

# **eBook**

## **Balloons by Elizabeth Bibesco**

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# Balloons

BALLOONS

I

HAVEN

[To CLARENCE DAY, JR.]

"You should only," we are told, "wear white in early youth and old age. It is very becoming with a fresh complexion or white hair. When you no longer feel as young as you were, other colours are more flattering. Also, you should avoid bright lights and worry."

Here, the beauty specialist reminds you of the specialist who says in winter, "Avoid wet feet and germs." In spite of both, we are still subjected to sunshine and anxiety and rain and microbes.

But there are risks which the would-be young can and should avoid. Surely Miss Wilcox ought to have known better than to flop down on the grass with an effort and a bump, clasping (with some difficulty) her knees because Vera, who is sixteen, slim and lithe, with the gawky grace of a young colt, had made such an obvious success of the operation!

It is better not to sit on the grass after thirty when sprawling at all is difficult, let alone sprawling gracefully.

Poor Miss Wilcox! At seventeen she had been a pretty, bouncing girl with bright blue eyes, bright pink cheeks and brighter yellow hair. All the young men of the neighbourhood had kissed her in conservatories or bushes and to each in turn, she had answered, "Well, I never!"

Then an era of intellectual indifference to the world set in. She read Milton in a garret and ate very little. When addressed, she gave the impression of being suddenly dragged down from some sublime pinnacle of thought. This was the period of absent-mindedness, of untidiness, of unpunctuality, for she was convinced that these three ingredients compose the spiritual life. But it was not a success. True, her cheeks lost their roses, but without attaining an interesting transparent whiteness and her figure became angular, rather than thin. Cold food, ugly clothes and enforced isolation began to lose their charms and Miss Wilcox abandoned the intellectual life.

She discovered that men were her only interest---probably she had always known it. Even the curate, who was like a curate on the stage, was glorified into an adventurous possibility from the mere fact that he belonged to that strange, tropical species---the other sex.

Unfortunately, Miss Wilcox, who was practical and orderly, knew just "what men liked in a woman." It was, it appeared, necessary to be bright---relentlessly bright, with a determined, irrelevant cheerfulness which no considerations of appropriateness could check and it was necessary to have "something to say for yourself" which in Miss Wilcox's hands, meant a series of pert tu quoques of the "you're another" variety. Her two other axioms, "Don't let them see that you care for them" and "feed the beasts," were alas! never put to the test as no man had ever considered the possibility of being loved by Miss Wilcox and the feeding stage had, in consequence, never been reached.

Nevertheless, in defence of her theses, Miss Wilcox was rough-toughed in public, while in private, she studied recipes and articles on cooking. As hope gradually began to give way to experience, Miss Wilcox came to the conclusion that

she frightened men off. They regarded her, she imagined, as cold and indifferent and unapproachable. "I don't cheapen myself," she would say, forgetting her conservatory days. In her heart of hearts, she imagined herself in humble surrender, laying her strong personality at the feet of a still stronger one and being gently lifted up on to a pedestal. It was curious, she thought, that her wonderful, unique gift of tenderness should go unperceived. But how is one to show that one is tender? It is so difficult for a maiden lady, living alone. She saw visions of a huge man with whimsical, smiling eyes, who after seeing her two or three times would call at her cottage. He would stand in the door and simply say, "Ellen," and she would put her head on his shoulder and cry gently while he stroked her hair. "Does my loving you make you sad, little one?" he would say, and she would answer, "No, no, they are tears of happiness."

Miss Wilcox thought it would be delightful to be called "little one." And then, rather nervously and tremulously, she would murmur, "I am afraid I am not very beautiful," and he would laugh a deep, joyous laugh and say, "To me, you are the most beautiful woman in the world."

But it never happened. Even the chinless curate, whose voice without consonants gave the effect of an intoning bumble-bee, never took advantage of her suggestions (frequently repeated) that he should drop in to tea.

She tried to learn lawn-tennis and chess, but driving a ball into a net and studying problems in the Sunday papers becomes very monotonous. It was extraordinary how little provision life seemed to have made for superior people with fastidious tastes, whereas an empty head and a pretty face conquers the world! Miss Wilcox was very proud of the epigram, "empty heads and pretty faces." She used it frequently, more in sorrow than in anger. Vera was an excellent example. She was incapable of "conducting a conversation," she never read a book, but simply because her eyes sparkled and somehow or other, she always reminded you of a Shepperson drawing, she was invariably surrounded by a host of adorers. She was indifferent to the axioms, "boys will be boys" and "gentlemen are different." In her philosophy, "girls would be boys" and the difference between the sexes was simply one of what you might and might not do.

"A positive savage," Miss Wilcox would explain and then, "You should be more womanly, dear; men like a womanly woman." And Vera's eyes would sparkle maliciously, for men undoubtedly did like Vera.

I do not know at what moment in life, if ever, we realise that we are neither George Sands nor Juliets. Of course, if we are not beautiful, we recognise early that beauty is nothing. What are features? The only thing that matters is to have charm and expression. Then comes that horrible gnawing doubt of our own magnetism. Is it possible that, though we are not lovely, we are not irresistible either? That we will have to go through life belonging neither to the triumphantly beautiful nor to the triumphantly ugly? Miss Wilcox knew that she was not exactly clever. But after all, what is prettiness and "men don't like clever women." So she consoled herself with the thought that though her manner "permitted no liberties," the warm tenderness of her true nature must be apparent to the really discerning.

Poor Miss Wilcox! She had tried brightness and common-sense, Milton and lawn-tennis, the arch and the aloof. She would have liked to have been seductive and a little wicked, but she had found it easier to be dignified and very good. Easier but no more satisfactory. Evidently charm was a strange, mysterious thing, for which there was no recipe. A dangerous force governing many things and subject to no law.

Every one was kind to Miss Wilcox. Lady Mary (Vera's mother) was always asking her to picnics and lawn-tennis, parties and festivities of all sorts. On these occasions, Sir Harry invariably chaffed her about the curate, little knowing that his foolish jokes were a source of exquisite and almost guilty pleasure to her. Was it, she wondered, altogether fair to let him think that Mr. Simpson loved her? But she did enjoy it so much, the nervous agonising sense of expectancy and then the sudden hot blush. "Their little secret," Sir Harry called it and though, of course, it was very wicked of her to let him continue under a misapprehension, it was so difficult to clear the matter up, as, the more she protested, the more confused she became, the more he was bound to think that there was something in it.

Poor Miss Wilcox, battling with her conscience when Mr. Simpson's passion was an invention of Vera's to whom old maids and curates were simply stage properties. Vera with her long legs and her laughing eyes and her happy, unimaginative youth---how was she to know that the Simpsons of life stand for romance and mystery and longings unachieved? To some people the impossible is impossible. One fine day they wake up in the morning knowing that they will never hold the moon in their hands and with the certainty, perfect peace descends on them.

Miss Wilcox was not like that. She couldn't settle down to decorating the church and organising village entertainments. She woke up every morning sure that something was going to happen and went to bed every night dissatisfied in proportion to her confidence.

And then, quite close together, two things did happen. Miss Wilcox was left a small fortune and Vera became engaged to be married.

The wedding, of course, was a great dramatic event. The preparations engulfed everybody. What flowers should the triumphal arches be made of and were the fair or the dark bridesmaids to be considered in the bridesmaids' dresses? Miss Wilcox gave her advice freely and tied cards on to presents but she felt unaccountably depressed. This, of course, was because dear little Vera whom she had known since a child, whom she had loved as a child, was leaving them and plunging into this strange, unknown adventure. What an uncertain thing marriage, what an elusive thing happiness! At nights she would dream of white satin figures shrouded in white tulle veils, of shy, passionate bridegrooms and shy, radiant brides. Sometimes she would see Vera's face and sometimes her own and often in the morning, she would find her pillow wet. "It will be you and Simpson next," Sir Harry teased her. But somehow the remark no longer pleased her and she no longer blushed.

And then, one day she couldn't bear it any more. Without saying a word to any one she went to London. A thick orange fog greeted her, a wonderful, mysterious fog, creating immense prehistoric silhouettes, a fog which freed you from old accustomed sights and sounds so that your individuality seemed at last to be released and to belong exclusively to you.

Gratefully Miss Wilcox accepted this gift of privacy. London belonged to her, there were no prying eyes. Slowly she walked along the pavement peering into shop windows. It was difficult to see anything. At last she distinguished a blur of gold and jewels. She walked on and then back again. She stood still. Her heart was in her mouth. Resolutely she pushed the door open. The brightness blinded her, the sudden warmth made her feel dizzy. Weakly she sat on a chair. A sympathetic salesman asked her if he could do anything for her. "No, thank you," she murmured faintly, "if I might sit here a moment."

Gradually she recovered and walked out again. The fog was thicker than ever. The traffic had stopped. People bumped into her with muttered apologies. Hesitatingly, wearily, she walked along. At last, she reached another jeweller's. Firmly, quickly she walked in. How was she to ask for what she wanted?

"What can I do for you, Madam?"

She looked up like a frightened animal.

"I've lost my wedding ring," she stammered. "It was a broad gold one. I---I don't want my husband to discover it."

How easy it was after all.

The salesman was very sympathetic. She looked at a great number of rings, toying with them in voluptuous hesitation. She enjoyed fingering them. At last she chose one. The gold band on her finger frightened her. It made her feel a

strange, different person, rather disreputable and quite unlike herself.

Miss Wilcox went to the Ritz. It was, she felt, a place where married ladies without husbands would be neither noticed nor commented on. There is, after all, nothing so very unusual in a wedding ring and Miss Wilcox's appearance did not arouse idle and libelous speculations. But still, she felt safer at the Ritz---there is something so conspicuous about a quiet hotel.

The next day the fog had been cleared away and the sun, emerging after a day's rest, sparkled with refreshed gaiety. Miss Wilcox, in deep mourning, went out to buy new black clothes---lovely they were, intentionally, not accidentally black, filmy chiffons, rippling crepe-de-chines, demure cashmeres, severe, perfect tailleurs. Here and there touches of snowy crepe gave a relief suitable to deep unhappiness and her widow's cap, low on the forehead, was the softest and most nun-like frame to her face. Seeing herself in the glass, Miss Wilcox blushed with pleasure.

"My husband was so fond of clothes," she murmured to the vendeuse with a break in her voice, "and he always said that nothing became a woman like black."

\* \* \* \* \*

There is a little village on the Seine. An old grey church nestles among the huddling houses. A platoon of poplars guards the river, and little pink almond bushes spring out of patches of violets. Miss Wilcox, calling herself Mrs. Demarest, lives in a charming old house surrounded by box hedges, paved paths lead through beds of old-fashioned sweet-scented flowers, stocks and wall flowers and mignonette and moss roses, lavender, myrtle, thyme and sweet geranium. Mr. Demarest, it appears, could not bear the wonderful new varieties of huge, smell-less blooms.

Miss Wilcox has never gone out of mourning, though she sometimes wears grey and mauve. Her gracious sweetness has made her much beloved in the village where her gentle presence is loved and honoured. She can often be seen bringing soup to some old invalid, or taking flowers to the church she loves to decorate. Her charity and her piety are revered by all. Sometimes in the evening she plays a game of cards with her neighbours or chess with the cure. It is known that a rich man from the adjoining town proposed marriage to her, but she continues to mourn her late husband with profound devoted fidelity. She is too unselfish to force her grief on to others, but every one knows that her heart is broken. Sometimes she talks of her sorrow---very gently, very uncomplainingly, and there are always flowers in front of the photograph of her husband on her writing table. He must have been a magnificent man---huge, with whimsical smiling eyes. Every one in the village feels as if they had known him. They have heard so much about him. He had only seen Miss Wilcox three times when he walked into her cottage. Standing in the doorway---"Ellen," he said, and she went to him---

"I suppose I knew it was for always," she explains gently. "It has been a short always on earth---but so happy, so very happy."

All the girls of the village go to Mrs. Demarest before they marry. Her wise counsel and the radiant memory of her happiness lights them on their way.

"I have had everything," she says, "and now I have found peace."

It is the severity of suffering bravely borne. She has called her house "Haven."

II

## TWO PARIS EPISODES

[To ANTHONY ASQUITH]

### I: THE STORY OF A COAT

"Le Printemps a brulé cette nuit." The news greeted me when I was called. It had no special significance, but spread through my semi-consciousness into meaningless patterns. Then I woke up. "Comme c'est terrible," I said, "quelle chance que ça s'est fait la nuit!" I saw visions of leaping flames and angry reds reflected in the sky.

Then I remembered. It was at the Printemps that I had chosen my divine coat. They had promised faithfully to send it me to-day. The loveliest coat in the world---"fumée de Londres," the salesman had called it, and in fact, it was the colour of the purple-grey smoke that ascends in solid spirals from factory chimneys. There were stripes too of silvery grey chenil which made a play-ground for lights and shadows. In shape it was like an old print of a coachman driving a four-in-hand, long with a flapping cape, and the lining was the colour of the sky when the sun has set.

I saw my coat giving new life to the dying flames. Tongues of fire were darting down the lines of silvery grey chenil, greedily eating up the smoky back-ground. Finally, a mass of ashes---purple-grey like their victim---was carried by the wind into the unknown. All day long my coat became more and more beautiful. The texture was solid smoke and the stripes were shafts of moonlight. How it shimmered through the mirage of my regrets.

When I got home that afternoon I found a cardboard box. The inspector of the Printemps, knowing that I was leaving for England, had brought me a coat from the reserve stock which was not kept in the shop. Infinitely touched, my heart overflowing with gratitude, I wrote a love letter to the Printemps.

Then I looked at my coat. The silvery stripes turned out to be black and white, giving a grey effect. The texture of the back-ground was not purple smoke, but rather scratchy wool. Evidently it was no longer the coat of my sad dreams. In becoming once more "la création" of the Printemps it had ceased to be the creation of my imagination. Resurrection is a dangerous thing.

My coat which was once a legend is a reality again. It has travelled from fairy-land to life. Now it is a symbol. Isn't this the story of the Life of Christ?

### II: BALLOONS

All my life I have loved balloons---all balloons---the heavy English sort, immense and round, that have to be pushed about, and the gay, light, gas-filled French ones that soar into the air the moment you let go of them. How well I remember when I was little, the colossal effort of blowing up the dark red, floppy India rubber until it got brighter and brighter and more and more transparent, though it always stayed opaque enough to hold the promise of still greater bigness. And then the crucial moment when ambition demanded an extra puff and a catastrophe became ever more imminent.

And now, when I suddenly see a huge bunch of wonderful bloated tropical grapes, overpowering some old woman in the street, I feel so happy! In Paris, of course, they are quite different---balloons have much too much flavour to be international---they are smaller and lighter in colour and gayer and more reckless---they always look as if they were out on a spree, just waiting to break loose from the long string by which they are tied, in a huge multi-coloured sunshade, to a stick. There is something very independent about French balloons---you feel you couldn't make a pet of one.

But I am telling you things you know already, instead of getting on with my story.

It was the sort of spring day when all the buds look like feathers and the sun has been bathing in milk. I was walking down the Champs Elysees, sniffing secret violets in the air and feeling as joyous as if the world were entirely full of primroses and larks and light-hearted passers-by whom I would never see again. In the distance a barrel organ became more and more distinct and as I drew nearer and the noise grew louder, I wanted to dance and sing. It was in tune with my mood. A symbol of the crescendo of living.

And then, in the distance, I saw Cousin Emily crawling towards me like a black beetle with her half-shut eyes that see everything except beauty and innocence. Though I avoided her and the day was as lovely as ever, I had become conscious that the world was inhabited and that there were people who didn't whistle---or want to whistle---in the streets.

I tried to think of larks and primroses, but my thoughts were dragged back to thick, half-drawn red curtains, black woolen shawls and silver photograph frames. Then I had an idea. "I will buy a balloon," I thought. My spirits rose and my heart leapt. Should I buy a green one like a bad emerald, or a red one like wine and water, or a thick bright yellow one? White was charming too, and sailed up into the sky like a tight, round cloud---

I reached the Galleries Lafayette.

"Des ballons, s'il vous plait. Joujoux," I added. I was told to go straight on, to turn to the right and the left, to go up three steps and down three steps---but my mind wandered as it always does when I am listening to directions that I have to follow. By an unseemly scramble I got into an over-crowded lift. I seemed to be treading on children and reclining on tight, upholstered bosoms. At random, I chose the third floor and found myself among a forest of lamps. Desperately determined not to risk another struggle for the lift, I tried to find the staircase. At last, after endless enquiries and---it seemed---going back five steps for every three I had gone forward, I reached the toy department. Breathless, bedraggled, hot and exhausted, I clutched the arm of the first saleswoman I saw. "Des ballons, Madame," I gasped.

She looked at me with contempt, "Les ballons, ca ne se vend pas, ca se donne."

For a moment I was awed by the aristocratic magnificence of balloons. How superb, how reckless! Very humbly I appealed to her,

"Pouvez-vous, voulez-vous me donner un ballon?"

"Les ballons, ca ne se donne pas apres cinq heures," she said.

I didn't press her. How could I? By how many thousands of years of tradition might not the habits of balloons have been fixed? Their lives were evidently strangely and remotely unlike our lives. Warily I walked downstairs, not snubbed but humbled and a little awed.

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Half an hour later I was walking down the Champ Elysees sniffing at the secret violets in the air. I had forgotten Cousin Emily and the world was full of primroses and larks and light-hearted passers-by. Suddenly, at the other side of the street I saw a bursting sunshade of balloons, emerald and ruby, transparent white and thick, solid yellow, a birthday bouquet from a Titan to his lady. Reverently, lovingly, I looked at them, my heart full of joy, but I did not cross the street.

### III

#### COURTSHIP

"I do love yachting," she said, "to see the sea change from aquamarines and diamonds to sapphires and emeralds, with thick unexpected streaks of turquoise. To sail away into the unknown, away from your own life-----"

She was looking dreamily in front of her to the blue beyond the mimosa.

"The sea is jolly," he said.

"To feel that you are leaving land behind you and your friends and your relations and your duties and what are called your pleasures. To be free," she murmured.

"There's nothing like horses," he said. "Their very smell does you good. An hour's gallop before breakfast in summer, a twenty minutes' run with the hounds in winter-----"

A week later they were engaged to be married. I wondered whether he would take to yachting or she to riding or both to golf.

I didn't see them for five years. And then, I met her at Melton. She had taken a house for the winter. "So he won," I reflected to myself.

"Have you done much yachting lately?" I asked her.

"Yachting?" she said, "why it's my idea of hell. I'm the worst sailor in the world. A sea as calm as a pond finishes me."

"How is your husband?" I murmured weakly. "Is he coming down here to hunt?"

"Tommy?" she laughed. "Why he's never known a horse from a cow."

### IV

"DO YOU REMEMBER----?"

[*To LESLIE HARTLEY*]

There are so many delightful things about being a bride besides actual happiness, little peaks of pleasure that gradually sink into the level of existence, unimportant, all-important things that never come again. To begin with, there is your wedding ring which keeps glistening up at you, unexpectedly making such an absurd difference, not only to the look of your hand but to everything else, as well. And there are your trunks, shiny and untravelled, with glaring new initials almost shouting at you, so very unlike other people's battered luggage with half obliterated labels sprawling over it.

And trousseau clothes are quite unlike other clothes---not prettier, often uglier---but different. Your shoes and stockings match, not yet having begun that uneven race which, starting from the same mole, ends with a fawn-colored shoe and a grey blue stocking. Your hats go with your dresses and your sunshades with both. You have an appropriate garment for all occasions, instead of always being---as you once were and soon will become again---short of something. Altogether, there is no other word for it---you are equipped.

And then you feel exhilarated and responsible---your jewels are still new and so is the strange, beautifully embroidered monogram on your handkerchiefs and underclothes. Also, for the first time in your life, you have a jet evening dress with a train and your maid calls you "Madam."

Lucy was extremely pleased about all of these things. She was pleased, too, to have married a foreigner, to be sailing away into a new milieu, where she would be surrounded by the strange exciting faces of her husband's friends. It would be delightful to have nothing to do, but make yourself liked, to be automatically disentangled from all of your own complicated, complicating relationships with nothing around you but a new world to conquer. And how thrilled and curious every one must be about her. What sort of a woman had succeeded in catching dear old Tony! Tony, who was so delightfully, so essentially, a man's man. There had been Vivian, of course, but no one quite knew the rights and the wrongs of that and it was over anyway. Tony was so deuced unsusceptible (Lucy prided herself on being able to think in English), unsophisticated, too, about women, but with a sense of self-preservation like an animal's. And now he had gone and married an American and a Bostonian. Americans, one knew, were heiresses and Bostonians were blue-stockings. The lady, it appeared, was not very rich, but of course, Tony would never have married for money. It was all very puzzling.

And then, Lucy imagined herself walking into a room full of strange, curious faces and some one murmured, "That is Tony's wife," and every one looked up. She was wearing a shimmering, silvery blue dress and she was looking her very, very best. An old lady told her that she ought still to be in school and a young man told her that she was a jolly lucky woman and Tony a jolly lucky man, by Jove.

Lucy was sure that that was the way Englishmen talked.

And on their way home, people agreed that they could understand any man's falling in love with her. Tony talked a lot about his men friends. Women meant nothing to him. He had, Lucy knew, once been engaged to a woman---Vivian, she had been called---rumour had woven a pattern of legends about it, but he had never seemed anxious to discuss it. People said he had behaved badly---but how was one to tell? Those things were always so complicated. Usually, every one ended by behaving badly. At any rate, the girl had made a brilliant marriage, which might or might not mean a broken heart. It was, Lucy thought tenderly, so characteristic of Tony to have sown such legitimate wild oats. An engagement contracted and broken off in gusty fits of honour.

"You look very lovely," he smiled at her.

She was shimmering in silvery blue, her eyes like cloudy star sapphires, her hair like primroses and ashes.

In the motor she leant against him, a discreet gentle pressure. She always gave you a feeling of delicately intertwined reticencies and avowals, a faint New England flavouring which she had never lost.

"I do hope they'll like me," she murmured.

Dinner was a great success. Lucy loved her neighbours and her neighbours loved her, while secretly congratulating themselves on having always been right about Boston (which they had never visited and of which they knew nothing).

After dinner a few guests trickled in for the tiny dance that was to follow. It was all very much as Lucy had imagined it, old ladies delighted by her youth, old men delighted by her prettiness. Every one saying that she was very un-American (by which they meant unlike the Americans they had known).

Then, suddenly, a hushed silence grabbed hold of all the various conversations. Tony got up. His hostess was saying, "I want to present Mrs. Everill." Some one in a corner gave a little suppressed laugh, Lucy looked.

She saw a thin, dark woman with charming irregular features and a figure which looked as if it had been put into her black velvet dress with a shoehorn, and she heard her say in a low voice which somehow seemed to creep inside shut parts of you, "Tony and I are very old friends." They were coming straight to her and then, next thing she knew was that voice again, saying, "Mrs. Everill, you must forgive me if I say that, for the moment, you are to me, just Tony's wife. But, of course, I know that to be that you must be a great many other things besides."

Lucy knew that every one was looking at them, not at her, Lucy, the bride (and she had been so proud and happy---childishly happy---to be a bride), not at Tony, not even at Lady Dynevor, but at *them*, at the situation. It seemed to Lucy so indecent, so vulgar.

"You will love Lucy, Vivian," Tony said quietly, and Lucy looked up at the charming, gracious apparition so dominant, with her beautifully friendly manner. Her eyes looked as if she could never find the bottom, as if tears were just going to well up and drown them.

"Of course I shall," she said, and there was a little edge on her voice, as if it were going to break. That was the feeling she gave you, Lucy thought, of being on the brink of something, a tenseness like the moment when the conductor's baton is raised before you have been released by the music.

"How ill you look," Tony was saying. Vivian laughed,

"You always said that, do you remember---?"

Conversation was buzzing again. Lucy turned to her neighbour. Through what he was saying, she could hear Tony---"your white velvet dress---do you remember...?"

She got up to dance. The room seemed to whirl round her while she stood quite still.

"Of course, we know all about Boston, Mrs. Everill," her partner was saying, "it produces beans and Cabots and blue-stockings---and brides," he added, smiling.

Tony and Vivian were still sitting on their sofa. As she passed, she heard Vivian laugh, "Do you remember?"

The evening seemed to Lucy interminable. Tony was very good. He did his duty very nobly, dancing with every one, even his wife.

At half-past one they went home.

"How charming Lady Dynevor is," Lucy murmured.

"Charming?" Tony looked puzzled. "Vivian?"

It obviously seemed to him an almost grotesquely irrelevant, inadequate word. And then, feeling that something was expected of him, "She is a wonderful woman, loyal, faithful, a real friend."

"She is very pretty," Lucy said.

"Pretty, is she? I hadn't noticed it." Again he seemed puzzled, as if it were really too difficult to connect up these absurd adjectives with Vivian. Then an idea occurred to him.

"You're not *jealous*, sweetheart, are you?"

"No," she lied.

"Vivian is--well, Vivian," he explained, making matters worse. And Lucy knew that if she had said "beautiful, fascinating, majestic," if she had used all the superlatives in the world, they would have seemed to him equally irrelevant and inadequate. But Tony was very much in love with his wife and she knew it and soon, in his tender, whimsical, loving, teasing way, he had made her perfectly happy again.

She was standing in front of her dressing-table, her cendre hair--shadows shot with sunlight--falling like a waterfall over her shoulders. With one hand she was combing it, with the other she fingered a bundle of snapshots taken on their honeymoon--lovely snapshots, full of sunshine and queer, characteristic positions and expressions. They might, she thought, have been taken by a loving detective.

Tony came in.

"Do you remember," she said--and then, suddenly, with a wave of misery, she realised it. The phrase did not belong to her.

V

## THE MARTYR

[*To H.G. WELLS*]

I, myself, have always liked Delancey Woburn. To begin with, there is something so endearing about the way he displays his defects, never hiding them or tidying them away or covering them up. There they are for all the world to see, a reassuring shop window full of frank shortcomings. Besides, I never can resist triumphant vitality. Delancey is overflowing with *joie de vivre*, with curiosity, with a certainty of imminent adventure. If you say to him, "I saw a policeman," his face lights up and so it would if you said "I saw a dog," or a cat, or a donkey-cart. To him policemen and dogs and cats and donkey-carts are always just about to do something dramatic or absurd or unexpected. Nor is he discouraged by unflinching regularity in their behaviour. Faith is "the evidence of things not seen."

And then, too, he is so very welcoming. Not, of course, that he makes you feel you are the only person in the world because a world with only one other person in it would be inconceivably horrible to him, but he does make you quite sure that he is most frightfully glad to see you--all the gladder because it is such a surprise. Delancey always makes a point of being surprised. Also, though he is invariably in a hurry--being in a hurry is one of the tributes he pays to life--he as invariably turns round and walks with you, in your direction, to convince himself that having met you in Jermyn Street is an altogether unexpected and delightful adventure. And he never feels, as I always do, that a five minutes' conversation is a stupid, embarrassing thing, too long for mere civility and too short for anything else. The five minutes are filled to the brim and off he rushes again, leaving me just a little more tired and leisurely from the contact. Delancey is the life and soul of a party--or perhaps I should say the life and body. He likes eating and drinking and talking to women and talking to men and smoking and telling a story. And if he does address his neighbour a little as if she were a meeting at a bye-election, open air, he at any rate never addresses her as if she were a duty and no one had ever wanted to kiss her.

To Delancey all women have had lovers and husbands and children and religious conversions and railway accidents. Old maids and clergymen's wives adore him.

I don't know what it was that made him write originally. Perhaps it was his name---Delancey Woburn sounds like the author---or the hero---of a serial. Or it may have been that his exuberant desire for self-expression had burst through the four walls of practical professions. He had, I believe, considered the stage and the church. Journalism would have seemed to me the obvious outlet but he preferred literature. "Creation is such *fun*," he would explain, beaming. And, of course, he was tremendously successful. Delancey was designed on a pattern of success.

That was one of the obvious defects I was talking about. Delancey has missed his failures. He has fought and been defeated but he has never longed and been frustrated. In his case, romance is realism. He has only known happy endings.

Naturally he is not an interesting writer. How could he be? And, naturally, he is a successful one. How could he help it? Delancey writes for magazines in England and America. I, myself, never read magazines, but occasionally he sends me one and every twenty stories (I think it is twenty) become a book. The English ones were about scapegraces and irresistible ne'er-do-wells, ancestral homes with frayed carpets and faded hangings in which penniless woman-haters (the last of a noble line) sit and brood, living alone with equally gruff, woman-hating family retainers. Sometimes, too, there was an absent-minded dreamer, and villainous business men worked indefatigably in the interests of their own ultimate frustration.

But this, of course, would never do for America where there isn't a market for ne'er-do-wells, frayed carpets inspire no glamour, and dreamers who before the war were despised as harmless, are now damned as dangerous. No, America must have her special line and no one better than Delancey knew how to mix the fragrance of true love with the flavour of Wall Street and serve at the right temperature.

He wasn't proud of his writing---or, rather, he wasn't proud of it with every one. In his heart of hearts, what he wanted was not the applause of the public, but the faith of a coterie, to be a martyr, misunderstood by the many, worshipped by the few. A Bloomsbury hero, a Chelsea King! "We confess that as a writer Mr. Delancey Woburn is altogether too rarefied for our taste. His work is far too impregnated by the stamp of a tiny clique of rather self-conscious superintellectuals. Reading his books, we feel as if we had suddenly entered a room full of people who know one another very well. In other words, we feel out of it."

What would not Delancey have given for a review that began like that! Instead of which the best that he could hope for in "shorter notices" would be an announcement that "Mr. Woburn's many admirers will no doubt find his last book eminently to their taste. He provides a lavish supply of the features they are accustomed to look for in his work."

Poor Delancey, his stories *did* sell so well! And there was his flat in Grafton Street with the beautiful new taffetas curtains and the cigars that had just arrived from Havana, with his own initials on.

So from week to week he put off becoming an artist and one year (after a four-month love affair and two lacquer cabinets) he made a lecture tour in America.

"Was it a success?" I asked wearily (Delancey's success is always such a terribly foregone conclusion).

"Tremendous," he beamed. "I was careful to be a little dull because then they think they're learning something." But he was out of love, the flat was overcrowded, money continued to pour in and he knew terribly well that he was not making a contribution to contemporary literature.

He had always assured me at intervals that some day he would write his "real book" but I think it was after his tour in America that the dream became a project. He burst in to tell me about it. Delancey always begins things with a sudden noisy rush.

"Charlotte," he said, "I have made up my mind."

"It sounds very momentous," I teased. He decided years ago that I was grave, fastidious, whimsical, aloof and (I suspect) a little faded. I have long given up fighting my own battle (to be known) because I realise that Delancey never revises the passports given to old ideas. There is always, to him, something a little bit sacred about the accepted. "I can't go on with it any longer," he explained.

"Go on with what?"

"My damned stories."

"How ungrateful you are," I murmured, thinking of the lacquer cabinets, "you have a market, you can command a price. Each of your love affairs is more magnificently studded with flowers than the last----"

"Be quiet," he said. "I came to you because I knew that you would understand."

"You are trying to blackmail me."

"Do be serious," he pleaded. "I am going to give all that up. I have determined to settle down and dedicate myself entirely to my book."

"But," I expostulated, "have you thought of the yearning *Saturday Evening Post*, of the deserted *Strand*?"

"I have thought of everything," he said, "I shall be sacrificing 5,000 pounds a year, but what is 5,000 pounds a year?"

I thought of the taffetas curtains and the cigars, but I answered quite truthfully.

"I don't know."

"You see, Charlotte," he dropped the noble for the confidential, "I have got things to say, things that are vital to me. I couldn't put them in my other work. How could I? It would have seemed---you will think me ridiculous---a kind of prostitution."

"Yes," I said.

"But they were clamouring for expression all the time. And I have kept them down till I couldn't keep them down any longer. Of course, I know my book won't be a success---a popular success, I mean---but it won't have been written for the multitude but for the few---the people who really care, who really understand. It may be even thought," there was exultation in his voice, "dull."

"Well," I said, "I think it is very brave of you---and quite right. Truly I do."

"I think I shall take a tiny cottage in a fishing village in Devonshire," Delancey was as usual seeing things pictorially---bare white-washed walls, blue and white linen curtains and a pot of wall flowers.

A week later he came to see me again.

"When are you off to Devonshire?" I asked.

"I have decided to stay here," he answered, "there is a roar of life in London, a vibrating pulse, a muffled thunder." I began to be afraid that Delancey's book would be very bad indeed. It was, it appeared, to be a novel. "Not exactly a novel," he explained, "a large canvas with figures moving on a back-ground of world conditions." I thought of "War and Peace" and was silent. It doesn't matter being silent with Delancey because he doesn't notice it.

"I want," he said, "to picture the very earth in the agonies of labour giving birth to a new world." Later, the theme was (to my secret relief) narrowed down to England.

"I have changed my motif a little," he said. "I simply want to portray the quicksilver of after-war conditions---England in transition." At this time Delancey seemed to me the least little tiny bit depressed. The income he was sacrificing rose (in his conversation) from 5,000 to 7,000 pounds. He dined out less, avoided his club and Christie's. Also, he kept out of love. For ten years, Delancey had always been in love. Managed by him, it was a delightful state, ably presided over by head waiters and florists. It made, he once explained to me, all the difference to walking into a room.

But everything was changed now. The masterpiece was a jealous god. Jealous and, I sometimes thought, apt to be a little tiresome. It had to be referred to so very deferentially, with such carefully serious respect. Also, it cast a shadow of gravity over Delancey---Delancey who was never meant to be a high priest, but rather a young man in white flannels, with a cigarette in his mouth, punting a young girl with a red sunshade---like an illustration to one of his own stories.

Friendship is a difficult, dangerous job. It is also (though we rarely admit it) extremely exhausting. But never have my patience and endurance been more severely tested than during the year of Delancey's masterpiece. He finally decided that in the foreground, there was to be the clash of two human souls and in the background, the collision of two worlds---the old (pre-War) and the new. In fact, a *partie carree* of conflicts.

"You with your love of form," he explained to me, "will appreciate the care I have given to the structure. It is," he added, "difficult to mould vast masses of material."

As the months went by I began to be horribly afraid that Delancey's novel would be very, very long indeed. And even if nobody read it through, not even a reviewer, I should have to without skipping a word or a comma.

"The sentences," Delancey told me, "are rather long. I find the semicolon very useful for cumulative effects." A vast array of words policed by semi-colons. I felt a little dizzy. Would they be able to keep order?

"Of course," he continued, "the interest is very largely psychological, but I regard the book mainly as a document---a social document. The fiction of to-day is the history of to-morrow."

This seemed conclusive. The book could not have less than 700 pages. A social document with psychological interest and a double conflict. Why, it would be short at that. And then, one day, when Delancey's book had become to me a form of eternity, he arrived, breathless with excitement.

"To all intents and purposes, it's finished," he gasped.

"Thank God," I murmured faintly.

"It will be an awful loss to me," he stated mournfully.

"It isn't dead yet," I said with feeble jocularity.

"It is sad to see your children leave you. To watch them step out into a cold, inhospitable world," he went on.

"A warm, welcoming world," I amended dishonestly. "You haven't told me what it is called yet."

"It isn't called anything. I want you to be its god-mother, Charlotte. What about 'Whither'?"

"Too like a pamphlet," I was glad to be on firm ground again.

"I thought about 'Fate's Laboratory,' but it isn't very rhythmical, is it?"

"Not very," I agreed.

"The question mark after the 'Whither' would look nice on the cover," he reflected regretfully.

I brightened. This was the old Delancey. The Delancey of the *Saturday Evening Post* and the *Strand*, of the taffetas curtains and the cottage in Devonshire. By my sudden glow of gladness I realised how much I had missed him. But I couldn't say, "Dear, *dear* Delancey, please be your old self and never, never, whatever you do, write another 'good' book," so I confessed that a question mark *would* look very nice, but that I still thought that "Whither" sounded rather like a religious tract.

"Well, we must think it over," he said.

A week later, he announced to me in a tone which indicated clearly that my opinion was only wanted if it was approval, "I have decided to call my book 'Transition.'"

"I always like single word titles," I said.

"No one will read it," he said. "One bares one's soul to the public and they throw stones at it. But at any rate, now I can hold my head high."

I didn't laugh, but it was the effort of a lifetime. Dear Delancey was so very absurd as a self-made martyr. It was somehow impossible for him to give an impression of having been persecuted for righteousness' sake. His shiny, rosy face had never looked rounder, his trousers had never been more perfect or his shoes more polished. And there were still the same little outbursts of childish prosperity, his watch, his tie-pin, his links were all redolent of a vitality that had ever been just the least little bit blatant.

"Delancey," I said, "I want you to have just the sort of success you want for yourself."

"Thank you," he said, wondering if I knew what I was talking about.

And then, one day, a proof copy of Delancey's book arrived. I looked at the paper cover. It was bright orange with "Transition" slanting upwards in immense black letters. "Very arresting," I could hear the publisher saying. Gingerly I unwrapped it. Underneath, it was sober black linen, with bright blue lettering still on the cross. I sat with it in my hands, feeling limp and will-less. But, at last, I pulled myself together. I read the dedication, "To those who died." I saw that

there were 600 pages, big pages crowded with words. And then, saying to myself, "It is no good putting it off," I began to read. Delancey's book was certainly not at all like his stories. It was very nearly rather a good book and it was quite extraordinarily dull. The social structure played a role of deadly relentless magnitude. It began (before the War) as an immense iron scaffolding and ended sprawling in the foreground, torn up by the roots. In the clutches of this gigantic monster, the two chief characters not unnaturally reduced by comparison with their surroundings to the proportion of pygmies in their turn, worked from happiness to the self-conscious misery which is the only true state of grace.

"I have chosen a man and a woman, neither of them in any way exceptional," wrote Delancey in the preface and though this was undoubtedly so, they seemed to me truer to fiction than to life. No, the merits of the book had nothing to do with the characters, they lay in the descriptions of the English countryside, of village life, of London traffic, of the Armistice, of an Albert Hall meeting. There was a close observation of detail and that pictorial sense which is Delancey's one gift and which he relentlessly suppressed whenever he could, nevertheless forced its way out here and there. The canvas seemed to me immense. Politicians and preachers, workers and capitalists, artists and philistines, "good" women and prostitutes, soldiers and conscientious objectors jostled one another in the melee. Bloomsbury, Westminster, Chelsea and Mayfair each had its appointed place, while race-courses and night-clubs alternated with mining villages and methodist chapels. But, unlike Delancey's other stories, the soldiers had no V.C.'s and the workers didn't touch their caps. My eyes ached and my brain tired as I read on, but I forced myself forward with the thought that no one else in the world would reach the end.

Then the reviews began. I felt a little nervous but one seemed more glowing than the last. Finally, a notice appeared two columns long entitled "A Social Document" which ended with the words, "We venture to predict that this book will be read 100 years hence as a truer picture of the England of to-day than most of the histories that are being written." Delancey was frightfully pleased, naturally. With child-like joy he showed me cuttings from intellectual literary papers. His book was even mentioned in a leading article and formed the topic of a sermon.

"Think of reaching a pulpit," he exclaimed exultantly. "Of course, I know I've lost my old public but I've found my soul."

"People talk to me of their work now," he told me another time; "in old days, they never thought me one of themselves. I was a story teller, not an artist."

And then it was that an extraordinary thing happened---"Transition" began to sell. It was quoted and talked about until the snowball of fame, steadily gathering momentum, started rolling down-hill to the general public. The sales went up and up and up. The circulation reached 100,000 and soon after, 150,000. Why people bought it and whether they read it, I don't know, but Sydney (the heroine) and Mark Allison (the hero) became household words and soon they were used as generic terms---a Sydney, or an Allison, without so much as an inverted comma!

Delancey hardly ever came to see me. I imagine he was in a very divided state of mind! He had so dreadfully wanted to be an intellectual, to be able to rail at the base imbecile public in exquisitely select Bloomsbury coteries, he had so resolutely determined to be a martyr, to sacrifice himself on the altar of pure art, and somehow Mr. T.S. Eliot and martyrdom were as far off as ever. After all, he had given up 5,000 pounds a year and V.C.'s and happy endings. Was it his fault if he was making more money than ever and the inner circles of the unread elect seemed more firmly closed than ever?

At this time, Delancey avoided me, but I heard that "Transition" was to be dramatised and that the film rights had been bought. How the endless chaotic mass, loosely held together by semi-colons, was to be moulded into a drama or a movie was quite beyond my imagination, but evidently some enterprising people had decided to call their play "Transition." "Delancey must," I reflected, "be getting very rich indeed." But still he didn't come near me, until one day I sent for

him. He looked, I thought, just a tiny bit care-worn. The all conquering light had gone out of his eye. His boots were a little dusty and he wore no tie-pin. He had, I suppose, become rich beyond the symptoms of prosperity.

"Well," I smiled at him to reassure him.

"It has all been very surprising, hasn't it?" he said with an embarrassed expression.

I didn't know whether to say "yes" or "no," that I was glad or that I was sorry.

"But it doesn't alter the quality of your book," I consoled him.

He brightened, "No," he said, "it doesn't; I am glad you said that."

We talked about other things, music and old furniture and people. He had, he said, thought of buying a house in Chelsea. It was, I realised, not exactly the entry he had planned but I encouraged the idea. There was, I explained, nothing like the Thames.

And so we rambled on till he took his leave. But five minutes after his departure I heard the bell ring. Delancey burst back into the room,

"I forgot to tell you," he said, "that 185,000 copies of 'Transition' have sold."

VI

## **A MOTOR**

*[To ALICE LONGWORTH]*

There is a special quality about a December sunset. The ruffles of red gold gradually untightening, the congested mauve islands on a transparent sea of green, the ultimate luminous primrose dissolving into violet powder and then the cold biting night lit up by strange patches of colour that have somehow been forgotten in the sky.

Eve was walking home, her quick, defiant movements challenging the evening, her head bent slightly forward, her chin almost touching her muff, while her eyes shone and her cheeks glowed and her lithe figure seemed almost to be cutting through the icy air.

"This is happiness," she thought exultantly, "this bitter winter stimulus--I feel so light--as if my heart and mind were empty--only my body is quivering with life--the pure life of physical fitness. Why think, or feel, or look forward?" She doubled her pace until her feet seemed to be skimming the road. "I feel like a duck and drake," she laughed to herself. "Nothing matters, nothing, while there is still frost in the world."

And then she saw a little motor waiting on the other side of the road. She stopped dead and her heart stopped with her.

"There is no reason why it should be his. Hundreds of people have motors like that."

Resolutely she took a step forward. "I can't see from here, and I won't go and look," she added as she crossed over.

And then, shutting her eyes:

"Jerry," she said to herself, trying to kill his ghost with his name.

The evening air had become damp and penetrating. It made her throat feel sore and she choked a little as she breathed it.

Gingerly she approached the motor to make sure. What an absurd phrase! Why, a leap of her heart would have announced its presence, even had her eyes been shut.

She knew its every detail, the sound the gears made changing, the feel of the seat, the way the hood went up. And, above all, the little clock, ticking its warning by day, regular and relentless, while at night its bright prying eyes reminded her of all the things she wanted to forget. "It is my conscience," she would say, "and fate and mortality. It symbolises all the limitations of life. It is the frontier to happiness, the defeat of peace."

"Go on," he had said, "and you will end by forgetting it."

It was what he had called her habit of talking things "away."

How often she had slipped into his motor after him, sliding along the shiny leather, nestling happily against him, explaining that there was no draught, that the rain was not coming in, that her feet were as warm as toast. How often he had steered slowly with one hand, while her fingers crept into the palm of the other. And then he had turned off the engine and they had sat there together silent and alone, cut off from the world. How she had loved his motor! Surreptitiously she would caress it with her hand, stroking the cool shiny leather, and seeing him looking at her, she would say, "I think my purse must have fallen behind the seat." It had become to her a child and a mother, a refuge and an adventure, an island cut off from all the wretched necessities of existence, associated only with her and with him. It was a much better kingdom than a room; for a room is full of paraphernalia and impedimenta, with books and photographs, and the envelopes of letters to remind you of people and things that you want to forget. After all she could not sweep her house clear of her life, empty it of the necessary and the superfluous of her ties and her duties and her responsibilities.

But his motor---his little gasping uncomfortable motor---that was really and truly hers, because it was his. Here was her throne and his altar.

No wonder she sometimes stroked it a little, when it was too dark for him to ask her what she was doing.

And now, now some one else crept in after him, slid towards him on the shiny leather, murmured that her feet were as warm as toast, that there was no draught, and of course the rain didn't come in....

Or did she say, "Do you think there is something the matter with your motor to-day? It seems a little asthmatic?"

Eve looked at the house. She could see brightness shining behind the curtains. She could imagine a glowing fire and a faint smell of warm roses. Who was the woman? What were they doing? Sitting on either side of the fireplace drowsily intimate, smiling a little perhaps and hardly talking, conscious only of the cold outside and the warm room and one another....

Eve shivered. Almost unconsciously she fingered the mud guard. "A room is a horrible unprivate thing," she said. "People walk in and out of it, any one, and there are books and photographs and letters. It is a market place, not a sanctuary,---whereas you...." She looked at the little motor. It was too dark to see anything, but every line of it was branded on her heart.

"No one will ever love you as I did," she said to it and slowly, wearily, dragging one foot after another, she walked away into the cold raw night.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Nothing in the world like winter air to make you feel fit," Bob said to himself as he swung himself along the road at a tremendous pace.

"Jove, what a sunset!" he added, looking up at the red gold ruffles slowly untightening. He reflected that there is nothing in the world like health. Live cleanly and the high thinking will look after itself---or at least won't matter. Physical condition, there's nothing like it. Love and that sort of thing all very well in its way, but a cold bath in the morning and plenty of exercise.... He began to whistle, and then---because he did feel most frightfully well---to run.

"Run a mile without being out of breath," he thought complacently, and then---because he hadn't meant to---("wasn't even thinking of her," he grumbled to Providence)---he found himself outside her door. And in the road there was a motor, a little coral coloured motor. He looked at it in dismay and then he looked at the house. He saw it was lit up and he imagined the room he knew so well. The crimson damask curtains and the creamy walls, the glowing fire and the red roses, the roses he had sent for her. Probably she would be sitting on that white fur rug on the floor, her arms clasped round her knees, her red hair as bright as the red hot coals, her dark eyes dreamy and half closed.

"Damn him, I wonder who he is," and he started examining the motor.

"It's not very new," he thought, "the varnish is all off and those shiny leather seats are damned cold and slippery, draughty too, I should say; hood doesn't close properly. Must let in the rain like a leaking boat."

He put his hand on the mud guard. "Bent," he said. He felt a little cheered. But then, looking at the glowing house, he grew disconsolate again.

"Wonder what they're doing," he grumbled to himself. "Jabbering away, I'll be bound. Never was much of a hand at talking myself. Wonder who the deuce he is."

And then he looked contemptuously at the little motor.

"Damned if I couldn't do her better than that," he said. "God, how cold it is."

Irresolutely he moved away. Then he began to run, but the raw air caught his throat and he felt out of breath.

"Not as young as I was," he thought as he walked away into the damp night.

VII

## **THE MASTERPIECE**

[To *HAROLD CHILD*]

He sat in front of his writing-table with a blank sheet of paper in front of him---a creamy, virginal sheet, inviting and elusive. "A few black smudges and the whole of life might be there," he thought, "concentrated but limited with four corners and no boundaries." He thought of the untouched whiteness of the paper violated by a masterpiece---or a love

letter. He didn't want to think of love letters. He had written such hundreds, and for four years now they had all been to the same person. His fidelity had been due, he supposed, to the fact that to him she was almost more an idea than an individual, a legend that he had created. She was his faith, his religion, his shrine. She was on a pedestal from which she shed a pale gold light---silvery gold---of serenity won through suffering. He saw her very seldom, but when he was with her she reminded him of a catch in the voice. It was as if her life had reached breaking point and for one moment she would give him as divine gift a little poignant stumble before she regained the sure foothold of her calm courage. It was these precious moments that gave a burning spirit to his image of her. The legend had a soul.

But to-day he didn't want to think of her. He wanted to work. The word made him smile a little. There had been a time when ideas had seized hold of him and driven him recklessly wherever they wanted him to go. Then he had made form his fetish and it had become his prison. Now he had lost both his abandon and his rigidity and with each, a certain driving force had been taken away from him. He would sit in front of his table and remember that all the masterpieces of the world are contained in the alphabet and it would prevent him from writing. And then he would think of her and that would mean writing to her or writing for her. In a sense, everything he wrote was "To her." He remembered the first time that he had dared to write her a letter without a beginning. His pen had trembled in his hand. And yet it is the way all borderland letters begin, whether the frontier is between acquaintanceship and friendship, or between friendship and love. For there are moments in life when if you can't say "My own Blessed," you can say nothing---omission is the substitute for the absolute. Only with her, formality was a flavouring of intimacy, a curious fragrance like a faint clinging of unseen pot-pourri. And so, for a long time after he had sent her his first endless, beginningless out-pouring, her letters had begun, "Dear Mr. ----" and had ended very tidily, with a signature at the bottom of a page.

He had dedicated his first novel to her,---"To Mrs. ----" The dedication had pleased him. It was so immensely full of reserve and respect and the possibility of other things. A little, locked box of a dedication. It had pleased her, too. "It is a lovely dedication," she had said with that smile she had, which was like a peeping glimmer of sunshine on a grey day.

He had always gone on dedicating his books to her. His collection of poems had been called "To Jane"---which was not her name, but his name for her---a deep, clear name, resolute and courageous, calm and direct and sure. A still name. He wondered if any one had ever given to another human being as much as he had given her. Or perhaps it was no longer a question of giving. Everything came from her and belonged to her. She was the womb of his thoughts and feelings. She was his roots in life and his blossoming. She was the only fixed point in the chaotic muddle of things, giving a certain reality to the world simply by being in it.

He hardly ever saw her. He couldn't bring himself to force his way through the labyrinthine tangle of circumstances that surrounded her. It was as if by doing so, he could only reach her mud-spattered and chipped and bedraggled, an unworthy, battered object. And so he preferred her to live in his heart, warming and watering his imagination, glowing in cold, dark places, gilding the tips of his fancies, fertilising his soul. He hardly wanted her outside in the physical world. But when she was with him, he felt a deep serenity, an absolute harmony of life. Questions and questionings seemed remote and frivolous, the useless paraphernalia of empty lives. There came, with her, a fullness, a sense of completion.

He sat and thought of her and gradually he shut his eyes and imagined her coming into the room. Her movements would be very slow and deliberate and a little tired, as if gently, almost imperceptibly, she were laying down the burden of her life and allowing herself, just for a few moments, the luxurious restfulness of fatigue. Slowly she would pull off her long, clinging gloves and he would hold his breath with joy as she unsheathed her marvelous arms and hands. And then very tenderly, he would lift them to his lips, one by one, laying them down on her lap again where he could see them. And they would smile at one another---a faint smile hers would be, seen as it were, through the veils of her exquisite reticencies. And then because she knew it made him happy, she would take off her hat and release the shimmer of her silvery gold hair, a halo made of sunshine and moonlight, inextricably interwoven. She always gave him a feeling of

gold and silver and luminous whiteness, a steady radiance that illuminated without blinding. And perhaps she would sink her head back into a cushion and shut her eyes with a little grateful sigh to these moments of respite, and he would watch her, proud beyond measure to be able to give her these little patches of peace. And between them there would be a fullness of silence. Sometimes she would talk a little with a low, clear, echoless voice like a note without a pedal. A still voice---monotonous, people called it---with almost imperceptible modulations which seemed gradually deeply significant as your ear became attuned to them, like a dim room in which you are able to see everything when your eye is accustomed to the light.

It was one of the altogether satisfying things about her, this abundant treasure of intimacy which could not be guessed at or even suspected by the ordinary passer-by. "That is the woman with the lovely hair? I never know what to talk to her about," he had heard people say, and exultantly, reverently, he had pressed her image to his heart. She never talked much. Seeing her in imagination to-day, he saw her leaning back, everything about her drooping and relaxed, her arms, her hands, her feet---they had all abdicated---only from the depths of her infinite tiredness she was smiling faintly and her smile was the dedication of this moment to him. Every now and then she would ask him a question and he would answer---rather shortly---or she would make a statement which he would seal with a monosyllable. There were never any comments between them. In the absoluteness of their understanding, explanations and amplifications had become impossible.

And she would get up slowly, giving herself a little shake to wake herself up into reality while he gave her her hat, her hat-pins, her veil, her gloves, her bag, one by one, and taking her hands, he would kiss them first on the backs and then on the palms and then give them too back to her.

And she would say, "Thank you," and look slowly all round the room, as she always did, wanting to take it away with her without one detail missing, for it was to this room that her soul retreated in its moments of unbearable loneliness.

With difficulty, she would make her way to the door and rather hurriedly, because she knew it was a weakness---she who was so deliberate and so strong---she would say, "Write to me," and then she would open and shut the door herself because she liked to take away the picture of him standing in the middle of his sanctuary---her sanctuary....

\* \* \* \* \*

He opened his eyes. The room was so full of her that he took a deep breath, breathing the certainty of her into his soul. And he seemed to hear the words, "Write to me." He smiled very tenderly. He loved her to have this one little wish---she was so far above and beyond concrete manifestations---she who had such a deep contempt for imprisoning forms. And he remembered her once looking at a cheque and saying, "The figures, after all, are a limitation." And suddenly in front of him he saw the blank sheet of paper. "She shall have the most wonderful love-letter ever written by man to woman," he said to himself and at the very bottom of the page, he put one initial. Then very tenderly he folded it up and addressed it, remembering that it was thus that his first novel had been dedicated---"To Mrs. ----." "The difference is," he thought, "that this is a masterpiece."

## VIII

### TEA TIME

[To SYLVESTER GATES]

She lay on a sofa covered with white marabou, her head sunk deep into a billowy morass of lace-coloured satin and lace-coloured lace. She could see her pointed toes emerging and her arm dangling over the edge as if she had forgotten

it. On her finger was a huge emerald ring, a splotch of creme de menthe spilt on the whiteness of her hand. She felt entrenched and anchored in an altogether strong position, so fixed that all advances would have to be made to her. This gave to her voice and to her gestures an indolent melodious security.

As the door opened she turned her eyes round slowly, suppressing all eagerness.

"Mortimer!" She wondered if disappointment could be as easily controlled as joy. "How nice of you to come and see me!"

"Are you glad---really?" He was kissing her hand with an unnecessary mixture of shyness and intensity.

"How intolerably literal people in love are," she thought petulantly; "always forcing significance into everything."

"Of course," she said, smiling lazily.

"It is good of you to let me come like this." How she hated his humility, but---"I like you to," she murmured, automatically kind.

"How lovely you look! Lovelier than ever before---as lovely as ever before." And then, "I love you."

"Do you think so?" She seemed amused and sceptical.

"Do you doubt it?" He clutched her wrist.

"Not if you put it like that."

"You are laughing at me," he recognised sadly.

"Forgive me." She put her hand on his, lightly, caressingly, her voice gentle and tender.

"But you do know it, don't you?" He was very insistent.

("Does he think that I am blind and deaf and that no one has ever loved me before?" she wondered irritably.)

"I think you think so," she prevaricated.

"I know," he was firm. "I shall love you always."

"Nonsense." She was tart with realism. "Why do you fly in the face of all experience with meaningless generalisations?"

"I have never said it before."

"Then how can you know?"

He hated her barrister mood.

"Elaine, aren't you glad I love you?"

"Of course." She closed her eyes wearily. They talked of other things and she remembered how intelligent he was. It had been--during these last months--very easy to forget. But though her interest was concentrated, his attention was on other things.

"Elaine," he blurted, "are you going to the country to-morrow?"

"I don't know."

"When will you know?"

"I have no idea!"

"But when shall I see you again?"

"I can't tell."

"Elaine, please do put me out of my misery."

"Very well then--I shan't see you again this week."

"Elaine!"

"Yes."

"Please."

"Please what?"

"I *am* sorry I bothered you; don't punish me. I promise not to ask any more questions, but please let me know when you come back. Even if you only ring me up on the telephone I shall have heard your voice!"

"Very well."

"You're not angry with me, are you?"

"Why should I be?"

"I thought perhaps you were."

There was a pause. "Is there anything amusing about being loved?" she thought; "what patient women the great coquettes of the world must have been! How I wish I were a crisp intelligent old maid, with a talent perhaps for gardening or books on the Renaissance!"

"How tired you look!" He had taken her hand and was pressing it with funny little jerky grasps. "I wish you belonged to me; I wouldn't let you spend yourself on every Tom, Dick and Harry."

"It is so difficult to know," she murmured, "who is Tom, who is Dick, or who is Harry!"

"When I think of the way your divine sympathy is imposed upon---the way your friends take advantage of you!"

"But I like being taken advantage of."

"People's selfishness makes me sick. Look at your white face and your drooping eyelids, and your tired little smiles."

"I am sorry."

"Sorry! Good God! My beloved, do take care of yourself, please. Promise me not to see any one after I leave; go to bed and pull the blinds."

"But I am expecting Bill."

"Bill will be all the better for not getting what he wants for once."

"But supposing he doesn't want it?"

"I don't understand."

The door opened.

"Bill!" She put out her left hand, all her features lit up with a quiet luminous radiance. His eyes were smiling, but his mouth was grave.

"Elaine!" He said it as if it were a very significant remark, and, though he hadn't meant to, he caressed her name with his voice.

"Mortimer thinks I ought to go to bed and send you away."

"But you won't?"

"Probably not." She was bubbling over with gaiety. "I am very weak-minded."

The two men were not looking at one another, but currents of hostility flowed between them. Bill had not fought for Elaine's love; it had come to him with a strange inevitability. He had no fear of losing it and no particular desire to keep it, but the thought that you possess something that some one else passionately covets is always exhilarating. He would never have admitted it--he could never have admitted it, but she was to him like an object dangled on a watch chain---not obtrusively displayed but a possession recognised by everybody and taken for granted by him. Only he never seemed bored because he was never tired of mobilising his own charms. And in herself, she delighted him---it was only in her relations with him that she got on his nerves. He loved to see her with other men exercising the divine arts of her irresistibility, her every smile, her every gesture, the intonations of her voice, the turn of her head, her bubbling brilliance, her cool indifference, the ice of her intellect, the glow of her sympathy, each contributing to the masterpiece of her coquetry. But with him she was not even a coquette---jerky, passionate, nervous, humble, exacting, dull---she tired him to death.

"Well, I must be going." Mortimer spoke doubtfully. There was a pause. Then Elaine pulled herself together.

"Why?"

"I have so much to do."

"It was so nice of you to come and see me."

"It was so nice of you to let me come. Please remember your promise to let me know when you come back."

"Of course." He was gone.

Wearily she shut her eyes. "Do you remember the time when Mortimer was charming?"

"Indeed I do; he was quite delightful till he fell in love with you. He is really a warning against loving."

"You hardly heed it, do you?" Her voice was very bitter. How he hated the entry of the acidulated tragic into all their talks.

"Perhaps not." He felt guilty, knowing how much he was hurting her. "After all you cannot ask me to model myself on the man who bores you most in the world."

She smiled. "What a good reason for not loving me!"

"The best!" He was smiling his enchanting, flattering smile at her---the smile that always seemed to draw you into the Holy of Holies of his confidence.

"I may be going away to-morrow," she said.

"May you?"

"But I shall be back on Thursday. Shall we dine together that night?"

"I am dining with a Russian friend of mine who is passing through London."

"Friday, then?"

"Friday I am going to the country for the week-end."

"Then it will have to be Monday."

"Yes, I am afraid so."

"Afraid that you will have to dine with me?"

"How civil you are!"

There was a pause. She wished she could keep all the acid out of her voice. He thought how tiresome women were, always wanting to know just what you were going to do.

"Bill," she said, holding out her hand, which he took rather perfunctorily. He felt like a dog that knows exactly which trick follows what word of command, but as, from force of habit, he invariably became lover-like when he was

absent-minded, he stroked her arm with a significant caressing gesture that filled her with joy.

"Are you glad I love you?" she murmured.

"Of course."

"There is an intelligent woman," he thought, "who has had hundreds of men in love with her, making a demand for verbal assurances that can't possibly add anything to her peace of mind. Either they are true and superfluous, or they are false and transparently unconvincing."

"Bill," she said, reading his thoughts, "you can't understand my wanting mere words, can you?"

"No," he said, "not you, who know so exactly what they mean."

"Nevertheless, they are sometimes vaguely comforting and reassuring---a sort of local anaesthetic." He loved her insight, her curious layers of detachment.

"Bill," she murmured, "I haven't seen you for ages."

"Not since two this morning."

"I don't count a ball; besides I was too tired to stop dancing."

"You danced like an angel and your eyes were shining with ecstasy, lighting hopes all round, though of course I knew you didn't know your partner from the parquet---if he happened to be as good as the floor."

"You love watching me, don't you? much better than seeing me." How he wished she weren't always right.

"Remember what a wonderful drama you are, Elaine."

"A drama in which you have played lead. But you only liked the first act---the Comedy Act, and you won't even enjoy the curtain as much as you think, because always there will be the nasty certainty of its some day going up again, and then you won't even be in the wings."

How diabolically clear-sighted she was!

"Bill, dearest," she held out her hand, "you are reaching the moment when you long to be the third person. You want a little rest. You have come to the point in the life of every lover when he prefers the husband to the wife."

But this was more than he could stand. A horrible shadow was being cast over his future, romance was shrinking before his eyes. Frightened, he bent down and kissed her. "Darling," he murmured, nestling his face in her neck, "what nonsense you talk."

Love, passion, romance, fidelity---all were vindicated by this deliberate act.

Her doubts, her certainties, subsided, vanished---hypnotised with happiness. "I was teasing," she lied.

"I must go," he said.

"No."

"Yes."

"Not just this moment, please; five more minutes."

"It will be just as difficult then."

"But I shall have had five more minutes."

"How practical you are!"

He stayed.

"I will write to you."

"Do."

"And I shall try and be back in time for tea Thursday, then I shall see you, in spite of your stupid Russian."

"If I can get away."

"Can't you bring him to dine with me?"

"I'm afraid not; he has asked some one else."

"Shall I have some forms printed with 'I miss you, bless you,' for you to sign and send me each day."

"Goose!"

"Well, at any rate, I shall have you properly on Monday."

"Yes."

"And please make a great effort about Thursday."

"Yes."

She drew him down to her, holding his face in her hands.

"It is silly to love at my time of life," she said; "I am too young. It is like wearing a lovely new dress to climb mountains in."

"You will always be young," he said; "you are eternal."

It was his considered view; he wished she weren't. Kissing her a little absently he walked to the door; then because he had always done so, he walked back.

"Bless you," he said. It was perfunctory and final. The shutting of the door turned out the light in her eyes.

"How tired I am!" she thought, and then---"Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday---Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday."

IX

## THE END

He knew that nothing could ever possibly happen to him again and so he sat on his sofa waiting---for death, he supposed, having excluded every other possibility. He didn't want to die, he didn't want to do anything, to eat or drink or feel or think---above all, he didn't want to move. He had shut his eyes trying to shut out the room. Every bit of it was saturated in her, everything had been consecrated---contaminated, it seemed to him now---by her touch. There wasn't a patch of carpet or chintz that didn't belong to her intimately and exclusively. Every object in the room seemed to pose her and add to the interminable picture gallery of his memory. He opened his eyes and saw an uncut pencil. Here, at any rate, was something new and independent---neutral territory, unsharpened it was an unloaded pistol and he wanted to shoot. At her? He was bound to miss. His bitterness was no medium through which to recapture her magic and without it he would merely be forcing a lay figure to perform vulgar and meaningless antics. And if he tore her to bits, it would be an indictment of himself, not of his gentlemanliness, that had long ceased to mean anything to him---but of his taste. Wearily, he shut his eyes. It was no good thinking when your mind had become a circle---a very small circle. He remembered something she had once said, "The future looks like the present, stretching interminably ahead in the shadow of the past." She had always understood everything, so she didn't deserve to be forgiven anything.

The front door bell rang and at once, he felt sick and faint. A ring still excited him as much as it had done in the days when it might have been hers. It was a ridiculous state of nerves that he had never been able to get out of.

A moment later she was in the room.

An absolute limpness had come over him. If his life had depended on it, he couldn't have lifted his hand. The surface of his mind examined every detail of her---the intense whiteness of her face and the severe blackness of her clothes, the fact that she wore no jewel of any sort, not even a ring---except, of course, her wedding-ring. He had never seen it before and it seemed a gaudy splash of colour out of harmony with the rest of her.

She took off her hat and laid it on the table. Then she walked to the window, touching the things she passed with a little caressing gesture. He noticed that she picked up the unpointed pencil and he felt a little desolate feeling, as if he had lost his only friend.

Suddenly, she turned round, "I am leaving England to-morrow," she said.

He shivered at her velvety voice, as he would have shivered had his hand touched suede. "Well," his voice was too natural to be natural, "you don't want to say good-bye to me again, do you?"

"Is there such a thing as 'good-bye,'" she mused; "won't this room always be a part of my life? Can one end anything? A chapter, a paragraph, a sentence even? Doesn't everything one has ever done go on living in spite of subsequent events?"

Relentlessly he brought her down from her generalisations.

"You have ended my life," he said.

"Oh, no." She was sitting beside him on the sofa. Gently and tentatively she put her hand on his. "Take it away," he said roughly, miserably, conscious that he was behaving like a hero of melodrama, and then more quietly, "can't you spare me anything?"

"I never could spare any one anything, could I? Not *even* myself?"

He resisted the wistful pleading of her eyes, taking a savage pleasure in their tired look. No doubt the preparations for her journey had exhausted her. Her hand was lying limply on the arm of the sofa.

"What does it feel like to wear a wedding-ring?" he asked harshly.

"It feels so strange at first. One keeps catching sight of it and being made to feel different by it. Somehow, it really matters, it really seems to mean something."

"Indeed?" He was ashamed of the cheap cynicism of his tone. It wasn't what he had meant to say.

She waited a few minutes and then she got up and put on her hat, deftly arranging her veil with almost mechanical quickness and skill. Then she pulled on her gloves. How well he knew the swift deliberateness of her movements. Without turning round she left the room. He heard her go into the dining-room.... A few minutes later, he heard her come out again. He heard her open and shut the front door.... He went to the open window. Would she look up? Surely that was the test of whether or not she was still the same---the eternal. In the past, whatever had happened between them, she had never been able to resist that final peep, half to see whether he was there, half to send up a little tiny semi-binding glance of reconciliation. Sometimes, when he had been very angry with her he had watched from behind the curtains. To-day, he was at the open window, waiting to send her the smile which was to obliterate the past half-hour, the past six months. It was not to be so much a smile as a look, a benediction.

She got into her taxi. Through the far window she told the driver where to go. She never glanced behind her, she never glanced up.

He shut the window with a shiver. "The end," he murmured.

X

## **MISUNDERSTOOD**

[To JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES]

Her greatness was an accepted fact. Her fame had not been a dashing offensive but an inevitable advance quietly over-running the world. People who never read knew her name as well as Napoleon's. There was, somehow, something a little irreverent about being her contemporary. To attend the birth of so many masterpieces gave you the feeling of a legendary past invading the present.

A few great critics wrote wonderfully about her, but a vast majority of them, trained only in witty disparagement and acute disintegrating perception, became empty and formal in face of an unaccustomed challenge to admiration and reverence.

It is only the generous who give to the rich, the big who praise the big; the niggardly salve their consciences in doles to the humbly poor, making life into a pilgrimage of greedy patrons in search of grateful victims.

June was radiantly removed from the possible inroads of charity. You couldn't even pretend to have discovered her--unless, of course, you had met her--then you were quite sure that you had. Her friends explained--as friends always do--that it was what she was, not what she did, that mattered, that her letters and her conversation were far more wonderful than her books, that she was her own greatest masterpiece.

It was irritating to be forced out of it like that, but when you had seen her you began doing the same thing.

It was impossible not to want to tell people that her hair was like a crisp heap of rusty October beech leaves, that she always had time for you. And then you began to explain that she was happily married, which led you to the fact that she was happy, which reminded you that you were happy, by which time no one was listening to you. But it didn't seem to matter. People would ask such silly questions about her. "Does she admire Dostoevski?" they would say, and you would answer, "She has the most enchanting brown squirrel----"

George wasn't thinking any of those things. His mind didn't work like that. He was eating a huge breakfast, with the "Times" propped up against his coffee pot. The two and a half columns about her new book annoyed him. He hated a woman to get herself talked about--June, too, of all people. There was nothing new-fangled about June. Why, his mother loved her and she was so pretty and so fond of clothes and babies. There was really no excuse for her sprawling over his paper when she ought to have been moving discreetly through the social column like his other female friends.

There was really no reason for a happy, cared-for woman to write. It wasn't even as if she had to earn her own living. Richard ought to put his foot down, but Richard didn't seem to mind. One might almost have thought that he was proud of his wife's reputation, if one hadn't known him to be such a manly man. After all, a woman's place was in her home--or the Court Circular. She should never stray from birth, deaths and marriages to other parts of the paper. Even the sporting news (though he liked a woman to play a good game of golf or a good game of tennis) was *hardly* the place for a lady.

George knew that he was working himself up and he hated doing that at breakfast. So he started undoing the elaborate knot of a brown paper parcel to soothe his nerves--George never cut string. And out of it emerged her book--her new book. It was beautifully bound (she knew that he liked a book to look nice) and on the fly leaf was the inscription: "A leather cover, a little paper and my love."

It was as if she had sent him a box or a paper weight or a clock. It wasn't the gift, it was the thought that mattered. She knew that he had never read any of her books, but they were as good a vehicle for her affection as another.

"You are the only person," she had said to him, "to whom my books are really tokens," and she had smiled very radiantly as if he were the only person who had discovered the real secret of her books. George reflected sadly that he was the only person who understood her. Why, it was maddening to think that any one reading those paragraphs in the "Times" might imagine her middle-aged and ugly and spectacled. And how were they to know that her knowledge of cricket averages was probably greater than that of the Selection Committee? Probably, too, they pictured her with short hair, June, with her crinkling crown of autumn beach leaves; and thick ankles, June with her Shepperson legs; and blunt inky fingers, June with her rosy pointing nails and her hands like uncurling fans.

His mind went to other things, her low hard volleys and the lithe, easy grace with which she leapt over the lawn-tennis net. In thinking of her, the irritation her writing caused him decreased. It seemed altogether too irrelevant. June was the sort of woman one did things for. Helpless, he reflected with satisfaction, thinking of her tininess. Why, he could lift her up with one hand. George always mixed up physical phenomena with psychological fact. Small women were in need of protection; pale women were delicate; clever women were masculine--the greatest of all crimes. June might think it funny to be clever, but no one could deny that she was feminine--the sort of woman who appealed to you to do little

tiny things for her (things you would have done in any case), as if they were very important and very dramatic and very difficult. George liked the sort of woman who said to him: "Mr. Carruthers, you who know everything-----" It was apt, of course, to lead you into a lot of trouble, but that was one of the necessary results of being a man and having a superior intellect. June wasn't like that. She never asked you for legal advice or financial tips. She simply thought it most angelic of you to have fetched her coat and so clever of you to have noticed that it was getting chilly. And when you sent her flowers on her birthday, she would explain to you the flow of delight she had felt and perhaps a tiny little moment of surprise until she realised that of course it wasn't surprising at all, but just exactly what she knew at the bottom of her heart you would do--you, who were such a wonderful friend. Only the flowers were far more beautiful than she could have imagined and how had you been able to find them?

George had a photograph of June on his writing table. People were apt to stop short at it and say: "Is that the *great* June Rivers, the writer?" And he would brush the question aside---one must be loyal---and say: "She is a friend of mine," rather stiffly, as if they had said that she had run away from her husband or been found drunk.

He looked at it this morning, and suddenly he felt that he must see her---a feeling she frequently inspired. He knew that she hated the telephone, so he sent her a little note.

"Dear June: Thank you for your beautifully-bound book. May I come round this afternoon? I long to see your hair."

He wondered why he had put that: it was a silly sort of thing to say; so he scratched out the "hair" very carefully so that you could see nothing, and substituted "you." Then he wrote "George" and, after a moment's hesitation, added the postscript:

"Of course you saw that Macaulay had taken four wickets for two runs?"

Half an hour later her answer reached him.

"George dear, please come this afternoon. I was so hoping you would. Come whatever time suits you. I shall be happy and patient and impatient waiting for you." ("That doesn't mean anything," he growled to himself. "Pity she can't write more clearly.") "Of course I saw about Macaulay. June."

At five he was on her doorstep, and a very few moments later he was holding both her hands. They seemed somehow to have got lost in his. Her hair was crisper and rustier than ever, swirling about in competitive overlapping ripples. Her eyes, like a shallow Scotch brook, were laughing at him: like transparent toffee they were or burnt sugar or amber. "June," he said, and his voice was funny and thick, "I had forgotten how pretty you were."

"That was just a little plot you were making with yourself to please me," she said.

They sat happily on a sofa and talked about the wonderful way Mr. Fender managed the Surrey bowling; they discussed the iniquities of the Selection Committee; they decided that no woman who played the base line game could ever be quite first class. They considered the relative merits of Cromer and Brighton from the point of view of George's mother; they agreed that being braced was one thing and being overbraced another. Then June told George that he ought to marry, and George said that he was not a marrying man, and June said that men became the worst old maids and that a man's place was in the home and George thought that she had got it wrong by accident.

June was perfectly happy. She loved talking to George---George who adored her without knowing that she had genius, only that she had sympathy---had no idea that she was a great woman, only that she was a charming one. He was looking at her with a worried expression.

"June," he said, "you look tired."

"Oh, but I'm not a bit."

He put her feet up and covered them with a shawl.

"I wish you would stop writing," he said. "What good do books do? Health is the only thing that matters."

"Loving is the only thing that matters," she murmured, "loving and being loved."

"Well," (George thought it so like a woman to go off at a tangent like that), "you've got Richard."

"Richard," she twinkled, "is not like you. He loves my books."

"He ought to know better," George asserted severely, and at that moment in he came.

"George!" Richard was jubilant. "Have you heard the news?"

"What news?" George was thinking of the Carpentier-Lewis fight due that night.

"June has been awarded the Nobel prize."

"How splendid!" George looked a little puzzled. "Is it for life saving?"

"Yes," June put in quickly.

"I'm not at all surprised." George beamed at her. "You always were as plucky as they made 'em and gifted. Do you remember how charmingly you used to sing? 'Not a big voice, but so true,' Mother used to say, and she's a great judge."

"Your mother has always been so sweet to me."

"What a talented woman like you wants to write for beats me."

George had got back to his grievance again, but she lured him on to the subject of irises on which they were both experts, and it was not till just before dinner that he hurried away.

Then suddenly he remembered that he hadn't asked her whose life she had saved. How silly and how selfish! It was so like her not to talk about herself, and then he saw on a patch of posters: "June Rivers awarded the Nobel prize," and though he was very late he stopped to buy an evening paper.

XI

## COUNTERPOINT

[*To THE MARCHESE GIOVANNI VISCONTI VENOSTA*]

Matthew half shut his eyes---as he always did when he particularly wanted to see.

"For the first time in my life," he said, "I regret my myopia. Confronted with this room, imagination pales before sight."

Virginia looked round---at the strawberry ice brocade, at the gilt, at the Bouchers---so painstaking and so painful---at the palms that seemed to conceal manicurists and barbers.

"Look," he continued, "at our hostess. I am sure her ears and her nose take off at night. Her hair is a libel on horsehair and dye."

"Oh,"---Virginia's smile was playing like a light over his face---"think of the days when her eyes were like stars and her ears like shells and her hair was curling all over the place."

"Virginia," his voice was tender, "where you are there are no more palms, wigs turn into hair, rouge into blushes-----"

"Matthew," she said, "you are a romantic and I am the only person in the world who knows it."

"You are the only person in the world with whom I am in love."

"For the moment."

"How practical you are!" he teased, "full of forethought and arriere pensees. Isn't the moment the capture of the divine?"

She sighed a little---wise with the wisdom of frustrated dreams, and she thought how happy he was---happy with the happiness of iridescent, ever-changing whimsies.

"Virginia, does that young man love you?"

"Which one?"

"The one in spectacles."

"I don't think so."

"Are you sure?"

"One can never be sure."

"Of course if he doesn't, it proves that I am right in saying that spectacles are fatal. They prevent people from using either their eyes or their imagination. Shall I go up to him and ask him?"

"He would answer: 'I don't understand.'"

"And I would explain: 'Virginia is the only lady in orange,' and he would look at you for a moment or two and, holding out his hand in an ecstasy of gratitude, he would say: 'Thank you. Yes, I love her.'"

"Matthew," she murmured, "what an unsuitable name."

They sat in silence, interfered with only by the necessity of convincing passers-by that they did not want to be interrupted.

"Matthew," she said, "do you see that tall fair man?"

"The blond beast?"

"With a very tall woman."

"With gold hair and eyes like cows in pictures of Christ in a manger?"

"Yes. He loves her."

"How suitable."

"But it isn't. He has a red-haired wife."

"How unsuitable."

"Matthew, do be serious. I like him."

"How complicated."

"I told him I hated his air of perfunctory but restrained passion, and he laughed."

"Any one would have."

"And we made friends."

"You always make friends with everybody."

"You are unsympathetic."

"I am, I confess, a little bewildered by the situation. Do I understand that you are suffering from an unrequited passion for a man who is illegitimately attached to a magnificent cow and legitimately bound to a bewitching squirrel?"

"Matthew, you really are provoking. What I mean is that he is making a fool of himself."

"Why not?"

"Because he might do something irrevocable."

"Lucky man."

She looked at him in desperation--a desperation half exasperation and half enchantment. If only Matthew would sometimes appear serious--there is something so restful about appearances. Instead of which he always remained superlatively unsatisfactory and superlatively irresistible.

"Virginia," he said, "let us leave all this and drive round the park and I will talk to you like a lover in a bad book and I will mean every word I say."

"We can't go yet," she murmured.

"Virginia,"---his voice was urgent---"I will be divinely pompous."

That was so like him. He always tried to safeguard the simplest, most sincere moments of his life by inverted commas. It was a little trick that always irritated her.

"What an artist you are," she remarked acidly.

"Yes, indeed," he assented, smiling her out of her irritation. And then: "I have known you, Virginia, ever since I can remember."

"You told me that the first time we met."

"It is still true."

"How magnificent."

It was her turn now to ward off what she was longing for. To be serious with Matthew was a form of disarmament you always regretted.

"And knowing you as I do, I recognise the crusading light in your eye and I must point out to you that your altruistic excursions have not always ended by tidying up the situation."

"Alas, no."

"Now, why plunge into the eternal triangle? There is really no role for you unless you propose to supplant the cow. What, by the way, is her name?"

"Grace."

"I don't like the statuesque," he said, wrinkling up his eyes. "Look at her ecstatic vacant expression. A dangerous combination."

Virginia wished she had not given him this theme. He would weave it into such marvellous patterns that she would never be able to get it out intact again.

"I must have some more facts," he said. "What is the squirrel called?"

"Estelle."

"And the hero?"

"Edgar."

"More and more suitable. What prophetic parents! How admirably they kept their heads at the font. The squirrel is very vivacious---is it a brave front, a blind eye or a shallow heart?"

"Estelle is a courageous woman and discreet with the unpierceable reticence of spontaneity."

"How delightful. I might try Estelle myself."

"You might."

"If I said 'I love you,' would she laugh or cry?"

"Laugh, I think."

"With a little hidden tear in her voice?"

"I have my doubts about the hidden tear."

"Then she would be no good to me. I like mixed effects."

At this moment Grace and Edgar danced by. They were both radiantly fair and a little colossal in scale. Her eyes were half shut and her mouth was half open.

"Matthew," Virginia was firm, "something must be done. How can he scale the heights of a great passion carrying that hold-all?"

"An empty hold-all isn't so very heavy."

"It is if you can't put it down."

"Virginia," he said, "your missionary zeal appals me. Why invade the situation? What are you going to tell the man? That he has children?"

"No. That he is throwing his life into a cul-de-sac."

"He won't believe you."

"No."

"And it will probably end by his falling in love with you and think what a terrible mess the cow and the squirrel will make."

Edgar came up to them.

"Will you give me the pleasure of a dance?"

"I should love to."

Virginia's apricot had become a strand in the pattern of the ball-room.

A parma violet lady settled on Matthew like a fly.

"I can't think how you have anything left to say to Virginia," she remarked disagreeably. "But I suppose you simply make love to her."

"It is not simple at all."

"Let us go and sit somewhere," Edgar was saying, and they went into another room.

All of our real indiscretions in life come in the form of generalisations. A name is a warning, and we really give ourselves away in abstract philosophisings applied by an intelligent companion to the particular.

"Why should we accept ready-made standards?" Edgar said. "None of the great governing forces of life can fit into a ditch of conventions."

"No."

"Sometimes you have to set out to sea and turn your back on the old familiar coastline."

"In a pleasure boat for an excursion."

"In a sailing ship for distant seas."

"Argosies have a way of turning into penny steamers."

"You ought not to say that---you of all people, who sail the seas in a tub with a sunshade."

"Oh," she said, "I am at the mercy of the winds. But you have a harbour and an anchor and a flag to fly."

"You are thinking that I'm a fool."

"Yes."

"One must sometimes cut one's losses."

"One must sometimes cut one's gains---a much more difficult thing."

"You can't throw away light."

"The world is brighter with your back to the sun."

"Virginia," he said, "I have made up my mind."

"What can I say? I am helpless. I see you going shipwreck on dummy rocks---the water let in by a penknife."

"You are cruel."

"Don't you think I know those frontiers, when paradise seems but a step away, but you know that it is a step you can't retrace?"

"Why should you want to go backwards?"

She looked past him into space.

"Behind us," she murmured, "lie so many things---memories of childhood, dim happy echoes, primroses and hoops and peace shot with laughter. When you have taken your step you daren't look back. Remembering hurts too much. And so you look forward---always forward, knowing that the promised land is behind you."

Grace was dancing round and round, wondering how one stopped. Away from him she felt restless and nervous and will-less and incomplete, like a frustrated animal lost and impotent, with smouldering rage in her heart and sulky fires in her eyes. Why didn't he come to release her, to calm the tearing fever of her blood?

Again and again she walked through the library and always he was on the sofa with Virginia---Virginia in her orange haze melting into cushions; and sometimes he was bending right forward, his whole body curved into urgency. And when she passed, he half looked up with the tail end of a smile falling as it were accidentally in her direction.

Estelle laughed and talked, her feet twinkled, her eyes danced. Marriage, she said, was an altogether delightful thing, quite different from what people thought----

Matthew was introduced to her. He explained that love was so important that it could only be discussed lightly. He said that her hair reminded him ... he wished he could think of what, but he had such a bad memory for metaphors. It took him all his time to remember that a harp was like water and Carpentier like a Greek god. It was funny, wasn't it, to have such a weak head. He thought it came from hay fever---he always had hay fever during the third week of May. It came entirely from honeysuckle.

Estelle said that she would like to sit in the library. Grace was in a corner pulling monosyllables out of her mouth like teeth.

Virginia was still in the middle of the sofa, a dissolving mass of orange mist. Edgar was talking away all risk of his suiting the action to the word. Estelle was dimpling.

"Do you remember," she said to Matthew, "that orange is flame-colour?"

"By Jove, yes," he said, "oriflammes and hell fire."

A low murmur came from the sofa.

"Will you introduce me to your husband?" Matthew asked.

They all talked together.

"By the way, Virginia," Matthew said, "the young man does love you."

"Dear me, how very nice."

"It only required me to point it out to him."

"Was he pleased?"

"Delighted. By the way, Mr. Wilmot,"---Matthew turned to Edgar---"do you ever wear spectacles?"

XII

## VILLEGIATURA

[*To MARCEL PROUST*]

What a fool he had been to come. These wooden walls creaking at a touch, and the floors responding like an animal in pain to the lightest footstep. Not that Marie Aimee had light footsteps---far from it. She clattered about with the happy noisiness of a good conscience and perfect health. In her hands the opening of a door became an air-raid and yet what could you do, confronted with her rosy face beaming with a child-like confidence in giving pleasure and satisfaction.

No, it was entirely his own fault. Everything was what he might have expected. The sea was just where he had been told it would be, the air was relentlessly bracing, the cleanliness of the Hotel Bungalow reminded you of a shiny soaped face which had never known powder. It was all, he reflected, quite horrible. The salt-laden wind blowing the sand up from the dunes, the hard bright sunshine, the effect everything gave you of having been painted with the six colours of a child's rather cheap paint-box.

"A different man," she had said he would feel. Well he felt it already---the lassitude of his body feebly revolting against the impending bracing, his eyes watering at the glare. Health and inspiration, Marthe had said, dreamless sleep, an insatiable appetite and perfect peace in which to finish his novel. "Think how quiet it will be," she had said. As if the country were ever quiet, crowded as it was with locos and dogs and sabots. Surely peace meant Paris in August, with every one away, thick carpets and a noiseless valet.

Maurice imagined himself merging into a huge armchair, just able to see a square glass vase of Juliette roses---gilt petals lined with deep pink velvet. Why on earth were there never any flowers in the country? And no one would disturb him---no one. Privacy is only possible in a big town. Every detail of life in the Hotel Bungalow was revealed to him in a series of sights, sounds and smells. And should a fellow lunatic arrive, how was he to avoid him? At every meal there would be little exchanges of the banal, after dinner a game of billiards---even possibly, horror of horrors, potential excursions planned with zest and good fellowship. And all the time he would be saying "No," more and more ungraciously, or, worse still---and far more likely---saying "yes."

And then where would his novel be? Not that it was possible any way to write in a place where the sun was always in your eyes, the wind blew your paper away and creaking boards made sitting in your bedroom out of the question.

Marthe was a fool, given up entirely to hygiene and plans for other people. "You will come back bubbling over with physical fitness, your dear face all tanned," she had said. "Dear" indeed! It was simply a bribe. He was being bribed for his own good. And to think that like a great gaby he had been shoved off to the sea by one term of endearment, and to a place, too, where there was neither shade nor shadows, simply miles and miles of bright monotonous sea, three dusty cornflowers, two bedraggled poppies and the sun all around you.

Tanned, indeed! Why his face would be all blisters and his eyes bloodshot.

The insensitiveness of women!

If Marthe were here she would bathe before breakfast, feed the hens, find the eggs, encourage the cook, pat the dog, listen to the story of Marie Aimee's life, pick the cornflowers, praise the cook, churn the butter, play with the children,

climb on to the hay cart, collect shells on the beach, lie in the sun, let the sand trickle through her fingers and explain with perfect sincerity that it was the most delightful place in the world.

But he didn't like paddling or shrimping or sailing or farmyard life. He wanted a velvet lawn, a cedar, a rose garden, lavender, a sun dial, iced lemonade and solitude. Or he wanted his own cool apartment, with drawn sunblinds, vases full of flowers, his immense writing table, and a deserted Paris around him.

Women always did to you as they wanted to be done by. That sort of literal interpretation of Christianity showed such a lack of imagination. It was no good telling Marthe that you didn't like the sea, she simply wouldn't believe it.

"Think of the sunset reflected in the wet sand," she would say, and if you told her that you didn't want to think about it, that it was no fit subject for an active mind, she would be hurt.

In any case no one had a right to make you do things for your own good. It was a horrible form of self-sacrifice. If Marthe had said, "*Please* go to St. Jean-les-Flots and pick me a poppy," he would have been delighted, but to stay at the Hotel Bungalow in the interests of his own health was a very different matter.

Marie Aimee was putting a pot with one red geranium in it on his writing table. It was, she explained, still very early in the season but Monsieur must not be discouraged. Later it became very gay with dancing and Japanese lanterns in the garden. The Hotel Bungalow would be quite full, whereas now there was only Monsieur and a lady.

"A lady?"

"But yes, Monsieur."

"A young lady?"

"A lady of a certain age."

Maurice hoped that it would be an uncertain age. Of course every one over twenty would seem old to Marie Aimee. Probably the lady was on that exquisite frontier line, the early thirties, when the bud is already unfurling its petals, angles have softened into curves, and the significant is stirring in everything like a quickening child. Thirty, the age of delicate response, of subtle tasting, divorced equally from the ignorant impetuosity of youth and the desperate clutchings of middle age. How he disliked young girls with their sunburn, their manly strides, their meaningless giggles, their eternal nicknames! And, over their heads, a warning and a trade mark, that sword of Damocles---marriage.

Maurice was feeling a little happier. As he walked into lunch he felt a real twinge of curiosity. Ridiculous it was---why he was getting quite romantic, imagining an exquisite creature on a holiday from her husband. That was no doubt the result of the Hotel Bungalow. On the velvet lawn with the cedar, the rose garden, the sun dial and the iced lemonade, he would have been enjoying to the full his usual ironic detachment, but St. Jean-les-Flots would throw any one to romance.

He walked into the dining room. At the far end with her back to him sat the lady. She wore a white coat embroidered with black, a white skirt, a white hat with a white lace veil. On the chair beside her lay a Holland sunshade lined with green. It was he thought, deplorable, and indicated yellow spectacles. Her feet were very small and gave you the impression of an insecure foundation to her body. Her back was broad. She was certainly over forty. Forty, thought Maurice, the dangerous age---the desperate age. From forty to fifty, the flower in full bloom, the period of engulfing passions, of urgent transitory satisfactions. For how many women must it not be a ten years' death struggle.

"What a place," Maurice was disgusted; "it is driving me to melodrama."

The lady got up with a certain waddling stateliness (perhaps after all she was fifty). Her clothes fell into perfection---she walked slowly and calmly with appraising steps. The lace veil was over her face. She did not forget her sunshade, her bag, or her handkerchief. Louis, the waiter, opened the door for her. She sailed out like a gondola on the stage, or Lohengrin's swan. Her movements gave an effect of invisible wheels.

During the afternoon she remained undetectable, which was a tour de force at St. Jean-les-Flots, where the landscape was a successful conspiracy against concealment, and a sunshade could be seen for miles. Maurice had a tiresome feeling that she was lying out somewhere with that horrible sunshade over her head and a novel by Gyp on her lap. Had she, he wondered, ever read any of his books? Perhaps when she found out his name she would come up to him and say: "Are you *the* Mr. Maurice Van Trean?" And when he had bowed in the affirmative, she would add that she liked "Sur les Rives" best of his books---"she had read them all many times---and especially that marvellous description of Camille's return to her husband."

Maurice walked for miles down the hard glaring white road. It was the most uncomfortable thing he could think of doing, and when you are determined to enjoy nothing there is a certain voluptuous satisfaction in a maximum of unpleasantness. The air was burning and solid. An occasional convolvulus drowned in dust straggled in weary clinging grace by the roadside---a pathetic symbol, he reflected, of the pale refined irrelevant women who fade ineffectually beside the highways of life. He thought of Marthe with her urgent pulsating rhythm, the rhythm he remembered bitterly, that had brought him here. He wished vindictively that she were beside him, the hard burning surface of the road biting through the soles of her shoes. He would walk on and on till there were blisters on her feet and her steps were lagging. His teeth were set in the grim satisfaction of revenge.

"This is the country," he would say. "Do you feel the health-giving sea breeze you told me about?"

He stopped suddenly. Walking towards him was the lady. The offensive sunshade was over her head, but her veil was up. She was, he supposed, forty-six---no, forty-four. Her eyes were wide apart, dark and indolent and long---brown or blue they might have been. Her face was wide and so was her mouth with lips like curtains drawn across the teeth. Her cheek-bones were high and her skin, like marshmallow, was marbled with the bright yellow lights and bright blue shadows of early afternoon. There was a curious grace about her broad solid figure, an unhurried indifferent grace, as if she said to herself, "I shall please at my own time." She was not pretty. Her clothes belonged to her as essentially as her limbs.

Maurice took off his hat.

"Forgive me, Madame, but I think that we are both living at the Hotel Bungalow."

"I think so, too," she said drily.

He thought that she thought that he was taking a liberty, which made him suppose that she was not quite a lady, which made him accuse himself of vulgarity.

And then she laughed, and his accusations, both of her and of himself, fled.

They walked back together and he explained to her just how much he hated the sea, the heat, the Hotel Bungalow, the cook, and Marie Aimee's footsteps. He explained how anxious he had been about her---how he had longed to see her face---how much her sunshade had depressed him---how her lace veil had been a personal enemy.

She said that she adored the country....

He told her that only in big towns could you find peace or flowers.

She said the Hotel Bungalow had "un caractere assez special...."

He did not listen to her comments---they were mere breathing places. On the subject of the sea he was, he thought, almost witty, with a touch of real indignation.

She said the sea was her passion....

He decided that she was an obstinate woman---entetee. How ridiculous to love the sea---especially for some one who pretended to like the country. The two were practically incompatible. Could she explain her point of view?

The sea, she said, was such a wonderful escape....

He was thrilled. A thousand explanations of her presence at the Hotel Bungalow jostled one another in his mind.

Of course he quite understood what she meant about the sea. It had a certain spaciousness and it did, so to speak, quarantine you from life. For instance, in a rowing boat, it was impossible to feel the importance of being a snob.

That was not, she said, exactly what she meant....

Maurice was annoyed. He was accustomed to people who were proud to share his meanings.

Madame would perhaps be able to explain....

It was not, Madame murmured, a question of being able to explain, but of being able to interrupt....

Maurice flushed and relapsed into sulky silence. He watched his companion trotting by his side, taking three little steps to each one of his. He took a childish pleasure in making his strides as wide as possible, upsetting the rhythm of her walk. The brim of her hat hid her eyes. He felt that his uncertainty as to their expression gave the matter an interest that it did not intrinsically possess. Even if she were smiling, what did it matter?

Suddenly she turned to him.

"Has Monsieur anything more to conceal from me?" she asked.

Maurice capitulated. It was a delightful formula. He wished that he had thought of it himself. It was she, he said, who had been hiding things from him. Her eyes, for instance. All this time he had been wondering about the expression of her eyes.

"And yet you deny the potency of the country," she sighed, "the miracle-working country, which compels a young man of twenty-seven to wonder about the expression of an old woman of forty-four."

"Madame," he said, "I am very old. I have ceased to take myself seriously. You are very young, for you can force others to treat you with curiosity and respect."

She reminded him that eight minutes ago he had taken himself seriously. "It was you who made me," he retorted, "you have given me back my youth."

They went on like that for quite a long time---gallant lawn-tennis---long base line rallies with an occasional smash. And then he said that he must be indiscreet---specifically so. Why had she come to St. Jean-les-Flots?

It was, she explained meditatively, an escape (he noticed that it was the second time that she had used that word). The Hotel Bungalow was very clean, the food was good, the air was marvellous....

She pulled herself together.

When you took a holiday, she said, you had to make a careful choice between old acquaintances and new ones. Which was likely to be the more tiring? She herself always went to new places at the wrong time of year. Then it was a case of friendship, or nothing. The people who visited watering places out of season were always either impossible or enchanting. Very often amusingly impossible and temporarily enchanting, but so much the better. There is a certain safety in the transitory.

Is Madame married? Maurice asked abruptly. It was the sort of question that had to be asked brusquely, or not at all.

"Yes---No---Yes. That is to say, I have a husband. He will probably come here for a day or two later. He is tres comme il faut."

"Surely you do not blame him for coming to see you."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"It is magnificent, but it is not life. One is not always young enough to permit oneself these phantasies. At fifty-six it is silly to waste two days visiting some one you don't want to see. But there, Edmond is like that. Oh! the stability when he says 'my wife.' It is superb. It must be grand, too, when he says 'ma maitresse'; he has the property sense. And how he adores women, woman, all women, any woman. Even sometimes me. And when he doesn't, he keeps the habits. Toujours des petits soins. He never goes out of training, even at home."

"He sounds charming to live with."

"Ah, yes. That is it. He is charming. One cannot bear it. To have the five-finger exercises of his irresistibility played on one. To be the stiff piano on which he practises but never plays. It is too much. And one remembers the days when one was the concert grand. Pouf. It is not agreeable."

There was a pause. Maurice knew that she was going to say a great many other things.

But they had reached the Hotel Bungalow. Regretfully they parted.

He thought that she was a very remarkable woman indeed.

She thought how like her husband he was. Her husband twenty-five years ago.

At dinner she still was in black and white. Black covered with filmy laces, soft and shadowy and mysterious. After dinner they sat on the terrace and looked out at the inky relentless sea.

"Being sensible is no good at all," she said with sudden passion. "Courage is the only helpful virtue; when I married I was young and very pretty and I had thought about life a lot. I knew that in men fidelity had the importance that they gave to it. To a few---very few---it matters---but in most cases unfaithfulness is not a psychological thing at all; it is simply a temporary excess like getting drunk---squalid, if you like---but not touching your real relationships. Women bluff a lot on the subject and many are fools. They believe in the same law for both sexes. It is a ridiculous fallacy. Only Edmond was different. He loved women---*psychologically*. He was therefore inconstant, which is the real sin against marriage. He was a great lover, an artist. Every woman was to him what a canvas is to a painter, a violin to a violinist. The colours and the sounds he got were marvellous. Sometimes he would try impossible subjects---for fun---but always he could bring some sort of harmony out of everything. Ma foi, it amuses me to watch him now---now that it is difficult, and he is fifty-six and I don't love him---but then, when everything was easy and he was twenty-seven and I cared---then it was---well, it was different."

The way that her voice opened and shut reminded him of a sea anemone.

"It is not the way to talk to a stranger, is it?" she said abruptly, "but I feel as if I had known you for a long time. For twenty-five years, to be exact," she added.

Maurice felt curiously tongue-tied. He longed to tell her about Marthe. For the first time in his life he was finding a confidence difficult to make. He wondered why.

"Bon soir, Monsieur," she said, and she walked up to bed with a characteristic lack of pause or hesitation.

Maurice woke up---was woken up---knowing that he had something to look forward to. Sleepily he wondered what it was while patterns spread over his semi-consciousness---dreamily he saw Marthe in a filmy lace dress over black and he felt himself trying to play on a grand piano, every note of which was a sea anemone. Then he woke up completely, and with a delightful rush he remembered Madame and all of the marvellous things that she had told him and all of the significant things he had not yet said to her.

He walked down to breakfast whistling. In the courtyard he patted the dog and lifted the patron's son on to his shoulder, then he asked the patronne if the cook had a name and whether he might some day come and watch her churn butter. In the dining room he praised the coffee, and admired the geraniums. St. Jean-les-Flots must have a particularly fine soil for geraniums, and what air! Why, he felt a different man already.

Madame Marly---he had discovered her name---did not appear till lunch. They bowed to one another, and each talked a little to the waiter. It was delightful to keep their pleasure at arm's length. Coffee on the terrace brought them together.

"You are right," she said, "the country is an impossible place. It makes one talk."

"I love the country," he said.

"And then the sea. It is always going on without you."

"I have a passion for the sea," he murmured.

"I would like to wring the neck of the cook, chloroform the dog, buy Marie Aimee some lawn tennis shoes, and have a daily box of flowers from Paris."

"They shall be ordered at once."

"I should also like," she was looking out to sea, "to fill the hotel with people."

"You flatter me," he murmured.

"Perhaps," she added, "it would be simpler to go away."

"Simpler but impossible."

"Why impossible?"

"The air is unique. The Hotel Bungalow...."

"Please don't," she begged.

"Besides, for the first time in my life I am becoming discreet."

"Ah, no, my friend, believe me. It was merely that you, too, found it difficult to interrupt."

"I did not want to interrupt."

"There you had an advantage over me. I was longing to bring your remarks about the sea to an untimely end."

Her laugh was the most confidential thing in the world. You felt as if she had given you an unlimited credit of intimacy. He thought that she was looking ten years younger in her creamy crepe de Chine dress, with her big straw hat, which seemed to have conquered, without an effort, the perfection and simplicity of the absolute.

"What is it called?" he asked fingering it.

"Crepe surprise."

He asked her to describe its lines, but she refused.

"Ne parlons pas robes," she said.

They decided to go for a drive.

The cocher explained that he had lost his wife, but that "Lisette etait un tres bon petit cheval."

They laughed---at him, at one another, at the sun, at the sea, at everything. He told her about the convolvuluses, and she said he ought to write a book.

He told her his name.

She puckered her forehead a little, and looked to him for help.

He explained rather stiffly that he had written three novels, a book of short sketches, a book of light verse, and a phantasy on Algeria.

She asked what they were called. He told her.

She asked which was the best.

He said that "Sur les Rives" had the best things in it. Perhaps it was less finished than some of the others, but it was on a bigger scale, the conception was more interesting.

She asked what the conception was.

He told her that it was about a woman who, out of affection for her husband, and deep intrinsic virtue, refuses to become the mistress of the man she passionately adores. He goes away and she gives herself to the first person she meets with a look of him. Her original great struggle has exhausted all her powers of resistance.

Madame Marly was silent.

"It is true," she said, "for big things we have big resistances, and for little things little resistances. And so we live our lives in small weak lapses---not driven by hate or love, but by pique or boredom, lowering our flag to salute a pleasure boat, not a battleship. Pouf," she made a little gesture of disgust that he was beginning to know. "We occupy the places that other people make for us. We curl on their divans, we sprawl in their gutters, we sit proudly on the pedestals they put for us, we occupy their altars, and when we are alone, what happens to us? We dissolve into air."

"Not you," he said. "I feel it. You are so independent, so sure. Where are your hesitations? Your very doubts are challenges to truth."

"Challenges to truth," she said. "It is a nice phrase."

Driving back into the sunset they were silent. He wrapped her cloak round her, and once he kissed her hand, but it didn't feel as if it belonged to her. Her thoughts had taken her right away out of his presence, out of the carriage beyond the sunset. Where had they taken her? He wondered.

\* \* \* \* \*

That night she came down, dressed in glowing apricot---"fold after fold to the fainting air."

As always, her clothes seemed part of her, without ends or beginnings, flowing from her, a streaming enhancing accompaniment. He asked her if her dress were *nympe emue* or *feuille morte*. He was proud of knowing those two names. She said it was neither. He begged her to tell him, but she refused rather abruptly to discuss it. He said he loved her clothes---that he would like to know....

"Pour l'amour de Dieu, ne parlons pas robes."

He wondered at her irritability, but he obeyed.

They went out on to the terrace. The sea was black and angry, all the waves at cross purposes.

"What is your name?"

"Paula."

"What will you say when I tell you that I love you, that I want you?"

"You won't tell me because you will know that I don't want you to."

Her voice was a part of the wind.

"Why don't you want me to?" he was urgent---harsh with desire.

"Because it all happened twenty-five years ago."

He didn't understand.

"Because---because there are some things you can't do twice---like your book, they are the big things that create a strength of resistance. Because they are the beautiful things that belong to our dreams. Because they are of a magic fabric, into which you can weave no facts."

It was dark and he could not see her. The end of his cigarette was a bright spot in the night. The sea and the wind were the counterpoint of her voice.

He felt unreal and remote and small. A tiny strand in the vast design of destiny.

She got up and walked in. He did not move.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Thank you for the flowers."

The sun was glittering frivolous and cynical.

The box he had ordered from Paris had arrived. First there was a mass of Juliette roses---gilt and velvet---then a staircase of sweet peas, flame-coloured, coral, crimson, magenta, purple, bronze and black.

Both together they drank in the blaze of colour.

Ecstatically he said to her,

"You can't thank *me*, can you? They are too beautiful."

"Perhaps not," she said, "but it was beauty unleashed by you."

He looked at her with adoring eyes. She gave you phrases which lit torches in your soul.

They walked down the beach together. The sea was light and mutinous.

"How untransparent it is," he said, "lapis lazuli and turquoise and chrysoprase---no emeralds or aquamarines, or sapphires."

"How are we to get in our purple without an amethyst?"

"I don't know."

"That is what comes from not reading the Book of Revelations," she said.

They saw big, dissolving, poisonous jellyfish in the sea, mysteriously without lines---and tidy slabs of jellyfish on the beach. They found a starfish, and wondered who came to dance a sword dance round it. They picked up shells that looked as if they had fallen out of fading sunsets or glimmering dawns---they looked into pools of shutting and opening sea anemones.

They never noticed a sardine box or an old boot.

They were happy.

Over her head was a scarlet paper sunshade. It looked like a huge tropical flower.

"Paula," he said---and his eyes opened to her like a magic trap door.

That night they stayed indoors.

"Tell me the things that life has given you," he said, "the things that have made you so rich."

"If I am rich," she said, "it is from the things that *I* have given."

"Yes," he said, "but why do you impoverish yourself at my expense?"

"Please," she said, "don't talk about that. There are in all of us exposed places---you can call them pain or romance---Sehnsucht or memory---but they are the sanctuaries of our hearts---they cannot be violated."

"Paula," he said, "you have made too much of life. You have made it into the sort of hope that is always a disillusionment."

"Yes," she murmured very low.

"Why were you so unpractical?" his bantering tone revived her.

"I have done for some one (even for you, perhaps) what I have never done for myself;" she was smiling. "I will tell you a story. There was once a man who loved me. He was born with everything---a marvellous name, great riches, beauty, a magnetic quality that I have never seen equalled. I always reproached him with having added nothing to his inheritance---no glory---no achievement---'I have spent,' he would say, shrugging his shoulders. 'Wasted,' I retorted tartly. 'If you like. I have never admitted my past or my future as barriers---or even frontiers---to my actions. I have lived without forethought or *arriere pensee*---without the weakness of regrets or the stinginess of precautions,' and then he turned to me---his eyes were half shut and his voice was muffled as if a flood were battering on the door of his dispassionateness, 'I have had everything in life except you,' he said. I smiled at him, a little sadly, a little cynically. 'It

is I who have given you the greatest gift,' I said. 'I have given you a regret and an illusion. Vous avez donc tout eu.' That night he killed himself."

"And you, Paula, did you feel a murderess?"

"No, a saviour."

\* \* \* \* \*

She was dressed in pale lilac---the coolest lilac in the world. It rippled round her like loving caressing waves.

"What is your dress called, Paula?"

"Oasis," she said. "'Indian summer' would have been a better name."

"Tell me about it."

"Why do you always want to know?"

"I am writing a book."

"Tant pis."

She was out of temper.

The flowers arrived.

Old-fashioned pink roses, coral carnations, purple stocks, pink pinks, mauve orchids, moss roses, patterned chintz-like phlox.

"Oh!" she said, and for a moment she shut her eyes.

Then:

"Tell me about her," she said.

"Marthe?"

"Is that her name?"

"She is vibrant."

"But of course. What does she look like?"

"Her hair is like a dirty new coin. You feel that you could polish it into brightness. Her eyes are like tea---yellow camomile tea. Her mouth is big and rather grave. There are electric waves of aliveness running all through her."

"I do not like her."

"No?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"All that irrelevant, interfering vitality. It is dangerous."

"And slumbering, mysterious magnetism, is that not dangerous?"

"That, too."

There was a thunderstorm and the air got cool.

Madame Marly had a headache and dined in her room.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day was grey---grey air, a grey sky, a grey countryside, a grey sea---not luminous, lustrous grey, but opaque chiffon drawn across the world.

Paula's flowers had arrived---lemon-coloured hollyhocks, blue and mauve and purple delphiniums, filmy love-in-the-mist, primrose antirrhinums, snowy Madonna lilies with golden middles, huge creamy roses, tiny yellow rosebuds, straggling larkspurs.

She was dressed in a grey whipcord coat and skirt with a grey swathed turban. She looked distant---on the brink of disappearance---not so much as if she were going to travel but as if she were going to vanish.

She regarded the flowers with grave concentration. It was as if she felt for them a stern passionate devotion. She took one of the white roses and stroked it---as if it were a shy mother with her first child. Then she said:

"I want to go for a long walk."

They walked for miles and miles. The mist sprinkled her hair with dew-drops. It looked quite white. Her eyes were deep and brooding and you couldn't catch them.

"Paula," Maurice said, "how remote you are."

"Am I?" she said. And it made her more remote than ever.

He walked desperately, as if each step were an obstacle painfully overcome. She walked with a swaying unconscious rhythm, as if she did not know what she was doing.

She cut off his perfunctory attempts at conversation with a monosyllable. When they got home they were both tired.

They each decided to have a hot bath and rest before dinner.

She was dressed in very severe perfect black, marvellous lines, waiting to be sculpted.

He told her so.

She pursed her lips.

They sat in front of the fire in the hall.

"Tell me a little more about your husband?" he said.

"What can I tell you? I know him so well. You see, I have loved him and hated him---I have become indifferent to him---and I appreciate him. But I have had nothing from him that a hundred other people have not had---except, perhaps, his name."

"Marly?"

She looked at him in amazement.

"Marly?" she laughed. "Marly is not even my own name. We are all of us so very monogamous when we love, proprietary, exclusive, jealous, whatever you like to call it. Edmond's character was like a pergola. You walked in and out. There were always roses and jasmine, clematis and wisteria, peeps of the garden and patches of the sky---but never a shut door---never one. Oh," there was a breaking passion in her voice---"how I longed for four walls, for a lock and key, for a dungeon, for bars. 'Don't you know,' I would say to him, 'that much trodden territory becomes neutral?' and he would smile and say, 'you are generous.'"

Maurice was looking into the fire.

"Poor little Paula," he said. "But you were his only wife."

"Yes," she said, "a law-given copyright."

"Paula," he said, "will you do something for me?"

"I wonder. There are surely no somethings where we are concerned."

"I want you to describe several dresses to me. Your own perfect divine dresses. I want them for my book."

"So I am to be made use of, am I?"

Her eyes were flashing.

He was not looking at her.

"Yes," he said, "I am going to steal some of your genius."

She had left him. He was not surprised. She never said "Good-night."

The next day she had gone---very early, leaving no address, no letter.

She had, he heard, left his box of flowers at the village infirmary. He knew that that day it was to have been full of verbena, sweet geranium, sweet briar, thyme, myrtle, lavender and single roses....

\* \* \* \* \*

Marthe had insisted that he should come with her to Lally. He was feeling foolish and fascinated---dressing was evidently a religion with the most solemn rites in the world. The gravity and concentration of every one astounded him---the firm vendeuse refusing to allow her cliente any freedom of choice. The pathetic cliente pining in vain for forbidden fruit---the hopelessly ugly and unrewarding, who alone were permitted to follow their fancies. Patterns were discussed in hushed but intense undertones, faint but all-important modifications were offered by the vendeuse to bridge the gulf between the figures of the mannequins and those of the clients. The brave longing of a squat pigeon to have the model reproduced "textuellement" was resolutely suppressed.

Marthe was discussing her vendeuse's child....

And then suddenly Maurice saw Madame Marly. She was without a hat and scattering her terrified staff with her eye.

She came straight to him, her voice was mocking.

"Maintenant, je peux donner des renseignements a Monsieur."

"I did not know," he blurted, "I had no idea," and then as the ultimate significance of their meeting disentangled itself from the immediate embarrassment,

"Thank God, I have found you."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Mlle.* de Marveau married the Comte de Cely.

The Comtesse de Cely wanted an escape and became Madame Lalli.

Madame Lalli wanted an escape and became Madame Marly---for Paula was always Paula.

And then she met Maurice and her youth. Twenty-five years of age and experience and disappointment fell from her. But to keep her great illusion she offered her big resistance....

And then the tiny knife turned in the tiny wound. The unconscious buzzing machine touched the exposed nerve---the silly, absurd, irrelevant name.

The lover in pursuit of the beloved became the novelist examining the dressmaker, seeking for information. When professional meets professional.

This time she capitulated for she ran away.

\* \* \* \* \*

That night Maurice wrote to her.

"Paula, I love you. I loved you always. I loved you invulnerable, wise, fortified beyond the wiles of men. How much more do I love you now with your one weak spot---so weak, so absurd that it can only be kissed, and laughed at and adored.

"Paula, my own, the twenty-five years have never existed. There is only one immortal moment---and that is to come.

"Beloved, best beloved, only beloved, I want you so badly.

"MAURICE.

"Besides, you have got to describe me several dresses for my new book."

XIII

### AULD LANG SYNE

[*To HAROLD NICOLSON*]

It was delightful to be back in England after two and a half years. Two and a half years of India, of pomp and circumstance and being envied, of heat and homesickness and loneliness. How starved she had felt---starved of little intellectual coteries with their huge intellectual sensations---starved of new books and old pictures and music, of moss roses and primroses and bluebell woods, starved even into the selfishness of coming home, urged away by Robert, who did not know how to be selfish. Thinking of him made her feel very tender and very small. His iron public spirit, his inevitable devotion to duty, unconscious and instinctive and uncensorious, combined with a guilty sense that her youth and beauty had been uprooted by him, and put into a dusty distant soil. He was more convinced than any one of the importance of books and music and intellectual interests (he never read and did not know one note from another) because they were important to her and had therefore received a consecration they could never have had by merely being important to him. It was all so very simple---What she admired was beautiful; what she laughed at was funny; what she loved was divine---And she belonged to him---Robert. It was a miracle that found him every night on his knees in humble gratitude. She had, he thought, been so wonderfully good, walking on his red baize carpets as if they were fields of flowers, learning Sanscrit with passion and pretending, with what seemed to him complete success, and to them, absolute failure, that she liked Anglo-Indian women. When one by one his staff were incapacitated by love, he never complained. It made them of course useless, but how could they help falling in love with her? It would have been so unnatural if they had not. And when she told him---and to do her justice she knew that she was telling him the truth---that she was not worthy to do up his shoe laces---he would laugh and kiss her hand and send up a little internal prayer to God to be able to do something to deserve his wife.

No wonder he was always urging her to go home---haunted as he was by the feeling of having put her in a prison and, no wonder, not having his iron character, she had finally succumbed---as she so often succumbed to his unselfishness.

How she was loving England! The wet, heavy air---the sky curtained with clouds---the drenched leaves---the saturated flowers---the damp breathing earth---the distant lethargic sun. She could feel a pulse in the sopping soil and her heart beat with it.

Finding her friends too was such an adventure. What struck her most about them was that they seemed so stationary. There they were, just as she had left them, doing the same things, thinking the same things, saying the same things---fixed points with their lives revolving round them, seeming to have lost the capacity for independent motion.

She and Robert were not like that. Thank God, they were still pilgrims. After all, her life had been a big spacious thing in spite of India, because of India and, even more, because of Robert. Only she did not want to think about it now. Just to go on repeating to herself: "I'm at home. I'm in England."

And she was going to stay with St. John. How excited she would have been four years ago. How her heart had beaten when she heard his footsteps, how she had thrilled when he had said "dear" to her. She remembered the care he had taken of her, the beautiful considerate devotion he had always shown her when she was longing so passionately for other things, trying with all her might and main to make him lose his head. *How* badly she had behaved. She could wonder now dispassionately whether he had *ever* been in love with her. On the whole, she thought, he never had. If she had not been married---it was a silly "if." The most he had said was "you make things very difficult," not a very satisfactory avowal when you came to think it over calmly. But she remembered how it had thrilled her at the time---what a blank cheque of possibilities it had seemed. She remembered, too, the evening when he had talked seriously to her---very gently, very tenderly, very gravely. She had thought he was going to say, "I don't want to be made unhappy," and, instead, he had said, "I don't want you to be unhappy." That had been a nasty one. How she had lashed him with her tongue! What inexhaustible reserves of icy acid she had brought forward.

She had tried to hurt him as much as ever she could. How hurt had he been? She wondered. It was all such very ancient history. And yet he had gone on being fond of her. Fonder and fonder---men were so odd.

So many things had happened since then. She had been away and he had lost an uncle and inherited a property. And now she was going to stay with him. Last time they had met, two years ago, he had talked to her as if they had had a boy and girl affair thirty years before. She had been very much amused but she had hidden it; hiding your amusement was an essential part of being fond of St. John---a rule of the game, so to speak. That was one of the delightful things about him; to like him at all you had to be really devoted to him and when you had reached that stage, all of the qualities that would have been intolerable in other people became subtly lovable. Somehow they seemed to creep under your wing, compelling you to give them the protection of your own intimate understanding. It was impossible not to make pets of St. John's defects. Ariadne remembered the way he had always tried to keep her out of moral draughts, how he had hated to see her in a room with any one of a doubtful reputation, how her habit of taking off her hat in motors in towns got on his nerves.

"But if it tires my head," she would say, and he would explain very seriously what an intimate gesture it was.

Then as she always rested before dinner, people would come to tea with her in her bedroom. St. John didn't like it at all. There was to him something inherently disreputable about the horizontal. If she were too tired to sit up in an armchair, she was too tired to see any one---except him, of course, who understood her (which was just what he didn't do).

"But my back does ache so easily. After all, if I were really ill you wouldn't mind."

"That is different."

"How ill do I have to be before I can abdicate the perpendicular in the presence of a young man?" He consoled himself with the thought that she was extremely, exceptionally innocent. She told him that thousands of people were extremely, exceptionally innocent. It was a fact which could never be explained to juries. St. John doubted it. He believed in a vast number of rules to which all of the people he liked and most of the people he knew were exceptions.

The train drew up at the platform. Ariadne got out. The footman explained to her that his Lordship was so very sorry not to be able to come to the station, but he was attending a cattle show.

"Of course," said Ariadne, and she felt it.

She got into the brougham---it was so characteristic of St. John not to use a motor in the country---which had that delightful, almost forgotten, smell of broughams, and drove through an avenue of oaks up to the fine old Georgian house, dignified and mellow and lived in---a house proud of its cellar and its stables---of its linen and its silver---a house where men were men and women were women---where the master hunted and sat on the Bench, and the mistress embroidered and looked after the household---each having his separate functions and the one joint one of propagating the race.

In the hall, St. John's housekeeper, in a black taffetas apron, welcomed her.

"His Lordship would be most distressed not to have been there when her ladyship arrived, but the cattle show-----"

"Of course," said Ariadne, and hinted at a quite special awareness of the importance of Cattle Shows.

Her bedroom was immense---there were lavender bags in all the drawers, and flowers on the dressing table, the fire was lit and there was boiling water in the shiny pale brass can. Her maid, the housekeeper explained, was sleeping in the dressing room. On the table by her bed was a glass box of biscuits, "The Wrong Box," "Omar Khayyam" and Lucas Malet's last novel.

Ariadne was smiling with happiness. Talk about the joys of the unexpected, can they compare with the joys of the expected, of finding everything delightfully and completely what you knew it was going to be? There was a tap at the door.

"Come in."

"It's I." (St. John never said "It's me.")

She threw open the door.

"Do come in," she said, and then, with a little stab of extra pleasure, she wondered if he would be shocked by her flimsy pink dressing gown and her bare feet.

"St. John," she put out both her hands. "I *am* happy to be here."

He took them and held them quite tight, then he kissed them.

"Little Ariadne," he said.

It was, she supposed, a way of getting over the dressing gown.

"You look younger than ever," he said.

"It's my hair being down," she murmured.

He asked her if she had had a good journey, and whether the housekeeper had seen that she had everything she wanted.

She asked him if the cattle show had been a success.

He said he really must dress for dinner, and so must she.

"Ariadne," he put his hand on her arm, "it's good to have you here."

There was an emotion welling up in his voice that surprised her. He turned his back and left the room rather hurriedly. She realised that he had almost kissed her. Would he have said, "I'm sorry, but you looked such a baby," or, "Forgive me, it was seeing you again after so long," or, "Ariadne, can you forgive me? I lost my head."

She plumped for the baby, and wondered if the visit could conceivably be going to be a slight strain. In old days there had always been a certain tenseness about their relationship, made worse by her attempts to topple over his gentlemanliness. She had felt that if her wish could have been gratified just once, she would have been released from it and never have wanted to repeat the experiment. Also a little of the responsibility would have been his---thus obliterating the irritating daily spectacle of his untarnished blamelessness.

Of course he had never been in love with her. She had always been buoyed up by little things she wouldn't even have noticed in some one she hadn't cared about. If there were acute disquieting moments when the troublante quality of her loveliness tossed him about unmercifully---weren't they moments that any stranger might go through sitting next to her at dinner? No---the truth always had been that he was really fond of her.

"I'm glad now," she smiled to herself, "how lucky that we can't always sculpt our own relationships."

She went down to dinner---in the huge hall full of armchairs and cushions and antlers and comfort St. John stood with his back to the fire smoking a cigarette which he threw into the grate when he saw her (St. John invariably threw away his cigarette when you came into the room and then asked your permission to light a new one. In her mind's eye Ariadne always saw him opening the door for his wife after a violent scene with her).

"My dear," she said, "what a divine house."

"The wing you are sleeping in was built by the fifth Lord...."

"The staircase was designed by...."

"The mantelpieces in the drawing room...."

"After dinner I will show you...."

Dinner was announced.

She tucked her hand under his arm.

"Are you going to take me in to dinner, St. John?"

"Of course," he smiled at her.

The dining room was big enough to reduce the immense pieces of Georgian silver---beautiful they were---to reasonable proportions.

St. John said there were some very fine pieces of Queen Anne which he would show her.

"There was," she murmured, "nothing like Queen Anne."

The attentiveness of the footman and even of the butler did not seem to her to be entirely confined to their wants.

St. John asked her questions about India, which she answered as she answered travelling Europeans---correctly, concisely, and without any frills of vocabulary. It was quite possible, she reflected, that St. John wanted to know the answers to his questions. That was the worst of being abroad so much, you were always either trying to tell things it bored people to hear, or else they were determined to hear things that it bored you to tell. Her mind wandered to the curious tide-like quality of interest, the way it advanced and retreated in a conversation.

St. John was explaining what a quiet life he had led. Perhaps, to her, it would have even seemed dull. (This to him was rhetorical paradox, and to her an obvious truth.) She did not know, he said, what it meant to feel that the land belonged to you---to see your own flowers growing, your own calves being born---to feel yourself surrounded by your own people, for whose happiness and welfare you were responsible.

Ariadne said that inheritance was a sacred trust (it was wonderful how easy she found it to talk like St. John).

"Yes," he said, "that is just it---a sacred trust. Why, I hardly ever go up to London now, and when I do, I feel quite homesick till I get here again."

They got up from dinner.

"Shall we go and sit in the library?" he said.

They sat one on either side of the fire. She felt like an ancestress or a family portrait. The rosy haze of her tea-gown looked strange and alien fluttering in the huge leather armchair.

"What a wisp you look," St. John said. She remembered how satisfactory her tininess had always been to him. "I think I could blow you away with a puff of smoke."

"I am a limpet really," she laughed, "think how I have stuck to your life."

"Thank God," he affirmed fervently.

"Are you still a great flirt, St. John?"

He looked at her in amazement.

"You have surely not forgotten the way you played fast and loose with me?"

"Ariadne," he was using the firm voice she knew so well, "you mustn't talk like that."

"But you did. Don't you remember that dinner you gave when we went to the L-----'s ball and you never danced with me till seventeen minutes past one?"

"My dear, I was saving you up. The joy after all the duties."

"You never told me so."

"There were a lot of things I never told you."

"I tried so hard to make you."

"It was so hard not to."

"St. John," she said, "the things you didn't tell me, were they true?"

"Yes, they were true."

He had got up and knelt by her chair.

She put her hand on his head.

"St. John," she said. Should she tell him that they were not true? That he was building up a retrospective passion which had never existed? That what he supposed to have been renunciation and self-control and chivalry had in reality been a rather tactfully steered unflammable affection? Why his voice now was far more broken up and moved than she had ever heard it before. Of course he had not been in love with her. She had never realised it as clearly as to-night. For a moment he put his face in her lap, then he kissed her hands---reverently, in memory of his great sacrifice.

"May I smoke a cigarette?" he asked.

"Please do."

He went back to his chair.

She was, he said, a wonderful friend.

So, she said, was he.

They talked about his family and her family---a little about their mutual friends and a lot about friends of his that she had never seen.

They talked about furniture and gardens.

There were, he said, a lot of subjects on which he wanted her advice.

It was all very domestic, their two armchairs and the fire---the dying fire. He must, she supposed, be imagining that they were married, seeing her at the head of the table, in the family pew. She wondered if he would have let her re-set the family jewels. Perhaps his mind had reached the nursery. He was dreaming of children, his children, her children, their children.

Dear St. John. She looked at him tenderly. She longed to explain what an unsuitable wife she would have made him.

"What are you thinking about?" her voice was very gentle.

"I was thinking of the cattle I bought to-day, and wondering what sort of fencing I should put up at the bottom of the drive. Ariadne, you remember how gregarious I used to be; well, you can't think how perfectly happy I am living here

alone."

Smiles were popping out of her face shamelessly. No sooner had she kept one out of her eyes than it reappeared on her lips.

"Dear St. John," she said, "I do love you."

He looked, she thought, a little alarmed.

"Not like that, that is all over."

"Quite over?"

"Quite---are you glad?"

"If it makes you happier," and then, "No, I'm damned if I'm glad."

"Thank you, St. John," she was laughing a little.

He looked puzzled, even rather disappointed.

She had broken the rules and laughed.

"How lucky you didn't say that to me four years ago."

"Don't," he said sharply.

"I'm sorry."

He was lighting her candle.

"To-morrow," he said, "you will choose the colour of the garden gates and advise me about the fencing."

"That *will* be fun."

She shivered.

"Are you cold?"

"One is always cold after India."

He took her to the door of her bedroom.

"Good-night---God bless you," he said.

She put her two hands on his shoulders and, bending forward, she kissed him lightly. It was a cruel way of showing him that she didn't care any more.

"What a revengeful woman I am, punishing him after all these years," she thought.

But he didn't see it like that.

"I think I deserve her trust," he said to himself, and then his thoughts, let out to graze, returned to the subject of fences.

"Robert," wrote Ariadne, "I am homesick for India."

XIV

## **TWO TAXI DRIVES**

[*To PAUL MORAND*]

I: SUNSHINE

"Margaret, my dear, how delightful."

"Is it?"

"But of course."

"I always wonder," she murmured, "about accidental and sudden meetings. They are a sort of nervous shock and you always feel that you are looking for something that you've mislaid and that you don't seem able to find again until you've parted."

"How depressing you are. Looking for mislaid intimacy, do you mean?"

"I suppose so."

"When I saw you I simply felt--Margaret, thank God!"

"Matthew, you old humbug."

"And for you who specialise in intimacy and the unexpected, it is simply disgraceful."

"But I don't."

"You used to."

"Yes."

"Are you a reformed character?"

"A reformed experimentalist."

"I don't believe it."

"Matthew, after all I *am* glad to see you."

"Then let us take a taxi and drive round the Bois."

"Very well."

"You're not reformed at all. If you were, you would say, 'I've got to try on,' or, 'there are so many things I must do before lunch,' or 'I am only in Paris for such a short time.'"

"They're all true."

"Of course---that sort of thing is always true. The point is, is it relevant?"

"Talking of specialists. Do you still specialise in the irrelevant?"

"I have never understood what that word meant when applied to my activities. I have still kept my sense of proportion, if that is what you are driving at?"

"And Virginia?"

"Is still Virginia."

"And you love her?"

"Very often."

"Not all the time?"

"Certainly not. How then should I have my opportunities of discovering that I loved her?"

"Does she like your method?"

"I wonder. Sometimes it gets on her nerves."

"Poor Virginia."

"It is ridiculous to pity Virginia. Every one adores her and she meddles about in people's lives to her heart's content."

"I always pity women who care for charming men."

"Why---because charming men are fickle?"

"No, because they are vulnerable."

"Nonsense."

"Charm is the dragon's blood."

"But the leaf always falls somewhere."

"And the weak spot is vanity---which is no use to one at all."

"By the way, how is Michael, talking of charming men. Or, were we talking about them?"

"I suppose so."

"Margaret, I don't like Michael."

"Why not?"

"He is too complete."

"Do you usually tell women that you don't like their husbands?"

"No, they usually tell it to me."

"Is that what you suggest that I am doing?"

"Margaret, please. You know I didn't mean that. It was just an idiotic jeu de mots."

"Matthew, be careful; if you are serious you will turn my head."

"I would love to turn your head."

"Why is it that you always make me indiscreet?"

"I suppose that I inspire people with the happy illusion that I am not going to take what they say seriously."

"I suppose that is it."

"By the way, what was India like?"

"Do you want to know?"

"Of course not."

"I stayed with Ariadne."

"Is she happy?"

"Radiant."

"Loving pomp?"

"Loving Robert."

"Dear me."

"Robert is the most wonderful man in the world."

"Well, he wanted to marry you; why didn't you marry him?"

"I thought his pedestal such a precarious foothold in life."

"If Ariadne can balance on it for a moment, it must be pretty firm."

"It is a lovely pedestal. You can see for miles from it, and it is as comfortable as an armchair."

"Ariadne always had a rare eye for a cushion."

"Ariadne is a perfect wife."

"Margaret, it is absolutely essential that I should see you once every twenty-four hours for the rest of my life. You will, therefore, not think me too matter-of-fact if I ask you your immediate plans?"

"I am staying here three more days."

"Damn---sixteen hours gone already, I am off to Deauville."

"Then I am going back to London where it will all begin again."

"I shall be there."

"How grand it sounds to be a melodrama."

"Margaret, do you know that I love you a great deal?"

"I know that you are a great flirt."

"Of course. That makes my real love so very exceptional and precious."

"Does Virginia know that?"

"Virginia almost understands everything, but of course she can't afford to admit it, or one would behave too impossibly."

"Matthew, may I tell you something very serious?"

"Yes, if you don't expect me to profit by it."

"I used to understand almost everything, and I went on stretching and stretching till it broke, and now I understand nothing."

"Perhaps you are right," he twinkled at her, "perhaps I had better not marry Virginia."

"Are you trying to make me unhappy?"

"Margaret, dearest, I might even be serious if I thought that it would make you happy."

"Good heavens, it's one, and I am lunching at one."

"Margaret, promise never to mislay our intimacy again."

"I promise."

That evening there was a knock at the door.

"Monsieur a fait dire que c'etait un bouquet pour Madame."

An immense bunch of balloons followed him into the room.

"For Margaret who---in spite of everything, because of everything---understands everything."

"Matthew," she wrote, "how young you make me."

And then she murmured to herself:

"Poor Virginia!"

## II: LAMPS

"I love you so." The wheels of the taxi were the counterpoint to his voice.

"What is the good of my turning away when every bit of him bites into my consciousness?" she thought.

The road stretched ahead of them like cire satin with a piping of lights. She had changed her position a little, restless under the constraint of his eyes. A lamp lit her up for him, her face white and drawn, her eyelids pulled over her eyes like a heavy curtain.

"One feels that one could skate down the street," she murmured, "it looks like stuff worn thin with time and use---the shabby shiny surface of the night."

On and on they went.

"We can't get anywhere," he said.

A lamp lit up her face.

It looked so weary and impotent as if she had abdicated the uneven struggle with circumstances.

On they raced, down the slippery ribbon of road.

There was a bump and she fell towards him. He stretched out his arm and held her firm and secure. He wanted her to feel that it was a rampart and not an insidious outpost of passion quick to take advantage.

"Let me kiss you once, for God's sake," his voice was harsh.

She turned her face towards him. The passing lamp showed her resigned, pitying, tender.

"Don't look like that," he said---sharp with the things he had wanted.

"I'm sorry," her voice was velvety and comforting.

Yet another lamp, there was a faint smile on her lips---breathed as it were from him. He huddled into his corner, hurt by her compassion.

"I hate to see the moon," she said, "cynical and prying---an eavesdropper of a moon."

Again a light gave him a fleeting vision of her---photographed on to his soul.

Her deep dark eyes, heavy with distress, the corners of her mouth repudiating the misery of the moment. She put her hand on his arm.

"Don't," she said, "there is in life such an incoherent mass of interwoven strands. And perhaps something comes and tears them all to bits."

Her voice was chanting---as if she were singing him a lullaby---then it became light again.

"Wait till the next lamp," she said. "And you will see in my eyes the old laughter that you used to love."

They turned down a side street and there were no more lights.

Abruptly the taxi stopped.

She got out. Her pale gold coat was a continuation of the moon.

She turned her brooding eyes away from him.

"Thank you for taking me home," she said; her voice had broken. She looked back---a smile turned on to her lips.

He heard her latch key. The door opened and shut.

XV

## **A TOUCH OF SPRING**

[*To W.Y. TURNER*]

The sun was streaming through the curtains silhouetting a strange bloated pattern on the chintz, breaking through an opening and cutting a deep yellow slit in the carpet. She lay in bed subconsciously awake, subconsciously asleep, her

thoughts drifting into dreams, her limbs merging into one another. "This is happiness," she murmured to herself, and feeling consciousness invade her, she clutched at the perfect moment, and it was gone.

Smiling at her defeat she stretched herself luxuriously like a cat and poked her toes out into a cool expanse of sheet.

"It is nice," she thought, "to have the whole bed to myself."

She curled herself up and lay for a few moments watching the sun catching little patches of air and turning them into rainbow dust. Then she rang. Her maid let in such a flood of light that she was forced to shade her eyes. An unabashed cuckoo broke into the chorus of birds, glorying in being a solo part and despising them for mixing and intertwining their notes.

She got out of bed and her bare feet sank into the warm furry rug; without putting on her slippers she walked across the room, stepping like a child into the puddles of sunshine on the carpet. Leaning out of the window the air pierced through her transparent nightgown---a tingling quality underlying a faint veil of warmth. Everywhere mist and dew lay on the countryside like the bloom on a grape. The gardener's boy walking across the lawn had left his footprints stamped in emerald on the grass.

Smiling intimately to herself she got into her bath, wondering vaguely at the miracle of water, enjoying impersonally the cool whiteness of her body, doing tricks of perspective with her arms and legs.

She dressed slowly with indolent rhythmical movements, indifferently aware of her effortless inevitable perfection.

Even more slowly she walked down the staircase out through the open window on to the grey terrace. Somehow she felt that she was violating the morning, forcing the human on to the divine. Sipping the day she walked towards the almonds with their pink blush of blossom bursting through the brown; turning round her head she saw the double cherry, its branches nearly breaking under their load of snow. And at the roots of every tree uninvited primroses and violets were crowding out the earth.

She followed the winding terraces towards the gleaming river, past fluttering daffodils and wandering narcissi, over riotous anemones and bright sturdy scyllae, shaking showers of diamonds off the grasses as she went.

The river lay like a long satin streamer, a curling ribbon dropped on the meadows. And everywhere, hidden and vibrating, was an urgency of life: buds bursting into blossom, birds bursting into flight.

Gradually the veil was lifting from the morning, the sun was rubbing the bloom off it as a child rubs sleep from his eyes.

She retraced her steps, putting down her feet with the delicate fastidiousness of a cat in order not to tread on a flower. "I'm alone with you," she said shyly and ecstatically to the day. Never before had she had the Spring to herself. Always there had been the children (now on a visit) dragging plans and occupations, games, picnics, and bicycles across the pure joy of living, or her husband like a violin very close to her ear tearing her nerves to shreds with poignant urgent beauty.

Looking dispassionately at her life, it seemed to her a slum of human relationships, airless, over-crowded, a dusty arena where psychological acrobats perform by artificial light. And always that dragging of the general down to the particular, that circumscribing of everything by the personal, every rose a token, the moon something to kiss by, flowers prostituted into bouquets. She thought how happy she was this morning, feeling a little tiny speck of the miracle of life instead of trying to catch it like a wasp under the wine glass of some human desire.

This not being a wife, or a mother, or a friend, or a beloved, or even herself, but a tiny part of the universal, this surely was happiness. To be at one with the morning, to belong to this frontierless world of nature, to be coaxed into flower by the sun, to be a strand in some unknown design, how much better than the weary steering of your life between the Scylla of your ardent futile longings and the Charybdis of some senseless malignant providence.

She took her lunch into the wood. The bluebells were still in bud and hadn't yet swept everything before them in a headlong rush of waves that never broke. She sat in an open space on a patch of velvety moss, surrounded by tree trunks and waving windflowers and peeping primroses and violets, all diffident forerunners of Spring, shyly enjoying the sun before being submerged in that all-conquering flood of blue.

She caressed the ground with her hand and watched little gusts of wind play hide and seek with the sun. "I don't believe I've ever been alone before," she thought, and she stretched out her arms into the air, initiating them into freedom.

Gradually the sun began to sink, throwing a riotous tangle of crimson and gold streamers to salute the earth. "They are hauling down the flag of my perfect day," she thought with a stab of poignant sorrow.

The sky became the colour of a primrose stalk and as transparent as green glass. Before touching the horizon it dissolved into violet powder. The colour was being blotted out of everything; one after another the flowers went out like lights; only the white cherry seemed phosphorescent in the gathering darkness. A thick white mist was relentlessly invading everything, climbing higher and higher, enveloping her in its cold, wet clutches.

Bewildered and miserable, she struggled forward through the extinguished beauty of the world. A thin white sickle of a moon painted on the sky looked cynically down at her. Stumbling, shivering, she hurried blindly along.

The big stone hall was flickering in the blaze of an immense fire, peopled with strange, unreal, clustering shadows. In front of it stood a man in a fur coat. He turned towards her with outstretched arms.

"My darling, what have you been doing out without a coat? Look at your hair all white with mist and your sopping dress. I can't trust you to look after yourself for one day, can I?"

She looked at him as if he were a ghost. A look of blankness and horror.

He gathered her up and carried her to her bedroom. Putting her in a chair beside the fire he knelt down and pulled off her shoes and stockings.

She felt as if something were breaking inside her. Cold unrelieving tears were running down her face.

He was kissing her hands and her feet, murmuring little caresses, enveloping her in the glow of his love. And still she couldn't feel any warmer.

Putting his arms tight round her he held her close to him, her cold wet face nestling in his neck.

"I shall never leave you alone again," he whispered passionately, but to his horror he felt her stiffen and fall to the ground with a thud.

At that moment her old maid came in. "Poor wee thing," she said, "don't you be worrying and fretting yourself. It's just a touch of the Spring."

**FIDO AND PONTO**

Fido was a Dalmatian---of the race described by some as blotting paper and by others as plum pudding dogs. Every line of his body had been formed by hundreds of years of tradition. You can find his ancestors in tapestries and petit point in Italian primitives and Flemish family groups, nestling in voluminous satin petticoats, or running at the heels of skating children---moving in sedate indifference beside the cortege of a pope, or barking in gay derision at the tidy Dutch snow. Not "a dog" or "the dog" but "dog" unspecified and absolute. True, till 1700 it was largely a matter of silhouette, the lissom outline was there, but with a certain variety of colouring. Then the 18th century stepped in and made spots de rigueur---Dalmatians invaded new territory. They conquered the kingdom of china and occupied a commanding position in coaching prints. An unaccompanied post chaise, deplorable in life, because unknown in art, and the expression "carriage dog" came into use for the first time.

The 18th and 19th centuries were the golden age of Dalmatian rule, and when their dynasty was finally overthrown, it was not by a new upstart race of dogs, but by a new upstart production of that blind and ugly mother of strong and hideous children---progress. Motors were invented.

If machinery had a conscience, what a procession of ghosts would it not be haunted by---ghosts of white fingers and humming spinning wheels, ghosts of parasols---stiff pagodas of taffetas or rippling fountains of lace---ghosts of victorias and barouches and tandems---ghosts of spotted streaks of lightning bounding forward with the grace of cats and the speed of Derby winners, capering with fastidious frivolity between yellow wheels.

Dalmatians, console yourselves, you are in good company. Beside you walks the ghost of civilisation herself---surrounded by the phantom forms of courtesy and leisure and all the lost company of the divine superfluous.

Cause and effect, demand and supply, where does the vicious circle begin and end? Certain it is that when motors began to drench the countryside in dust and suppress reflexion by providing our afterthoughts with transport, Dalmatians disappeared. Silently, imperceptibly, putting down their paws with all the old fastidious grace, they crept out of a world that had betrayed aristocracy. Only Fido remained---to die of a broken heart.

When I first saw him, he was a puppy---a thin lanky puppy, waiting to be filled in by life, a mere sketch of the masterpiece he was to become. Even in those days he had heavy black charmeuse ears, marvellous thick rich satin they were, and tiny dark rims to his eyes---a setting of pencilled shadow. How am I to describe his spots? The wonderful distribution of black and white, the ruffle at the side of his arched neck made by the meeting of two competitive rhythms of hairs, the looseness of his skin, his long lithe legs that would tie themselves into a tangled heap of grace when he lay down.

To see him move was to see motion made concrete---to see him run was to realise that even Pavlova had never quite overcome the obstacle of being a human.

At night he seemed phosphorescent, the dark itself was defeated by his whiteness. His bark was low and deep and resonant---a church bell of a bark---it reminded [Transcriber's note: original reads 'remained'] you less of a 'cello than all 'cellos---except M. Casal's---remind you of a bark.

He had the divine irrelevant grace of a cat. Always he was showing off, practising his paws, curling and stretching and pirouetting, letting himself go like an arrow out of a bow, circling on the lawn like a swallow above water, giving you daily a thousand illustrations of how much you would have lost by only having 100 masterpieces in bronze of him.

Living with Fido was a daily revelation of absolute beauty. He was the key to the secret of Phidias and Ucello Pascal and Mozart.

But he was alive, warm and gay and moody---joyous and absurd---full of little confiding gestures---a nose pressed under one's chin, or a paw laid in alluring appeal on one's hand. Withal he was detached with the detachment of his separate universe---a divine world of smells and sounds and ever new adventurous possibilities, unspoilt by memory and untarnished by experience.

Dogs are the best company in the world---I would watch Fido abandoning himself to each moment of the day, the victim or the hero of a hundred impulses, torn by competing smells and sounds as we are torn by overlapping warring emotions and ambitions.

And then he would lie sprawling in front of the fire with a half open eye and when you said "Fido" his ears would answer you, taut with response, while his tail would beat the floor in indolent happiness. Is there anything in life so infectiously joyous as a wagging tail? Worry, distress, crossness, all melt at the sight of it---a hypnotic conductor's, baton beating the rhythm of triumphant joie de vivre.

Fido was a daily, hourly delight.

I would shut my eyes, to be able to open them suddenly and realise---with fresh acuteness---his infinite variety. There was to me something poignant about his loveliness like an open rose in whose very perfection lies the herald of doom. I loved him too much. The cynical masterpieces of the past looking at his beauty smiled in satisfied revenge for they knew that he was alive and that life means death. Love gives mortality to everything.

Fido grew limp and listless. His nose was hot and dry. He no longer trotted about, he wandered from room to room. His eyes were dull. His heart bumped about like money in a money-box. With an effort he wagged his tail to cheer me up. Wearily he would climb into a chair and lie there indifferent to my trembling caresses.

Fido died.

\* \* \* \* \*

I gave up looking at dogs, alive or china, embroidered or painted. Fortunately most of my friends have "pets," griffons that look like tropical spiders, little shiny naked shivering animals, bloated prosperous Pekineses, exuding the complacency of their mistresses and seeming to be rather the last word of a dressmaker, or a furrier, than a creation of the Gods.

If I saw a sheepdog, or a greyhound, a spaniel or a retriever, I would avert my eyes, shivering a little as when the hitherto harmless buzzing machine reaches the hidden nerve.

"Don't you like dogs?" people would say.

LIKE!

"No!" I would answer.

"How strange. I adore animals."

ADORE!

Oh the verbs of the untouched. And then, in spite of everything, because of everything, a Dalmatian once more invaded my life---the life that I had so resolutely determined never again to expose to any dog. What is invulnerability but a pis-aller? Which of us, given the choice between perfect peace and imperfect love would hesitate for one moment?

When Providence gave me Ponto I accepted him with hungry passion, with nervous propitiatory prayers to the Gods.

He was a stray dog, masterless and collarless, an erring emigre of civilisation and he came to me. At first I did not dare look---my heart was beating so fast. I was frightened of being radiant. I was frightened of being miserable.

And then I turned to him. He was bigger than Fido, with longer, stronger legs. His ears were not quite black, there were two little white spots on them, his eyes were not set in pencilled rims. But he was beautiful, as beautiful as a Greek athlete---to see him run was to see the Olympic games, and in the house he would curl and stretch and tangle up his paws, and put his head on my lap and reassure me with his eyes.

Once more I lived with motion made concrete, with beauty made absolute---once more a wagging tail brought the inexhaustible dot of gaiety.

Ponto had finer manners than Fido. He was maturer, with a deeper sense of noblesse oblige. He never forgot that even if he had been born a Dalmatian, privilege entails certain obligations.

Perhaps he lacked something of Fido's moody charm, of his frivolous pathos, of his absurd joyousness, of his enchanting vanity.

Perhaps it was just Fido's youth that he lacked, and his irresponsibility. There was a certain gravity about Ponto---a perfect dignity. His fastidiousness had gone beyond the stage of selections, and had reached the stage of exclusions. But he never lost his manners, or his manner.

Always he said "Good-morning," and "Good-night." If I was embarrassed, or worried, he would pretend not to notice it, but if I was happy, or sad, he would show his sympathy in a hundred ways---putting his head on my lap, or cutting absurd capers to distract my mind.

And then one day I went away.

I told Ponto when I said good-bye to him that it would be some time before I saw him again.

How was I to explain partings to him? The monstrous role that geography plays in our lives? I just told him that I loved him, that his image was in my heart, that our separation was only the preparation of a glorious meeting when old-remembered delights would merge into newly discovered ones.

He listened to me while I stroked his heavy charmeuse ears. He licked my hand, knowing that with my whispering words, I was trying to console myself as well as him.

Then I left him quickly.

They wrote to me that he had disappeared.

They wrote to me that his master had reclaimed him.

But I know that he is mine.

For I have made a great discovery.

What I love belongs to me. Not the chairs and tables in my house, but the masterpieces of the world.

It is only a question of loving them enough.

THE END