'I thought of getting on to call up the cops. But I didn't like to leave you, see. Let alone I've got three tons of scrap metal up, and I thought to myself, there'll be someone along with a bit more speed.'

'Have you got a torch?'

'No such thing, mate. But I could bring the truck up and have a look-see. Though my hunch is they've left you to it. A bit high they must have been. I seen their marks on the wrong side of the road.'

'Get the truck, would you? I remember now, they must have been drunks or lunatics. But we'd better make sure.'

'Whatever you say, mate.'

The actor stood in the road. The fresh air, and the rain, buffeted his sluggish wits, and relieved the terrible feeling of nausea. He found he could walk. Groaning and clattering, the lorry pulled up towards him. The circle of light moved over the shining road, and the tangled encompassing hedges. First he saw the small green car, with two wheels in the air; and then the still figure of a woman.

The brakes of the truck grated. The actor, his throat aching, walked across the road and bent over her. She was a young woman with the remote and flowerlike beauty which does not long outlast childhood. She was lying with consummate ease and grace on a bed of rough grass, and might have been sleeping. Her eyes were closed, and a strand of black hair had fallen over her forehead.

The driver came up. 'Thrown half a dozen yards,' he said, his voice shaking. 'What ought we do?' said the actor, 'If it's a head injury, say, we shouldn't move her.'

The driver crouched beside her. The actor, recognizing a better confidence, waited. A head injury, a spinal injury, no blood at all events. He tried to give himself hope.

'I seen this sort of thing in Gallipoli,' said the driver. 'Looks like it's the finish for her, poor kid.'

They looked at her in silence for some moments. Then the driver rose to his feet.

'I'd better get on to the cops, soon as I can make it. Sure you'll be all right here?'

'I shall be all right.'

'I'll have a try if you like getting your car out, so that you could have a bit of light.'

'I don't think we need light.'

'O.K. then. Be seeing you. Looks like I'll be some time getting to Doncaster.'

The actor was left alone in the darkness with the dead girl. La belle inconnue. Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died young.

The leaves rustled. The rain was beginning to drip from his hat. He wondered what fate had driven her, and what hopes died with her beauty; and also, from a heart in which piety and scepticism were perpetually at war, he gave a thought to her future.

The mystery of death had never been so close to him. He tried to think of a prayer, and began murmuring aloud, in a voice as gentle as the patter of the rain.

'O God, who declarest thy almighty power most chiefly by showing mercy and pity; mercifully grant unto us such a measure of thy grace. . . .'

He could not remember any more. Paula lay quiet, with the light rain falling on her, perhaps blest by this petition, from a friend who did not know her to powers she had not acknowledged, for a compassion that is offered, like the rain, unconditionally.

44

THE whole school was at work. But the lady who appeared at the door and asked if she might see Andrew as soon as he was free, was not kept waiting long. The Headmaster, impressed by her manner, so serious and so undemanding, left her in his study, and went himself to relieve his favourite junior master.

The room was small, with two faded armchairs by the fire, and a desk, heaped with papers, under the window. The four walls were covered to the ceiling with photographs – panoramas of the whole school; groups of boys assembled round a challenge cup or wearing, a little awkwardly, their costumes for a Christmas play; and more formal pictures of the old boys, some from the far past, speckled and faded.

Elizabeth caught sight of one, in a subaltern's uniform of 1918, who reminded her a little of Edward. Then she heard the door open, and turned to face Andrew.

'I came myself,' she said, 'because there is some bad news. Paula has been killed in a road accident.'

Andrew stood quite still. The muscles of his face tightened; and his mind, reeling from the blow, made the rash, instinctive gesture of self-preservation – what is that to do with me?

'I thought,' said Elizabeth, 'that you might not have seen it in the papers; and would want to know. And I came myself, because I am fond of you.'

The courage to know it, and the courage to say it with simplicity, did not come easy. She could not even be sure that he could take in what she said, yet she felt it necessary to offer him the fragments of truth that remained unshaken in the midst of her sorrow.

'Me?' said Andrew. It seemed quite irrelevant. Yet, as his defences crumbled, and left him confronted by the appalling question he could not answer, he was able to appeal to her. 'Was it my fault?'

She shook her head. She understood very well what he meant, for she herself had lain sleepless night after night, asking herself how much she was to blame. She gave Andrew, first, the simple answer.

'It was an accident. The verdict was death by misadventure. She was thrown out of her car, and they say she must have been killed instantly. The other driver was exonerated. You know, she drove very recklessly.'

'But this is what she threatened to do.'

'Did she?' Elizabeth's resolute spirit shrank. The burden that lay so heavily on both of them was hard to lift. For a moment, she was much tempted to leave him to make his own bargain with his conscience. Surely she had borne enough? A sudden sense of acute physical oppression warned her that her own powers were not inexhaustible.

She forced herself to look at his sad and stubborn face, and drove her imagination to read it with justice and pity. In the long watches of the night she had grieved over Paula, the lost child, as a victim of greed and blindness and negligence; and she had not spared any of those who might have offered her a firmer hold on life. Yet she was aware, too, of the tragic poverty of spirit in Paula herself, and now, her rage spent and her tears shed, she was content to inquire no further.

One thing remained – to challenge the terrible revenge that the dead girl could still bring upon the living. It seemed to Elizabeth that this last service was required of her, as an act of reparation and an act of faith. She herself had failed, and at certain moments when her exhausted mind reached a condition of almost visionary clarity, she had seen all the evil of the whole world condensed into the single substance of cold impermeable egotism.

She was tempted to despair. Here she stood, an interfering elderly woman, face to face with a boy whose nature she could only conjecture, whose instinct to forget might well outweigh his need to understand or the liberating impulse to forgive. She

felt very stupid, very tired, and mercilessly oppressed by the stuffiness of the small room.

'Could we go out of doors?' she asked him.

Obediently, he led her out through the large hall, and past a string of huts equipped for painting and handwork. 'These are all Christmas presents for the parents,' said Andrew, as they passed a collection of calendars, pipe-racks, and assorted boxes with a high varnish. 'Some of them are not very good.'

They walked down the long drive. 'I believe, as you do,' said Elizabeth, 'that Paula may sometimes have wanted to escape. She was not happy. And she could have forgotten that other people might be injured.'

'She always did forget,' said Andrew, bitterly; and was immediately contrite. Elizabeth gave him only a mild look, and went on speaking quite calmly.

'She was very unfortunate in her marriage. If you have seen Reggie, you can understand that. But I am sorry for him now. And Ralph, it seems, met her just before the accident, and he, too, is very wretched. He feels, as we all do, that he should somehow have prevented it. He was at the inquest, but he was not called. The evidence of the other driver, and of a lorry-driver who came past afterwards, was enough. It was raining, Andrew, and her car was open, and she can't have been able to see very clearly. There is no evidence of intention, and I am quite certain in my own mind that the intention, if it existed, was only very vague and fleeting.'

'I should like to believe it,' said Andrew.

'The other driver says that she seemed to pull away at the last minute, a few seconds too late. He came to see us; and was very kind. I think he took Ralph home after the inquest. I was glad of that, because the poor boy needs friends. Will you go and see him soon?'

'But what can I say or do?' said Andrew desperately. 'Paula had finished with me. We had done each other enough damage, nothing else, from beginning to end.'

'Are you really so unforgiving?'

Andrew stood stock still. 'If you had any happiness together,' said Elizabeth, 'if she ever showed you any kindness, or taught you any generosity, it is wicked to let it be poisoned by ingratitude.'

'We were very happy,' said Andrew, 'for a very short time.'

Elizabeth sighed. 'She did not have much happiness. If you remember that, you will perhaps be able to forgive her, and yourself, too.'

She had no more, for the present, to say to him. When she left, he wandered about the coppice in a kind of stupor. Her words were lodged in his memory like a phrase of music with no literal meaning. He could not take, yet, the path she had shown.

As feeling revived, a broken sob burst from his throat. Helpless as a child, he leaned against a tree, possessed by a dark and formless sorrow. He was quite alone, so detached from thought and action that even the image of Paula was faint. His own loneliness filled him, and brought with it a kind of relief – the calm of despair.

The sound of a bell reminded him that his loneliness was not private. The boys were out. He made a lethargic attempt to regain the appearance of an ordinary simple schoolmaster, finally, after some stretch of time he made his way back along the drive. Almost immediately, he was dragged roughly back to the trivial events of life. Young Beasley hurled himself out from the bushes and stood choking before him, alarmed and speechless.

'Oh, sir, p . . . p . . . lease . . .'

'Take it slowly.'

'It's P . . . p . . . otters, sir, he's st . . . tuck in a t . . . t . . . tree.'

Andrew felt his hand clutched. He was taken at a run to the one big, difficult tree, the tree the elder boys regarded as a test of courage. Beasley, with an expression of great alarm, pointed upwards. On a high branch, Potters was clinging to the trunk, absolutely immobile, his face hidden.

'He gets dizzy,' said Beasley. 'But he wanted to conquer it. And now he's stuck.'

Andrew surveyed the route, while Beasley watched him hopefully. It was not a difficult climb for a tall man and Andrew was about to start up to the rescue when he suddenly seemed to see, in that small and shrinking body, another kind of appeal. He narrowed his eyes, and followed the branches down.

'Hullo, Potters, can you hear me?'

There was no answer. Andrew called again.

'I can see good holds for you all the way. Don't look down, but keep your right hand round the trunk, and move your left down about six inches. You'll find a branch there. Get a good grip on it before you do anything else.'

There was a long pause. Then a small filthy hand began to grope downwards.

'Good boy. That's a start. You'll be all right. Don't look down, but you can move your right foot now, down and to the right. A little more to the right, you're nearly there. That's got it. . . .'

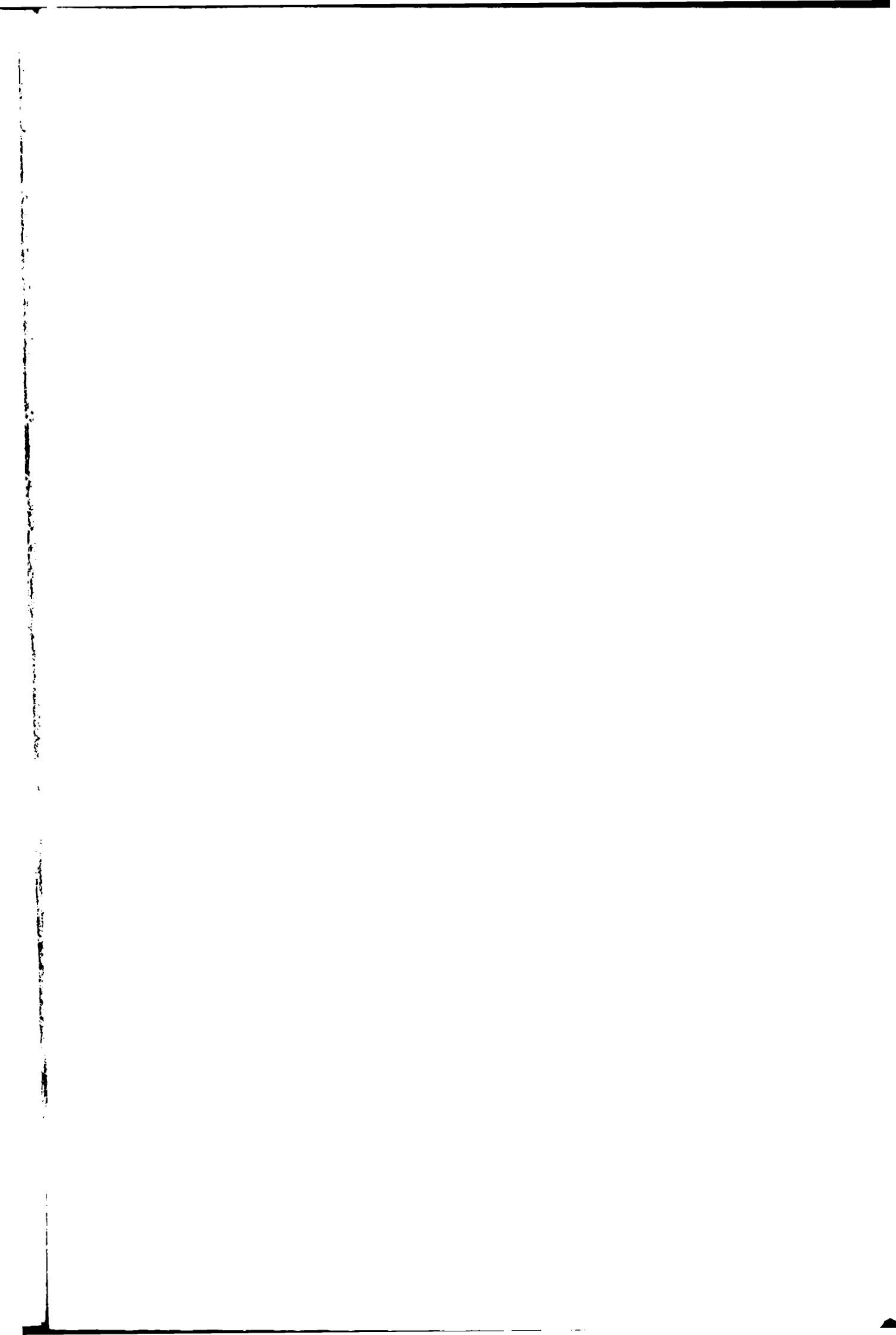
Beasley breathed heavily. Potters, slowly and silently, followed the directions. Andrew felt his neck aching and his voice growing hoarse. Within a few feet of the ground Potters spoke at last, in a voice still shaking with fright.

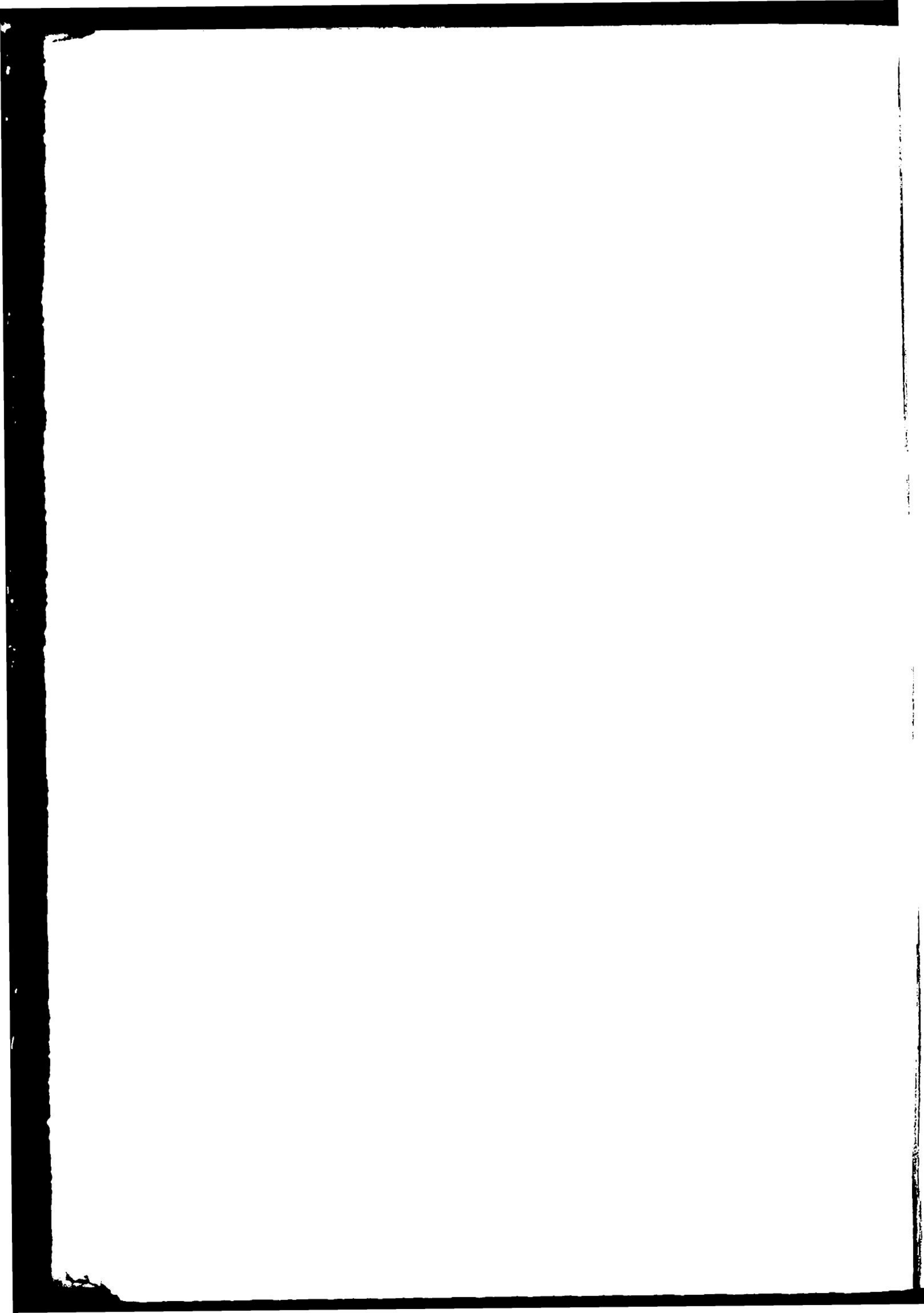
'Am I nearly there?'

'You can jump now if you like. I'll catch you.'

Potters hesitated, collecting his courage, and jumped. Andrew set him on the ground. Instantly, his colour returned.

'That was jolly good, sir,' he said, smiling happily. 'I honestly thought I was stuck for the rest of my life.'





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