

# FIRE DOWN BELOW



Margaret Irwin

CHATTO AND WINDUS

MARGARET IRWIN

Fire Down Below

*By* MARGARET IRWIN

★

ROYAL FLUSH*
*The Story of Minette*

THE PROUD SERVANT*
*The Story of Montrose*

THE STRANGER PRINCE*
*The Story of Rupert of the Rhine*

THE BRIDE*
*The Story of Louise and Montrose*

THE GAY GALLIARD*
*The Love Story of Mary Queen of Scots*

YOUNG BESS

ELIZABETH, CAPTIVE PRINCESS

★

STILL SHE WISHED FOR COMPANY*

THESE MORTALS

KNOCK FOUR TIMES*

FIRE DOWN BELOW*

NONE SO PRETTY

MADAME FEARS THE DARK

MRS. OLIVER CROMWELL

* *Issued in this Uniform Edition*

*MARGARET IRWIN*

# Fire Down Below

LONDON
*CHATTO & WINDUS*
1951

PUBLISHED BY
Chatto and Windus
LONDON
★
Clarke, Irwin & Co. Ltd.
TORONTO

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FIRST PUBLISHED 1928
FIRST ISSUED IN THIS COLLECTED
EDITION 1951
PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
BUTLER & TANNER LTD.,
FROME AND LONDON

*To Tighernach*

# *One*

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DOWN in the village, anything that happened up at the Red House quickly acquired the importance of state affairs and the confused significance of legend. Science and history were taught in the village school, the motor-'bus took people into Sherne on market days to see the cinema, but at Gawcomb Mazzard tradition was still living and growing. Down in the village, 'they knew the way the wind was blowing before the weathercock.' All the dates taught in the school could not make them distinguish past and present and immediate future as clearly as in the towns, where life was divided so sharply into dates and reigns and fashions. But at Gawcomb Mazzard, in spite of the wireless and the motor-'bus, the essentials of life had for centuries remained much the same.

Grandfather Mytton told Jenny of a robber that had lived up in Puddlicot Wood and been flayed alive for stealing a donkey-load of treasure from the King, and his skin, it hung on the door of the Tower of London. Jenny told young Master John, the Squire's son, up at the Red House, and John, fresh from the historical picture and story-books, asked old Mr. Mytton which king it was, and was told it had been in King Edward's time.

"Not Edward VII?" asked John, shocked.

Well it might have been one King Edward, it might have been t'other, Mr. Mytton couldn't say which, but it was as much as forty year ago or more.

John then told his father, Peregrine Sark, who with his usual precipitate curiosity at once dashed up to London to investigate this piece of folklore, and found it genuine history; he had even examined the bit of dried leather that stands framed on top of the great coffer chest of Edward I, with the inscription that it is a portion of the skin of one Richard de Podlecote, who was flayed alive for robbing the King's baggage-mules as they passed through the West Country, and carrying off a donkey-load of the royal treasure.

This actual instance of living tradition has nothing to do with the story I am about to tell; it is only to show that, in Grandfather

Mytton's eyes, seven centuries are but as yesterday; and 'forty year ago or more' spells antiquity, where 'Edward I' or 'the thirteenth century' spell only 'book-learning.'

And the facts of the following story are as they will appear to Jenny Mytton when she herself is a very old woman and telling them to her great-grandchildren; looking back into the legendary past of forty year ago or more.

At the moment of this story she was still only seven years old, and in her mind, young Master John, her mother's photograph of the Duke of Windsor as a schoolboy, and the heroes in silver armour in the pictures at school, all belonged to the same world of unknown romance.

When she heard that a new young lady was coming to be his governess instead of the ugly one that had left three months ago, she waited about in the road to see the car go by that bore this fortunate new-comer into the strange and splendid world of the Red House.

But the car was late, and Jenny turned back lest she should be scolded for staying out so long. After all, she would see the new governess next Sunday in church. As she turned down the lane she heard the trumpet note of its horn; she ran back into the road, but the car was already only a gleaming speck between the golden cornfields; behind the distant hills and the rocks of the Devil's Chair, big clouds were pushing up their heads like giants, higher and higher, to stare as Jenny was doing at the scurrying insect that bore the new governess to the Red House.

On the day of that arrival, Peregrine said at lunch that he was going to write letters in the study and must not be disturbed. This surprised his family, for Peregrine liked to be disturbed, especially when writing letters.

He sat unusually still at his writing-table of red Chinese lacquer; the protective colouring of his tweeds sank into the background of the long window-curtains behind him, where the exotic birds looked more alive than he. The golden lining to the curtains cast a deceptive reflection like sunlight on the polished surfaces of dark wood and of walls that were like old vellum. It was always fine weather in the study.

A log fire burned with the luxury and importance of a fire in late summer; it crackled and panted, its reflections danced on the florid

carving of the Jacobean chimney-piece and glowed on the Bokhara rug so that here and there a stag's horn or a branching tree would appear with sudden vivacity.

The figure in the shadow was not writing. On the vermilion desk before him lay a crumpled sheet of thin paper; it was a typewritten letter covering only one page, and for a long time Peregrine read it without touching it.

Suddenly he rose, carried the letter over to the fireplace and dropped it into the flames so that they sprang up higher for an instant with a chuckle of welcome. Their light and heat played on his face and on a terra-cotta figure on the chimney-piece of the Phrygian earth goddess, Cybele; she appeared to be quickened into life in the firelight, pleased with the burnt offering of a typewritten letter. He thought of the red-haired men in Egypt who in the dog days were burnt in sacrifice to the earth deity, men with bushy red hair marching through the noonday heat of Egypt into a fiery furnace. O'Farrell, like himself, had had red hair, and the letter he had just burnt had told him of O'Farrell's death. He spread his hands to the fire and straightened his back as though freeing himself from a burden.

O'Farrell could concern him no longer, for he was dead.

Words came in and out of his mind. He said to himself, 'It's done now,' and then, 'Dead and done with'; then, 'I'd have given the world to prevent it.'

The world. It needed little less to satisfy his desires. His mind revolved over space and time, over China when her politicians wrote poems to each other, and Athens when the tinted Acropolis shone in the sunlight, and long journeys through Russia and Thibet, and a salon in eighteenth-century Paris where everybody saw each other every day and never went away, but talked and talked so that the whole world became no more than a feather to be balanced on the tips of their tongues.

Yes, he would have given the whole world to prevent O'Farrell's death, but he had not given the figure that stood on his chimney-piece.

The sun, which had been chasing the shadows over the distant hills, now shone out, and the room unfolded itself like a tropical flower.

Ella came in. She was thin and fair and her smooth hair glistened like straw. In that room she looked stiff and colourless. Her hus-

band thought that if you looked at her hard enough you should be able to see through her to the wall behind.

She asked him if his letters were ready for the post, and he replied that he had written none after all.

"How hot it is in here," she said. "Do you need such a great fire? At home we never began fires until October."

"It can never be hot enough for me."

She hesitated, and looked round the room.

The walls shimmered like ripe corn, the bloom on the rugs was as soft as that on a plum, in the Florentine curtains by the open windows was a forest teeming with life. Her eyes rested on the chimney-piece where the goddess of Fruitfulness and Plenty sat enthroned.

"Miss O'Farrell hasn't arrived yet," she said. "I think we should wait tea for her, don't you? That figure on the chimney-piece always looks dusty. I suppose it's because it's old and crumbly at the edges."

She felt oppressed and anxious.

She thought, 'No, it is not like a proper study.'

She said, "Well, shall we wait tea for her?"

He answered, "Give her till five o'clock."

She left him standing before the figure that had been made of red earth some twenty-five centuries ago and therefore had a crumbly look at the edges.

His eyes were dazzled. It surprised him that he should have seen Ella so clearly that he saw through her.

For fifteen years he had seen her as he first saw her in the port at Alexandria. Hot and dusty and hurried, he had only just caught his boat, he had had months of travel and trouble and haphazard adventures; and a half-bred girl had picked his pockets when asleep in her arms.

He came up into the fury of Eastern sunlight on deck; he saw a girl glimmering in the green shade of her parasol, and was reminded of the shade of yew hedges in an English garden.

The night before, Peregrine Sark and O'Farrell had met for the only time since their schooldays. O'Farrell had run into him under a street lamp in Alexandria, had come towards him, swinging his arms, his big head thrust forward, staring, not seeing him. They had talked there in the street; O'Farrell had been married for some time, he had a daughter and she had yellow hair, but now it was turning red like his

own, and he had called her Bridget after the oldest of the Irish saints, Bridget Bride, who had been a goddess before she was a saint, the earth goddess and mother of all the gods, but O'Farrell did not know that. It was Peregrine who had told him, so he now remembered, looking at the figure of the Phrygian earth goddess on his chimney-piece.

It had been a shock that O'Farrell his fag was married, that queer unattachable thing, married before him, and with a daughter. He had been making money too, he said, and sending a lot home, and soon he would be going home himself, and his face glowed as he said it.

And Peregrine, after that last sordid adventure which had landed him, despite his wealth, in this bankrupt plight, felt homeless and barren; for here was O'Farrell, the most solitary creature he had ever known, not content with his art but creating a home as well, and golden-haired daughters growing like himself.

O'Farrell had thrust all the money in his pockets into Peregrine's hands, and seven pounds was enough to get him and his luggage out of pawn in time for his steamer. O'Farrell insisted that he had lots more money in his room, so much that he could not be bothered to count it. Peregrine counted his loan under the street lamp and put his address into O'Farrell's breast pocket himself, and O'Farrell swore he would send his new home address the moment he knew it himself. But O'Farrell never sent it, and Peregrine never found him.

Thanks to that loan, he caught his boat before the bank opened next morning, and met Ella Winteringham. He looked at the girl under the green parasol on deck, in the reflection of O'Farrell's glory, and said to himself, 'Why shouldn't I too get married?'

Since then he had always seen her as he first saw her, inaccessible and therefore desirable.

All the ardours of his wooing, and Peregrine was by conviction, temperament and experience, an ardent wooer, had only succeeded in making him feel slightly foolish. He won her in marriage, but she maintained her aloof position and her value.

For fifteen years he had suffered a feverish fidelity to her; but he had only once seen her agonized, and that was when she had for a time to give up feeding her first child at the breast; only once enraptured, and that was when, six years after the second child, she knew she was going to have another baby. Both glimpses had slightly shocked him. If he had ever won her to self-abandonment, it would

have lost him his purpose, his grievance and his ideal; for he liked always to see Ella as he had seen her first, and reason told him in vain that the delicacy of her beauty had become bleached and dried quite early, that she was now forty and not twenty-five, that he could not stir the depths of her emotion, because there were none for him to stir.

He could only think of her as in that moment which had lasted fifteen years and which he would have thought eternal had she not broken it just now, quietly and indifferently, as she did everything, when she came into the study to ask for his letters and he had seen through her.

He had stared too long at the fire. Ella was right; he would go into the drawing-room where it was always fresh and cool and demand tea after all.

But at that moment the dogs began to bark, he heard the car drawing up at the side of the house and was intimidated by the thought of meeting the new governess. There was the fuss of arrival in the hall. He did not want to welcome a probably shy girl whom he was doomed to see at every meal for the next three months. He told himself this, because he refused to admit other reasons for his misgiving.

He stood uneasily at the French windows considering what he should do next. They opened on to a flag-stoned terrace, and from this the garden sloped so abruptly that he saw nothing beyond the terrace but the high hills in the distance, and crowning them the jagged rocks called the Devil's Chair.

Behind the rocks were further mountain ranges of black clouds, shaped like gigantic heads; the scene was a vast stage-curtain, a background, heroic and divine, to the human figure that stood awaiting the new governess. Looking on those portentous, derisive cloud-shapes, he asked himself, 'What has she come for?' and felt that the obvious answer was not the true one.

He stood there for some time. It was only 5.30, but should he have a drink? He had missed one before lunch at the correct moment when the sun is above the yard-arm. 'Let not the sun go down upon your yard-arm,' he murmured, chuckling, and turned into the dining-room, quickly, before he should be caught, for the bustle was beginning again, the drawing-room door opened, and the children uproariously conducted the new governess upstairs after tea. He

heard Very's most grown-up voice saying, "You'd like to see your room, wouldn't you?" getting it in very quick before her mother, and then a scuffle between her and John as to who should carry her hand-bag. He did not hear the governess's voice.

When the hall was quiet again, he strolled out of the dining-room, and Benedick, the great Airedale, came slowly across the hall to him, wagging his tail, a hopeful expression in his black and orange eyes which changed to one of reproach. His master was not going to take him out. He had come out of one room merely to enter another. He flopped down on the hearth-rug in despair at human futility.

Peregrine went into the drawing-room where Ella sat reading a library novel. There were no other books in the room, for books are apt to be dusty even if rigorously banged and dusted every day, and Ella insisted that everything should be very fresh, very clean, 'very Jane Austen' in the drawing-room. Peregrine looked at the white and gold furniture, the glossy flowers on chintz and china, the satin-striped wallpaper in narrow lines of apple-green on white. The room smelt of flowers that had been dried and preserved, of lavender, bergamot and pot-pourri.

This drawing-room was worthy of its name, he saw it withdrawing its striped and flowered skirts, primly, a little self-righteously, from the coarse masculinity of the red-curtained dining-room, its antlered heads and sporting prints and Victorian sideboard bulging under its decanters and bottles. 'Shall we leave the gentlemen to their wine?'

He was surprised at the sharp impression he had to-day of familiar objects and persons. Since he had burnt the letter concerning O'Farrell's death and shaken off that miserable sense of responsibility and remorse, he felt he had woken to the little world of the Red House after sleep-walking in it for years.

To see Ella sitting in the straight-backed Empire chair, her grey shoes placed neatly together on the foot-stool, had the effect of a cool hand laid on his forehead. He did not wish her to speak. But it was inevitable that she should.

"What happened to you, Perry? The tea is much too strong by now. Shall I ring for more? Oh, you don't want any? Well, I think Miss O'Farrell looks very nice, and the children have quite taken to her, but then they are always so friendly. She is not in mourning. I thought her father died just lately. But people are so different."

She spoke more happily and at ease than in the study, but now remembered that she had felt troubled there, and had not known why it was.

"What is the matter with you, Perry? You have been so odd and restless all day. Has anything worried you?"

He suddenly thought he would tell her. It was over and done with now, he would know it all the better when he heard her small decisive tones saying that he could not possibly have helped it.

"You remember about O'Farrell, how I found out he was in Paris under another name when I was there early this spring?"

"Of course I do. You tried to follow him up when he was ill, wasn't he, or starving?"

"Both. I got lost in those stewing hot slums the first time I tried to find him and—there was something else—that terra-cotta—yes, it prevented me, I suppose. Anyway, I gave it up that time."

He paused and looked at her a little anxiously, but Ella did not ask how the something else had prevented him. She did not ask questions like that. He was relieved at first and then disappointed.

"I set out again the very next day and found the hole where he had been staying, but the woman there had turned him out the night before. She couldn't tell me where he had gone. She shouted a string of garlic-scented oaths at me about the worthless English beggar who hadn't paid her. He couldn't. He was down and out. I tried to trace him, you know. Two months ago I had a letter from the French police to say he was"—he stopped again, looking at her, then finished—"dead."

"But, Perry, you told me all this at the time. Why should it still worry you that your old schoolfellow is dead? You have seen nothing of him since your schooldays, and he sounded most unsatisfactory. If it weren't for the good accounts I have had of Miss O'Farrell, especially from Mother, I should scarcely care for such a waster's daughter for the children. You have done all you could for him and his family by hunting up his daughter and getting her to come here."

"Yes, to be governess here must be ample compensation for her father's death."

"How absurdly you put things, Perry. Why should it be compensation? You are not responsible for her father's death."

Of course he had not told her and could not tell her. Supposing

he said, 'I have arranged for Miss O'Farrell to come here in order to satisfy my sense of obligation, if not of guilt, towards her father.'

Supposing he said, 'O'Farrell once lent me money at a moment when it altered the course of my life and added to my prosperity and happiness. That day in Paris, I had my first chance to pay it back, at a moment when it would have altered the course of his life. But I preferred to spend the money on the figure that stands on my chimney-piece.'

Supposing he said, 'That letter from the French police said that a certain man, whom I alone knew to be O'Farrell, had been executed for murder with robbery for its motive.'

What horrified exclamations he would hear about the children and the impossibility of a criminal's daughter for their governess! Even without that consideration, she would say, 'Perhaps it is just as well you never found him. A murderer——'

She would never believe that O'Farrell had not always been a murderer. But he had not been that at school, nor a 'nasty, cruel boy.'

He could remember O'Farrell wandering about the passages, swinging his arms, his shabby clothes always rather small for him (he had been sent there by the charity of an old lady and did not care who knew it), O'Farrell coming towards him, his big head thrust forward, staring, not seeing him. How it used to annoy Peregrine Sark, who had rowed in Trial Eights, scraped into Pop, and been told that only idleness could deprive him of a Post Mastership at Merton, that his fag O'Farrell should come towards him and not see him, come towards him with that look of dreamy obstinacy, the look of a stupid genius.

Yes, he was stupid, far too old to be Peregrine's fag, but dogged when he liked the thing he was doing. He spent four hours over a single line of verse one night and was told it was the line of a poet. That gave him more pleasure than filling in the pattern of the wall-paper with ink, for oh, the hours he wasted, the hours and hours that Peregrine with O'Farrell's genius could have used!

He loafed, he was no good at games, though very strong. He never realized his strength; patient, almost unobservant of the fact, he would let boys of half his weight and muscle bully him. But sometimes when no one could tell what had tortured him to anger, his face would suddenly twist and turn crimson and he would hit blindly out at whoever or whatever happened to be there.

His innocence was as queer as his rages; he would not have under-

stood nor taken any interest in the obscene wit of the Latin verses that Peregrine had written in his last year. He had the mind of a child in the body of a youth with the inspirations of a man; he was premature and overgrown, a changeling, a Great Elf; the phrase sprang into Peregrine's mind from a picture book in the playroom, and he wondered if elf and oaf were the same word. It was, when he thought of O'Farrell.

But what of all this could he tell to Ella?

"He half reminded me of the guide's epic remark about the names carved on the desks: 'P. B. Shelley, the poet, very unpopular when in the school.' But one can realize now that if ever he did see anything he saw it as if for the first time. And made others see it for the first time too."

Yes, he could see, but only after O'Farrell had shown him. That sketch he had done on a torn sheet of foolscap of the boys coming out of chapel on a spring morning, the contained savagery of young life beneath that decorous procession of black coats. Peregrine had then seen life in art for the first time, it was his awakening to beauty, to pictures, to all that he had cared for since. He had bought it for a strawberry mess and two doughnuts. But it was not his; it was O'Farrell's who never even cared to keep it.

If only he had had O'Farrell's genius, O'Farrell's life instead of his own. 'My life! What life? I have no life.' But Othello had said 'wife.' He looked at Ella in this new cold light that had risen on her less than an hour ago and felt that his was the better version.

"But he was never a real friend of yours, dear?" said Ella's voice.

"No. No."

She was glad that he left the room without saying any more, only singing one of his dreadful low songs.

Peregrine could be a tremendous talker and then Ella had the sensation of being dragged pitilessly behind a car. 'I can't keep up,' she would want to cry. And his silences could be equally uneasy and perplexing. He crackled with suppressed energy.

She was devoted to him of course, but it sometimes occurred to her how peaceful it would be, how quiet the house, if she were his devoted widow. She would half mourn him always—mauve and grey were her favourite colours—and people would pay calls on her and talk about nothing in particular and she would not have to listen very much.

Everyone had been astonished at his settling down as a country squire. His generosity, friendliness and cheerful driving force had made him very popular in the village; but not all his organizations and charities and parish councils and agricultural hobbies could give him enough to do, so that Ella sometimes felt herself in the position of guardian to a rapaciously hard-working Genie who, if he were not kept fully occupied, would return to hell, dragging her with him.

For to her, London was hell; 'it is impossible to keep things clean,' she would say, 'the noise, the dust.' But she meant, the people. The life there had exhausted her, and she was conscious of failure in it. Her careful and conscientious dinners had helped her more than her beauty; art critics called her the Still Life, but considered she would fade quickly; she was, moreover, 'conventional' and finally 'suburban.'

She could never learn which were the right plays and books to admire and to which to say 'Hopeless,' nor could she master the difficult simplicity of clever people. They appeared to aim at being silly, at making perverse criticisms like those of a petulant child. Ella could never learn to be silly on purpose. She said, 'I have no sense of humour,' and this gave her a spurious distinction until they found it was both sincere and true, and treated her candour as the princess and her waiting maids treated the nightingale. 'Fie,' said they, 'it is real,' and so cast it away.

Peregrine grew tired of having artists, writers, musicians at his house, of being perpetually stimulated by their talk, and his own, but to no creative purpose. To their work he remained the critic, the patron and collector, a rôle that in his irritable moments seemed to him merely parasitic.

He had always done what he wanted except the one thing he really wanted, and that was to create something beautiful. He had an excellent working brain, he had won scholarships and prizes. Cursed with a competence, he had eaten Bar dinners, lost money in financing an invention, made it in stock-broking but realized the ignominy of advising his friends to change their investments for the sake of a commission. When war broke out in 1914, he longed to give himself; but he lost nothing, and through the military influence of his wife's family, his ability and popularity had won him success in Mesopotamia.

He had come to think that to breed cattle and grow fruit and

flowers was all that could satisfy his constructive ambitions. So he bought the Red House.

Ella dreaded that his restless moods might lead to a return to town. He would not be happy there, he was so cross after their dinner-parties though he enjoyed them at the time, and it would be such a pity to make a change like that just as the children were getting on so well with their Latin lessons with Canon Goodchild, though she did wonder if he kept the window open sufficiently.

It was more comfortable to think of the new governess, not as she herself had just seen her, but as her mother had written of her after their interview, for Ella trusted her mother's impressions better than her own. Lady Winteringham's hooked nose and handsome, bushy eyebrows had always relieved her daughter of the fatiguing necessity to think for herself.

'I don't know if you would call her pretty,' Lady Winteringham had written on this important point, for Peregrine could not bear to sit opposite the last governess at meals, 'but she looks strong and healthy and I should think sensible. She reminds me a little of my darling Addy.'

This last was the highest praise Lady Winteringham could give, for her elder sister, Adelaide, the surprising object of that harsh old lady's tenderest romance, had been one of those exquisite and ineffectual Victorian belles whose muslins and ribbons had floated into the world just long enough to astonish it with her reckless spirits, her silliness, her heart-breaking loveliness, before Death pricked her like a soap bubble. It was therefore a contradiction that anyone strong, healthy and sensible and of looks that Lady Winteringham hesitated to call pretty, could at all resemble the fair and unfortunate Adelaide.

Peregrine had gone out of the drawing-room singing one of those dreary Cockney songs that sum up the philosophy of the London streets.

"It's the sime the 'ole world over,
It's the pore wot gets the blime,
It's the rich wot gets the pleasure,
Ain't it all a bleeding shime?"

'Yes, you know,' he told himself, 'it's like that.' His children told fortunes on the lobed grasses, 'Rich man, poor man, beggar man,

thief.' He had always been the rich man, and O'Farrell had been first the poor man and then the beggar man, and then the thief.

In a poky house in the back street of a suburban country town, O'Farrell's widow sat and sewed at children's frocks, and a sullen little girl came and looked at them from under her hair and was told to 'Come here, Kitten,' whereupon she turned and bolted, and Peregrine saw her elbow sticking out of a hole in her sleeve. She was very like O'Farrell at school, he had said so to O'Farrell's widow.

He had contrived that she should hear O'Farrell had died of influenza in Paris, had gone to confirm it as far as he could, and to arrange for her eldest daughter, Bridget, then away at college, to come and be governess to his children.

He had sat in a small room where the table was laid for lunch with a slab of Cheddar cheese and a loaf of brown bread, and from the much too adjacent kitchen had come the smell of cabbage.

A woman had entered, hurried and timid; the spacing of her face and the shape of her eyes were made for beauty; but she had no beauty left, she was always thinking of what she must do next. He looked at the preoccupied face, the anxious eyes and rough hands, and saw O'Farrell's face under the street lamp in Alexandria, transfigured by joy of her.

She had listened to him, acquiescing; the droop of her eyelids and shoulders suggested resignation; he guessed that bad news of her husband had been so long expected that it had brought more relief than anguish. It was nothing to her what became of the artist, she had the man safe now, safely hers for ever as only the dead can be. Peregrine felt that he alone had appreciated the artist, and locked him safely into himself for ever.

He ran up to the playroom, three steps at a time, shouting out "John! Very! I say, what was that hymn?

'The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
The poor man gets up early,
The rich man gets up late.'

It can't be as bad as that."

"Oh, Father, you *are*!"

"Aren't you *awful*!"

"It's—

'God made them high or lowly,
Each in his own estate.' "

"How nice to know that. So it's all right then."

The playroom was very large and three wide windows showed the surrounding country. Hunting scenes by Caldecott hung on the pink walls. The floor was deep blue and spangled with stars because John thought it would be nice to walk on the sky. Ella's old family dolls' house had been poked into a corner niche because Very had never cared for dolls, and the show places were shared by a headless rocking-horse and a toy cupboard, painted with golden knights and dragons.

"What are you looking for, Father?"

"Nothing. Yes I was, for a little frowning girl with a hole in her sleeve. I thought she might just look in, but she hasn't. Well, what's the new governess like?"

They had already begun to tell him rapturously that Miss O'Farrell had let them unpack for her, that she was now changing into a red dress, that she had long hair, all done up with three big crooks which John and Very had been allowed to pull out in turn when she was going to brush it, and that her brush was made of india-rubber and sighed when you squeezed it.

They at once forgot these new interests in a game of cavalry charges which revived Peregrine's spirits. But it was spoilt by his remark that Bucephalus was a leprous beast and would be the better for a head and a coat of new paint.

There was a roar of protest. They did not want their darling Bucey any different. It was true that his chocolate paint was peeling off and revealing large white patches, but it was fascinating to assist the process by surreptitiously inserting one's finger-nails beneath a loose flake of paint.

"I go *everywhere* on Bucey," proclaimed Very.

As when he had thought of O'Farrell's sketch, Peregrine felt an absurd prick of envy. Only the artist, the lunatic and the child could create a life other than their own. On the stationary rocking-horse Very could visit a stranger China and Peru than any traveller could explore; she could wander in the endless forests where Launcelot rode

'and held no path but as wild adventure led him'; she could journey to the moon. He doubted she did. Very's stories were generally domestic and apt to end in the prince and princess going home to tea.

Her real name was Verona, for Peregrine had been there when she was born. He strolled through honey-coloured arches, in and out of the vegetable market piled with pomegranates, and pumpkins large enough for Cinderella's coach; he sat under the striped awning of a café and sipped the full-bodied red wine of Verona.

Beauty was apt to give him more pain than pleasure since he could not seize and keep what he saw in even the roughest of sketches. But for that one moment he was living all that he could not express.

It was there they brought him the telegram that told him his wife had given birth to a daughter two months early, but that both were 'doing splendidly.' He must go and look up the train and re-pack his hand-bag and that terrible old woman Lady Winteringham would think he might have got home sooner, and so he might if he had not stopped these twenty-four hours in Verona. But there it was, they were his now, and, like the glutton, he told himself that even God, even Lady Winteringham, could not take away the dinners he had eaten. He would call his child Verona and in her keep this moment for ever. He was glad it was a daughter; there was some obscure triumph in his pleasure; it would add immensely to his satisfaction if his daughter, like O'Farrell's, had golden hair which would later turn red like his own.

But Verona had so far, at the age of eleven, ungratefully refused to live up to her name. She showed early signs of being brisk and decided, a bit of a bully as soon as John was there to bully; like Lady Winteringham in character and like neither Verona nor Ella in looks; she was sturdy and freckled with a button nose and round grey eyes and brown hair of the negative variety, and her temperament promised neither passion nor imagination.

He did not protest when Ella, with her habit of rather aimlessly shortening names, took to calling her Very, and everybody followed suit except Very herself, who always introduced herself as Verona and signed it in block capitals at the end of her letters.

Peregrine now suddenly asked her why. He played with the idea and her. " 'What's in a name,' my Juliet? Do you feel Italy and Shakespeare in yours?"

"My name's Verona," she said, stolidly enough.

"Quite right, hold on to it, be very Very Verona. Shall I take you there on Bucephalus?"

She had flushed angrily, but permitted him to swing her up behind him on the saddle.

"Not to Verona, though," she said, "I won't go there now."

"Where to, then?"

"I don't care. We're really here all the time."

Her dignity had been outraged, she might ride but she would not play with him. He found he was playing by himself.

On the rocking-horse he galloped back through the summer to this last March, to Paris slums in an early heat wave, where he was wandering, ever crosser and wearier, in search of O'Farrell's obscure lodgings, until suddenly he stepped out of the glare into the thick-smelling darkness of a grimy little shop.

In its deepest shadow stood a small object he could scarcely distinguish. But it made on him an impression of something very old, mysterious and significant. So once in Greece he had come through the bleak dusk on to two pillars, and stood looking through them to a ruined altar on which the rain poured down; and hurried down the bare hillside as if from some unknown power that he feared to stir.

All he had entered the shop for was to ask the way to O'Farrell's lodgings.

He had not asked the way.

He had instead asked to see the object on the shelf behind the Jew shopkeeper's head. It was an early terra-cotta figure of Cybele, earth goddess and mother of the gods. The archaic ripples of her hair were crowned with flowers. She held in one hand the pomegranate seeds of death, in the other, the torch of life. Her eternal smile accepted his worship.

He left the shop with a dirty newspaper parcel in his hands and a 50-centime piece in his pockets.

Then he remembered that he had not asked the way to O'Farrell's lodging. But it was useless to do so now that he had spent all the money he had with him. It could make no difference to wait another day.

But by the next day, O'Farrell had gone.

'It was fate,' said Peregrine to himself, 'it was on the knees of the gods'—of the goddess!'

"Ow! You *are* making Bucey bounce!" cried Very.

"Of course I am. I've ridden all the way to Paris and back in the last two minutes."

"And what did you do there?" Very condescended.

"I sold a man to buy a goddess."

"Father, you *are*! What did you do with the goddess?"

"Put her on the chimney-piece in my study."

"Oh, *that* old goddess. I'll get down now, please."

She shouldn't have said, 'That old goddess.' She wouldn't have dared say it to her face. Father liked that goddess better than any of his things, and she knew it, she looked so smug and proud, she pursed up her lips in a dreadful smile, she swelled larger and more important every time one came into the study.

Very joined John at his jigsaw puzzle. Father was being a beast. He had teased her about her name and was probably teasing her now. Nobody could be as much fun as he when he chose, but he just wasn't going to bother. There he was still sitting on Bucey doing nothing but pull things out of his pocket and put them back. Her head was carefully bent over the jigsaw puzzle, but she observed each movement that he made.

"You're not being much good," said John to her.

Father was reading a torn scrap of newspaper, such a crumpled, worn-out scrap that he must know it by heart to be able to read it at all. Why did he read it over and over? Why didn't he read it out to them?

"You've gone and put the lady's nose on her neck," said John.

Peregrine inspected a pipe, a lump of uncut turquoise, a tobacco pouch, a shining pebble, a knife, a torn envelope scrawled over with lines of verse, a gilt-headed champagne cork shaped like a ballet dancer, and a cutting from the *Petit Parisien* of May 1st that year which stated that an obscure ruffian of the name of Picard had been guillotined on a charge of murder following an interrupted burglary.

The prisoner had said in self-defence that he was hungry and had therefore broken into a house to take money to buy food, that when the owner of the house tried to prevent him he got angry and killed him by a blow on the temples with a coal hammer which happened to be handy. When asked if he had intended the blow to kill, he had replied, 'Yes. At the time.'

'How like O'Farrell!' thought Peregrine for the thousandth time,

'the poor damned doomed fool.' He put the newspaper cutting back into his pocket-book and then his pocket.

He had stayed to buy a figurine for himself, and in consequence two men had died.

He alone knew that the unknown vagabond Picard was O'Farrell, he alone knew what had happened to the schoolfellow and casual acquaintance whose life had at three different moments been linked with his own.

His head was bursting with purposeless vigour, with bright hot thoughts that chased each other round and round in ceaseless circular pursuit. But he could do nothing with them, and at the end of all the roads that his rocking-horse travelled, the Cybele sat there waiting, enthroned, in her hands the powers of life and death.

A clamour rose through the house, surging and resounding, filling each corner with reverberating echo. Peregrine sprang from his horse at the summons of the war gong that had proclaimed the power of the gods in Asia, and went to dress for dinner.

## *Two*

*

MISS O'FARRELL sat very still and looked down at her plate, for she was hungry and ate a good deal, and when she spoke, each word sprang up, alert, dutiful and distinct. Her voice was low and quick, not like O'Farrell's, that dreamy, dogged, dragging voice, the voice of a stupid genius.

Ella asked Miss O'Farrell if she had found the training college for teaching very interesting.

She had not.

Ella asked if she did not then find the psychology of children an interesting subject.

She did not.

Ella hoped that she was, however, fond of children.

She said, "When they are nice," and after Ella's expectant pause, she added, "Like yours."

Many girls were uncouth on purpose because it was the fashion, but

Peregrine believed that even her bad manners were natural. Perhaps she was afraid of Ella, whose unconscious stiffness was apt to put people off. Perhaps she knew that Ella thought her dress too bright, and not merely because of her father's death, but because Ella shrank instinctively from bright colours.

Ella said when alone with Peregrine that Miss O'Farrell seemed very young. It was amusing how often she first crystallized his impressions for him, stated them in a few flat words and left them finished as far as she was concerned, but just beginning for him.

Bridget O'Farrell was younger at one-and-twenty than many girls he had known in their teens, younger even than Very, for her youth was not just a matter of age, of newness to the world, of shyness and sudden gaucherie and cock-sure, conceited opinions, but rather the youth that poets sing of and old men dream of, the youth of Chaucer's Squire :

> 'Jocund he was and carolling all day,
> He was as fresh as is the month of May.'

Like him she should wear a coat embroidered with as many flowers as a meadow; that was why she reminded Lady Winteringham of the lovely and irresponsible Adelaide, who could never grow up and therefore died happy.

But he had not thought Bridget O'Farrell gay or pretty at dinner. Did she hide her qualities when she was with you?

He thought, 'I will show her the church.'

The church was Peregrine's pride and pain. Its early Norman tower commanded the village of which he was Squire, it stood in his estate, almost in his garden, and somewhat in the position of a private chapel which the villagers were graciously permitted to attend. If he had had some raw-boned, ill-bred, half-educated curate at Gawcomb Mazzard with an untidy wife and too many children, who would bother him with boys' clubs and committee meetings and either greet him with uneasy stiffness or slap him on the back, it would have offended not only his taste but the personal pride he felt in his property.

It was he who had induced Charles Goodchild, a former don of his at Merton, to take the living. His elegant and leisured Christianity, his stoutness and shabbiness, which only emphasized the distinction of his mind, had their fitting frame in the remote little village and its

old church. He could show his rector with pride and security, for Canon Goodchild took his faith and his learning with equal simplicity, and was as much at home with the villagers as he had been with his former associates at Oxford.

But he had also to show the prodigious walls of his church defaced with plaster of a pale dirt colour, ornamented with meaningless twisted scrolls the colour of a rotting toadstool, and the window in honour of the late—but here he became speechless.

They were walking with the children towards the church as he described his sorrows until they choked him, and Bridget O'Farrell answered with remarkable intelligence:

"The church ought to be beautiful all over, to go with your house."

He snatched at her appreciation. "So you like the house?"

"Yes."

"And when did you know that?"

What a lot he wanted!

"When I first saw it."

He wondered when her hair had stopped turning red like her father's, for it was now more brown, though with lights in it that were both red and gold. He nearly said, 'You were born under a street lamp in Alexandria,' for that was when she had first come into his existence. But she must have had an existence of her own before then, and since; it was difficult to realize that people went on living apart from his knowledge of them.

He was still waiting for her to speak. She wondered, what did he expect or require of her?

It was only three days, not months, as it seemed, since she had felt so lonely and frightened at going to this strange house that an old lady in the train had insisted on giving her tea because she looked so pale, and very nasty tea it was, but she had to drink it or it would have hurt the old lady's kindly feelings. Only three days since she had seen the car awaiting her at Sherne and the pleasant face of the chauffeur. He drove her on and on between golden fields towards the distant hills, crowned with the jagged outline of great rocks which he told her were called the Devil's Chair.

Behind the rocks were further mountain ranges of black clouds, shaped like gigantic heads. They had thrust up their heads over the mountains to look down on the car that was crawling, hurrying over

the shining plain, to look down on the one tiny human figure of herself as she came towards the house where she was to be the new governess.

Looking on those portentous, derisive cloud-shapes, a fear deeper than shyness had fallen on her; holding her bag tightly, she had said to herself, 'What have I come for?' and felt that the obvious answer was not the true one.

Then Williams had said, "There's the Red House, miss," and she had seen red twisted chimneys rising above the trees like the turrets of a palace. There was nothing awe-inspiring in its royalty, for it was of a day when palaces and farmhouses were much alike, built of red brick in peaceable times. Princes in velvet coats and flat caps should ride out from its courtyard with falcons on their gauntlets; she had thought that when she met Peregrine Sark, the tall man, the keen, imperious face, the name of a hawk.

Kindly, welcoming impressions had crowded on her; the people here were nice and wanted to like her, the baby's nurse had already told her there was an understanding between herself and young Williams. Everybody in this house was happy, and all the things in it were beautiful. She had never seen such things outside a museum, though they did not make her think of a museum, for in this house one lived on familiar terms with rare and lovely things.

But what of all this could she tell to Peregrine Sark?

"It looked," she said, "like a ripe plum hanging on the hillside where it could get all the sun."

It satisfied him, to her relief, for she did not know what to say to these prosperous, clever people who talked so fast and found life so easy.

Very and John were hanging on to their father. Very told her with a mysteriously self-important air that the church was still all dressed up for harvest, and John said, "Do you see that gargoyle? It's saying Yah boo at you."

It was. It leaned its hands on the edge of the roof and silently shouted. Next it was the bas-relief of a centaur with bow and arrow, possibly the last reflection of classic tradition, Peregrine told her. All this part was early twelfth-century. In the crypt were the remains of an altar showing that a temple to a Roman god had once stood on that site.

"We'll offer a sacrifice on it one day, shall we?" he said to John. A red cock was the right thing. Red was the colour of magic. No,

Very would not have a red cock. She thought dried rose leaves and lavender would do, and they would smell nice burning, but John thought it ought to be something one cared about very much like Jephthah's daughter.

He had once thrown a beautiful little boat into the fire because he had so wanted it to be fine next day for a picnic, but he had never told anyone this, he did not tell it now, he could never tell it.

## *Three*

✲

THEY stepped into a well of green darkness and the rank smell of vegetation. The fading faces of flowers hung heavily from their stalks, drooping roses had spilled their petals round them, bunches of hothouse grapes, black Monukkas and Moroccos, ripe to bursting, swelled in globes of shining darkness among their withering leaves. All this splendour was piled high in honour to the God of Harvest.

"These are all from us, of course," said Peregrine, naming his various produce with voluptuous content. Even the great tousled wheatsheafs had a title—Bloody Mars, he called them. He made Bridget taste a Chasselas Dorée, a small golden grape, very sweet and rich, that had been discovered by Henri IV at Cahors and taken by him to Fontainebleau.

Yes, she thought with amusement, kings *would* ride to Fontainebleau to do his pleasure! His slaves would till the vineyards and he would drink the wine. In a Renaissance palace two people sat at a supper served by silken pages, and one was herself grown very beautiful, and the other was gorgeous, courteous and tyrannical, and interested in her. And somewhere Frank was looking on and seeing the interest and not quite liking it. She and Frank had decided to marry shortly after he had become a cadet, so that though she wore no ring, they might be said to have been engaged for years now, but for the fuss that families made about purely abstract questions like their Age or rather their Youth, and the Slowness of Promotion in the Navy.

"You must see my window," Very's brisk little voice cut across her dream; "at least I let John do half of it."

"It isn't your window, it's hers," said John.

"Whose?" said Bridget.

"Miss Miningham's, and there she is," said the Squire, and told her in a swift undertone that Miss Miningham had continued to do the altar flowers ever since her father had been Rector here, thirty years ago.

A chill hush fell on their group as an old lady stepped down from the chancel with dead flowers in her hands; she moved towards them in a sidelong, soft-footed, nervous manner as a cat does when it goes past the windows of a strange house, looking in. The Squire introduced Bridget to her and she made a jerk with her bedraggled dahlias as though to repudiate introductions in a church. It turned out, however, that she was repudiating the decorations, last Sunday's sermon, and the very idea of a harvest festival. She made broken, whispering statements such as, "No really strict Church circle would ever."

"An innovation which."

"Canon Goodchild's remarkable learning. Such a privilege as I tell the villagers who would otherwise fail to recognize it, but."

The Squire agreed the Rector had given them a sanguinary sermon, all that about blood sacrifices—and worse. Miss Miningham rustled on hurriedly that no doubt one could explain everything as a parable, still. Heathen gods, and popes whose rods miraculously blossomed, were unsuitable in a Christian church, such a waste too, so much above the congregation's heads, except.

Her comprehensive jerk showed that the heads of the present company were so far elevated above the congregation that they could look at or even down on the Rector's sermon. Peregrine nodded from his eminence.

"I hate waste," he said. "I hate to think of beautiful nuns and imaginative stokers and——" he was going to say, "and passionate or maternal spinsters," but changed it in time to, "The most harrowing line of poetry ever written is:

> " 'Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
> And waste its sweetness on the desert air.' "

'Oh!' thought Bridget, 'why am I here? And why isn't Frank?'

Perhaps she would always be a governess until she was as old as Miss Miningham, who had once been a fresh young girl with a wasp

waist and long fluting skirts and flightily perched hat, stepping down the chancel steps years and years before Bridget was born; Miss Miningham who was now a shadow, a dusty relic, with dead flowers in her hands. For Bridget's imagination refused to recognize that Miss Miningham must every week take fresh flowers into the chancel as surely as she took dead flowers away from it. She saw her for ever drifting through the church; in a bustle, in leg-of-mutton sleeves, in bell skirts, in the indeterminate, shapeless clothes of old age; every week, every year a little more faded, and for ever with dead flowers in her hands.

And she too would be left out of life. Even now she was out of it, in the Red House.

That beautiful house, this crowded talk, this sense of importance and power and possessions, were an alien world. She was alone in it. 'I might as well be dead here,' she thought, for nobody here knew nor cared that Frank had gone to Gibraltar and she would not see him for months, and that her new red evening dress which had cost so much did not really fit, and that her mother was all alone in the jerry-built house at Redhill now that the children were at school, and had threatened to give up the daily charwoman; and if she did too much and moped she was sure to get ill again this winter.

She wished herself in the garden at home under the pear tree whose pears, unlike these vaunted fruits, were nameless, and hard as nuggets; that she were working through the mending basket with Mammy, while the Kitten dashed about catching frogs and putting them under a flower pot to see how they would jump when she took it away, and Jane read aloud her holiday task, the Conquest of Peru; so that dying Incas and intrepid Spaniards in coats of mail were inextricably part of that delicious homely medley of Mammy's old sun-bonnet, and unending piles of stockings, and the Kitten's whoops and calls, and Jane's voice droning like a bee, and the knowledge that at any moment Frank might be heard shouting, 'I say, can I come to tea? I've got some buns.'

A wave of homesickness engulfed her, her eyes were drowned in it, they looked through a mist at this strange sudden urgent man whose only concern was last Sunday's sermon, how he had felt the annoyance of a careful housekeeper as each suavely rounded pearl of the Rector's scholarly imagination had dropped before those vacant faces, pink with heat and health and recent scrubbing, that looked over their

magnificent carved pews like rows of white pigs looking over their styes.

Miss Miningham did not complain of pearls before swine, rather that the hungry sheep look up and are not fed. And the more the Squire agreed with her, the odder things he said to show it, but then he talked so much he probably forgot what his opinions were when he began. He said the harvest festival was only fifty years old in the church, and the oldest in the world. He said you might as well have a cattle-show as a flower-show, with his prize bull for the centre decoration, and then what about such parables as Pasiphæ and Europa? He said how hot and overcrowded the church had been, and the over-ripe smell and the cheerful bellowing of hymns about the kindly fruits of the earth, all of the earth, earthy, had given Ella a sick headache. And then he said he liked it.

Miss Miningham offered him a tentative smile, it gave her eyes the look of a child who anxiously holds out a lump of sugar to a horse. She gave ceremonious farewells and messages to Ella and half-playful thanks to the children for their decoration of her window, playful because it was not correct to talk to children quite as seriously as to grown-ups, even when talking on a very sacred subject such as her window, for she half closed her eyes at mention of it so that Bridget wondered if she were going to faint.

But at last, sidling and bowing and smiling and sighing, she was gone, and some rusty piece of mechanism seemed to creak after her; they all straightened themselves and looked round as though a door had just shut behind them into a dark passage through which they had come out into the open air.

John said, "Were you laughing at her, Father?"

"What the deuce do you mean?"

"Her *boots*," said Very.

"She is a delightful old lady," said Peregrine, "and no village would be complete without her."

Sidling and smiling and sighing she went; so many people to stop or at least bow to on the road; to tell how she had just seen the new governess in the church, a sweet-looking girl, though pride and modesty restrained her from mentioning that she herself had been slenderer than that at her age. Miss Chavers, the village dressmaker, had fitted her for an eighteen-inch waist. Poor dear Miss Chavers,

there was no one in the village now who could cut out like her, and it seemed just yesterday—but she had lain under the fir tree in the churchyard these twenty years, and now this new girl stood in the church and smiled.

She would hear all about Miss O'Farrell when the dear children came to tea, and indeed before then, for everybody told her everything. Perhaps Miss O'Farrell would help her with her Sunday-school class; she had so much to do; nothing had ever been done properly in this parish since twenty, or now it was thirty years ago, for 'how quickly time flies,' Miss Miningham had said again and again at her window, which looked on to the village street. She wondered a little where all hers had flown to, as she watched the strapping youths and girls go by who had been babies such a little time ago, when she had been just the same as she was now.

There had been few landmarks.

The last and chief was when her father died.

Second in importance was when she had learned to ride a bicycle in spite of his objection that it was an ungraceful exercise for girls, disgraceful for those past their girlhood. The lurid glow of that single revolt was still reflected in her refusal to acknowledge the second part of the accusation; she continued to explain that the long-disused machine which took up so much room in her back shed was kept as 'a relic of her girlhood.'

Many years earlier was the first landmark: her mother had called her unladylike, when at the age of fifteen she had walked up and down the Rectory drive with a chubby, snub-nosed boy cousin who was telling her about his school.

Her mother had been the beautiful Miss Trowen who had been married off in her teens by her mother, as were her seven sisters. After that, match-making died out in the family as it did to some extent through the country. The scheming mamma of the early nineteenth century was replaced by the mid-Victorian devoted wife and indifferent mother, who told her daughters that no man was to be compared with their father, and saw to it that the comfort of his declining years should be imperilled by the least possible chance of comparison.

So that Miss Miningham had been well fortified against Canon Goodchild's unconscious flattery. It was impossible for him to call on a woman without bouquets, whether of flowers, or abstruse compli-

ments, or books, the choice of which expressed his high opinion of her intellect.

But Miss Miningham, having fought two rectors since her father's death, was on active service in the Church Militant for life. She could flatter herself more insidiously by rejecting these overtures, by thinking that things might have been very different if she had had less pride, less sense of what was due to herself, as well as her father, beside whose memory the present Rector could only appear as a frivolous pedant, a serious trifler. Thus she turned his own phrases against him.

She could even, in the wildest flight of her frantic imagination, imprisoned as it was in her window by the hoarded relics of her father and the enduring restrictions of her mother, soar occasionally into another world where she reigned as a scornful beauty, or flitted, free and wild, a fugitive nymph who should for ever flee while he pursued. At this point the pursuer would change from the stout shabby stooping form of the Rector into a woodland god, lean and lithe, with satiric smile and brightly watching eyes, and what he wore she did not know —a leopard skin?—hoofs?—horns? Some picture in her childhood must have put it into her head; it was odd how such pagan fancies made one think of the Squire.

But neither the Squire nor the Rector had ever thought of Miss Miningham as a fugitive nymph.

The Squire was speaking to two men who had entered the church in search of him.

Very and John were showing Bridget their window,—or Miss Miningham's. Very asked a trifle aggressively which side she liked best.

"Mr. Mytton said that window cost a mint o' money," said John nervously.

He had done his side in alternate stripes of enormous red cooking-apples, each one highly polished with a duster, and large yellow daisies with their stalks picked very short; and Very had said it quite spoilt her side which was all mauve and white Michaelmas daisies.

Ella often wore mauve, and it had impressed Very as elegant and worldly because it had a French name and was a dim, refined colour. And John had burst in with his garish streaks of red and yellow and spoilt it all. Silly little boy. Why, until just lately he had thought

the name Michaelmas daisy was Little Miss Daisy. It was Very who had told him. Baby!

John didn't see why it was babyish. Little Miss Daisy was quite as sensible a name for a flower as some. He even thought it rather a nice name which might do for something else. There was Jenny Mytton alongside their pew; she looked like a Little Miss Daisy, at least she did on Sundays in her starched white muslin, but he had not said this to Very in case she should again call him Baby.

"Brabant Bellefleur and Belle de Franconville are the names of those red cooking-apples," he now told Bridget, showing off in imitation of his father, who had said these prancing titles should be those of great Flemish mares.

She was aware of the tension, that important issues hung on her answer, looked up for inspiration at the window itself, which had cost a mint of money, and saw two splay-footed saints whose watery simper smirked at heaven while they struck inadvertently at small toy harps; looked hastily down again and studied a brass plate which dedicated this window to the ever loved and honoured memory of Edward Miningham, late Rector of this parish; saw that the children were still anxiously awaiting her verdict, decided it was no good bothering, and plunged.

"I like the red and yellow stripes best."

"You don't think they're gaudy?" asked Very.

"Yes, but why not? They show up well. Now that mauve and white all runs together and looks rather dirty, the same colour as the plaster."

"There you are," said John. He wrestled with the Lord, and the Lord lost. "Father said so too," he brought out in uneasy triumph.

Very showed extraordinary restraint. She just said, "It was so funny on Sunday. They all came in in a procession, singing, 'We plough the fields and scatter'—you know. They simply shouted. We all did. Then they got to:

'The breezes and the sunshine
And soft refreshing rain,'

and John never noticed that that last line was marked *p*, and there he was simply bellowing away at the top of his voice while everybody

else had got thin and squeaky. It was awful. He had to pretend he'd lost his place in the hymn-book."

She left them with her head in the air. There was dignity for you. 'What character,' thought Bridget. John had got very red. He hated all women.

"Well, she owed you one," said Bridget.

Very examined the bunch of grapes that was hanging ludicrously round the neck of the brass eagle on the lectern. It must be tantalizing for him to have all that just under his neck and not be able to peck at them. Everything was cruel and unfair. Why wasn't she beautiful, with long golden hair as her mother had had as a girl, then perhaps they would call her Verona and her father would not have objected to the mauve and white? And she hadn't cared for mauve to start with, that was what made it so unfair.

She had painted a picture for their scrap-book in bright red and green and a splash of yellow and her mother had said, 'But what a pity. You want delicate colours for that little picture, primrose and mauve,' and Very had felt what a distinction it was to like delicate colours. And this was what came of it, that her father had thought her side of the window looked a dirty muddle. Next harvest she would do it with scarlet salvia and branches of dark yew and cedar; her father had called salvia 'angry dragons'; he liked things to be angry.

But it was a whole year to the next harvest. She might be at school, they might all be dead, the world might have come to an end. Sunday after Sunday after Sunday, for a whole year, before she could get the chance to wipe out that miserable faded mess on her side of the window, just like the dirty white plaster on the walls, which her father hated.

She went out, looking back at her father who had returned with the two men to Bridget and John.

Bridget was being introduced to young Tom Pike the organist and old Mr. Mytton the sexton. They stood waiting for her to say something and Peregrine did not help her. She admired the decorations.

Tom Pike with a shy and tremulous eagerness that reminded her of the sensitive nose of some animal, she was not sure if it were a whippet or a weasel, said something about the Squire's share, "but there, the Red House gardens, we all know——"

He looked for help to Mytton, whose red face shone solemnly out from a bearded halo like an old picture of the sun. He agreed after slow consideration that the Squire had plimmed up the church so as to make it real saucy. There was an apologetic deliberation in his compliment which was not lost on Peregrine.

The disproportionate success of the Red House harvest this year had caused some discontent in the village, and there had been hints of this during the Squire's genial hospitality at the harvest dinner he had given to all the men down at the 'Barley Mow.' With his usual frankness he now spoke of it, for he believed in having things in the open, and thought the men's natural grudge against his luck would be lessened by his recognition of it.

They agreed that the earlier drought and later frosts and high winds had spoiled the fruit elsewhere, but not in the Red House grounds; though higher, they were sheltered by the trees in the park, or else it was just luck, you could never tell. But you could tell how proud he was of it, how among those rather poor fruits from the village and surrounding houses, he gloated over his Amarelle cherries and the crimson flesh of his Italian figs, called after the white neck of a lady, too coy and uncertain for our climate, but this year at last he had succeeded with them.

"Do you think it will pass into a proverb?" he had asked Bridget just before the men had come in. "Will they always speak in these here parts of 'a Red House harvest'? Perhaps my honours will be yet more personal, in an extra fine summer, the oldest inhabitant will point at a giant gooseberry and say, 'Ooh ay, it be a Peregrine year fur sure.' 'A Peregrine year' sounds well, doesn't it?"

"Yes, all opulent and generous. You couldn't say 'Ooh ay, it be a Sark year,' that sounds bleak and harsh."

She did not think he quite liked that, though he had gone on laughing at their rustic imitations; Mr. Mytton, coming in just then, had looked shocked to hear so much laughter in church.

He was the same as John over his daisies and apples. She would have to revise the description to Frank which was going to tell him that Mr. Sark was a man of the world, and, but for the fact that he was always talking, one of those strong silent men who are absolutely ruthless when they want to get their own way. Bridget had decided, after twenty-one years of disillusionment, that there were no men like

that now to be found, and that Frank was nicest in any case, just as he was.

But she found that though she wanted to go on missing Frank she had to listen to that clear crisp rapid voice that was always just about to break out into a crackling blaze of laughter.

"It was Joe Mytton here proposed the principal grouse," he said. "Called me the Devil, didn't you, Joe?"

The sun face grew tropic though it grinned in answer to the Squire's and Tom's laughter.

"Well that weren't so to speak what I *did* say," he brought out at last after several false starts, and Tom finished the explanation to Bridget. "Seeing as how all he said was that the Squire had the Devil's own luck."

"And that only at an advanced stage of the dinner," added the Squire.

Tom Pike, stammering in his social daring, said slyly, "'Twas as the song says, sir, of John Barleycorn's beer,

> ' 'Twill make a boy into a man,
> A man into an ass.' "

"By Jove, yes, you must play that to Miss O'Farrell. It's the old harvest song," he told Bridget, "and Tom sang it at the harvest dinner. Go up into the organ loft and play it now, Tom. Mytton must wait till you're out of the church to break your head for calling him an ass."

Tom hurried off to the organ loft, his triangular, inspired face flushed with pleasure and looking as though his musical aspirations and devotion to the Squire had met in one quivering point at the end of his nose.

He was the blacksmith's son, and blacksmith too, but the Squire had discovered his talent and had him trained, and now he was organist in his own village and spent his evenings wrecking his home with church music on a whistle, for they preferred something cheerful and always used to tune in to the jazz music on the wireless, but all that was altered now.

And Bridget heard of old Joe Mytton too, now the Squire had got rid of him, how when he was a boy, old Mr. Miningham had walloped him with the best end of his umbrella for stealing his apples, and his consequent veneration for that great man had led him to look on all subsequent rectors as degenerate upstarts. So that was what Mr. Miningham had been like, walloping the village boys, a horrid

old man, bullying his daughter who spent all her money on his hideous window, and all her life in the shadow of it.

"Friends with them all? Oh, well," he answered, "I collect people, like pebbles." So he did, and put them in his pockets. He was collecting John now, telling him of a god who was captured by pirates, and just to show what he could do, caused wine to run streaming through the ship, and a heavenly smell arose and all at once a vine spread out along the top of the sail with clusters of grapes hanging from it and a dark ivy plant twined about the mast blossoming with flowers and berries and all the thole pins were covered with garlands.

"Was it a miracle, Father?"

"What isn't?"

He was staring at a sunflower, its savage head sunk on its chest. It only lacked arms to represent a sacrificial victim bound to the cross.

Through what wild centuries roamed back the idea of God and Victim, Christ, then Adonis, then Osiris, then Attis, son and lover of Cybele, then back through time, before church or temple, to some frenzied host that tore a man in pieces, ate his flesh to make them strong, and scattered his bones over the fields to assist the crops? For it is the oldest belief of man that the God shall be put to death for his people, that 'Blood must water the earth to make things grow.'

"Your father could paint sunflowers," he said to Bridget.

In the dying face of the sunflower he had seen O'Farrell's. Only a god could create as he did, give that sunflower his own life and hurl it writhing on the canvas to live for ever. And O'Farrell had been put to death.

Did his daughter see it, as she too stared at the sunflower? What did she know of her father? Only that he would never come back.

He fell silent.

The proud tune of John Barleycorn sounded in his ears like the notes of a reed flute, calling him back 'through what wild centuries' to an older, other world.

> There came three Kings from out the West
> A victory to try
> And they have ta'en a solemn oath
> John Barleycorn should die.

Could *he* die? Others, yes. It was easy to imagine old Chas. Goodchild lying in the quiet churchyard, enriching the violets he was

so proud of finding before anyone else. But he himself, for whom all life was not enough, how should he be content with death?

> They took a plough and ploughed him in
> Clods harrowed on his head
> And then they took a solemn oath
> John Barleycorn was dead.

"That song," he said, "is of the two greatest things in the life of man, the belief in immortality and the discovery of alcohol. John Barleycorn's beer 'will make a man into an ass,' but the ass who's drunk enough, knows himself to be a god. That's the true immortality of the spirit,—in both senses of the word! 'This that is *I* cannot die,' says the savage, and seeing the dead-looking grain buried and born afresh, thinks, 'Why not *I*? When I too am put into the earth, then this unquenchable spirit within me will rise again to a new life.' "

Here he was talking to impress a new governess, and for even that mild office he had nothing new to offer, nothing that had not been said before; for he had got that last idea from the Rector's harvest sermon. In surprise and awe at the coming of spring after winter, of sunrise after night, of green corn from the dry seed, the Rector had traced the dawn of religion in man's mind; the first religious ceremony had celebrated the miracle of harvest. Miss Miningham's protests against the festival had then been answered, or would have been, had Miss Miningham not gone to sleep.

Peregrine had to choke his laughter as he looked at the faces of the two children before him, for Bridget as well as John had the slightly scared expression of a child who is trying to live up to a dangerous honour. She was indeed rather startled by the hungry delight with which he pursued his ideas, swooping on them as a hawk swoops on its prey. He was like a Red Indian, like a flame. If he swooped on one in anger he would be terrifying. But he was never angry, he was friendly with everyone, he never minded when his wife answered all the things he hadn't meant and missed what he had; nor when Very had been sullenly rude over nothing. He did not even notice. He noticed nothing that did not interest him.

Only gods and miracles were good enough for him.

He said to her in that surprising way, all at once childishly confiding and friendly, "I had another birthday last week. That's why I

talk such a lot. You are silent because you are young and all the time you talk to yourself about the wonderful things you mean to do. I wish you would give me some of them. There's nothing particular I've done, or want to do, with my money, and I haven't got the peculiarly developed imagination that goes with it, or I could occupy myself with saving the matches and telling everyone how poor I am. There's John, of course, but why should John have my life? The impulse to reproduction has produced sex in compensation for death, but it's not good enough. John's not me, are you, John? and I don't suppose I'll be a bit interested in the way he wants to spend the life I've handed on to him. Big game shooting, isn't it, old man, or exploring forest sin Brazil? Why should one's children be the important people? Very is sure to marry a nice well-to-do man with a weak will, and spend all her time managing him and her three children; three is the right number; I have three myself."

"But they will be you too," said Bridget, "they couldn't be there at all if you"— she paused, disconcerted, under the laughing look that had swooped down on her, and finished rather lamely—"if you hadn't been there."

But he had ceased to be interested in her or in what they were talking about; paternity was a dull subject; she knew she had bored him and wished she hadn't. 'There is Frank,' she thought, for she never bored Frank. But was it altogether impossible, now that she had supped in a palace with a tyrant eager to do her pleasure, that Frank would never bore her?

Tom was playing the last verse. In another minute Peregrine would hear silence.

He would die and go under the ground and flowers would grow out of his grave, he hoped sunflowers, but even they would not be himself. He would be nothing. He was nothing. He had always been nothing. 'I've got nothing in my head to think about,' he had complained as a small boy, moping in the garden. He had since planted many tastes and interests there, had tended them industriously. But if they took root they would not flower; at forty-seven he no longer hoped that the wilderness would blossom as the rose.

And then there came again, as once or twice before in his life, that mockery, that sense of dazzled expectation, of the marvellous importance of this moment. Nor did it this time end in emptiness. Among this lush and teeming vegetation, a seed of fancy flowered in

his mind, showing him for perhaps ten seconds what the church might become in the hands of genius.

An old window he had lately seen for sale showed darkness lit with gold and purple, in place of the two splay-footed saints. Along the cold walls, frescoes sprang into life inspired by the mad fancies O'Farrell used to chalk up on the chimney-piece of his room at school. The life of the grain from the fecund darkness of ploughed earth, the growth of the mind of man from the first savage sense of awe, grew together before his eyes, created life on the dead walls.

And this then famous church, this bright treasure should express him and perpetuate him through the ages, rivalling even the gay monuments to mediaeval prince or bishop; for it should be his own tomb.

Beauty should flower in his church as miraculously as in the pirate ship when Dionysus caused the bare masts to branch and blossom and flow with wine. And the genius that could transform it was O'Farrell's.

But O'Farrell was dead.

Did nothing of that spirit live after him? Could no one make use of it now? Or was he the divine scapegoat, the god sacrificed to make things grow?

The last notes of the tune peeled their defiance to death.

> "Then Barleycorn sprang up his head,
> And so amazed them all."

He said, still smiling, to O'Farrell's daughter, "And the harvest also shall be mine."

"What is it you are saying?"

"The Sark motto. Not too 'bleak and harsh,' is it?"

"It sounds greedy."

"And why not? Aren't you greedy? Most people are at your age."

The motto had sounded terrible, though she could not have said why. He was considering, waiting to ask or command something of her, his face showed a savage concentration, and two questions came as one into her mind, 'What will he ask?' and 'What have I come here for?'

"Did your father ever have pupils?" he said.

So that was all.

"No, he couldn't bear them. There was only one he could stand."

"Well, John, what shall we show her now? The stables or the pigsties?"

John preferred the pigsties.

They left the church, and Peregrine asked Bridget to tell him all she knew of the only pupil her father could stand, and who else knew him. He stopped at the lychgate to write down the names, then said he was going to the post office to send a telegram and went off at a run. John, who had begun to follow him, had to give it up, his father went so fast that he was already disappearing down the village street.

## *Four*

*

BRIDGET was writing letters in her sitting-room, she mentioned this in each, and only her foreknowledge of the family's jeers prevented her calling it her suite. She had not only a bedroom to herself, for the first time in her life, but also a sitting-room leading out of it down three shallow steps, a low-ceilinged room whose window framed so wide a view that she seemed to be looking over the whole world.

Her writing-table was in the window, it was French and tiny, curved in a graceful embonpoint, it had been painted with prim bunches of flowers and then varnished, about eighty years ago. Bridget thought that actresses from the Opéra or Comédie, perhaps even that actress who became an empress, had sat at it in their crinolines and flourished plumed quills over their billets-doux. Now it had to put up with a governess who was writing to her family. So she told her Dear old Jane.

When she turned her head she saw a pool of sky encircled by pink and white cherubs. So she told her Pet Kitten, and forgot to explain that there was a Florentine mirror behind her.

"My room," she said aloud.

Through the open door, between the white walls, she could see her small four-post bed, hung with blue, at the top of the steps, as though

on a royal dais. She stared round her and then out again at the silent scene. So much space and loveliness frightened her, it was like having all your wishes come true, you thought there must be a catch somewhere. 'It isn't mine,' she thought, but that didn't matter, she was there enjoying it.

But perhaps she wouldn't stay long, she couldn't be really good enough, things always had gone wrong with them, and she supposed they would continue to do so. When any other member of her family drew the same conclusions, she was furious with such cowardly pessimism. Now it was Jane who knew she couldn't get that scholarship—'can you see any of us getting anything?' she had written. Bridget wrote: 'Just look at me now. So why not you? The luck must have turned at last. Touch wood all the same.'

She tapped the little painted table with her left hand as she wrote this and wondered how that simple action propitiated the powers of the universe. She must ask Mr. Sark who was sure to tell her about sacred trees.

To her Darling Mammy she wrote new and diverse reasons for her delight in being there, but that it was almost more than she could bear that Mammy could not be there too. 'It's all just made for you,' she wrote, unconscious of absurdity as she pictured the shabby, haggard woman with nothing to do for the rest of her life but to sit in Ella's drawing-room with her feet on the round Victorian foot-stool. With rest and good food and a beautiful dress, Mammy could look as nice as Mrs. Sark any day, Bridget decided, with some indignation that Mrs. Sark did not look even nicer since she only needed vitality to do so. It aggravated her that Mrs. Sark, unlike her house, would sit in the shade, when she needed all the sun she could get, she was so washed out and flat and limp as though she had been sent to the cleaners too often. What was the use of all her luck?

She wrote, 'You needn't worry about always being tired. Mrs. Sark is much more tired than you and she never does a thing all day to make her so. It isn't fair you can't have all the time she wastes.'

There she was back at home, wondering if Mammy looked more ill than usual, trying to get her to lie down. She felt frightened, she did not want to go back just then to the cramped, crowded house and all

the people in it that she had to look after. Remorsefully she reminded herself how homesick she had been in the church. She wrote that living in a house and family that had nothing to do with you, was like living in another world. There was such a lot going on, and she felt it all rather strange sometimes.

This was enough to show Mammy how she missed her; she did not add what else was racing through her head.

'It's so lovely—it's all too much—it makes one want to die.'

Da had felt like that sometimes, when things were so perfect that you could not bear them; sometimes she dared to hope that his death had come at such a moment.

She thought of a sunrise shared with him, of his homecomings and his face on meeting her mother.

Then she remembered hanging out clothes on the line one sunny windy morning. The pear tree was in blossom like a white cloud, showers of petals were blown in her face and her hair, and a blackbird balanced on its topmost twig sang against the shouting wind. She had just dyed all her clothes and they pranced flame-pink and orange against the blue sky. Her heart was so full of happiness, it felt it would burst. She heard Frank's voice calling to her, laughing, roaring against the wind, 'Hi, Biddy! What are all those flags you're flying?'

But the next-door neighbours complained of the clothes on the line; it was difficult to keep the flags flying. They averted their eyes when they met the O'Farrells in the street after they had seen the broker's men go into the house. Bridget could remember the broker's men coming before when she was a little girl, and she told her younger sisters that of course nobody was going to prison and they had got to be brave and helpful, as she had been. They took her word for it until her mother gave her away and told them that Bridget's early method of being brave and helpful was to retire to the coal-hole with an old copy of *Five Children and It*, which had just been given her, and read it all through in case they took it from her; and she was not discovered until hours after the broker's men had left, and her absence had caused worse anxiety than their presence. And this second time, Bridget was so far from making light of it to herself that she contemplated suicide before her next meeting with Frank's mother.

Mrs. Chanbury had always been surprised at Frank's friendship

with them; she would ask Bridget after her 'poor mother' and say 'Really' in cool surprise to all her answers; their very existence caused her surprise. When their brother Billy died, she couldn't understand that Frank should want to go on seeing a lot of little girls; she was very sorry for them all of course, but it was odd that Mr. O'Farrell should never be able to sell his pictures, and odder that he was away so much, and later she said it was wonderful all that Bridget managed to do in that house when she was often so vague and brooding, and she thought she might become very emotional which was so bad for everybody.

Frank did not like telling her about Bridget, but she did not like it if he left off. He told Bridget, laughing, that she might become emotional—'She meant passionate, but thought it kinder not to say that. She doesn't know you yet, that's all, and she's afraid of our falling in love, she doesn't know.'

'I don't see why I shouldn't be passionate.'

She had sat up on the lawn and looked over his head at the unexpected procession of her life. Three years ago she had been an awkward little girl in pigtails that were always coming unplaited but Da would never let her cut them off. Then one day Frank told her she was really not bad-looking. Some day someone might call her beautiful. She might be anything.

He had chaffed her uneasily, advised her to chew a rose instead of that bit of grass and to cultivate the works of Elinor Glynn.

He did not like her to look over his head as though for someone else to come towards her. If she were thinking herself passionate, why not with him? Why couldn't he make her so? But he felt self-conscious, the neighbours' windows were all round and they thought kisses as bad as broker's men. He wanted her to come a walk but there wasn't time, she was anxious what his mother would say if he didn't get back now, for he was going to join his ship next day. He told her she minded too much about mothers and what they would say and she ought to plan her own life more.

They kissed in the house, and both were so unhappy at parting that they forgot to wonder if they were passionate or not. It was Bridget's last term at the training college. Next term she would have to begin teaching, she did not want to go to a school, she wanted to act or paint, but one artist in the family was quite enough. They sat side by side on the sitting-room sofa, every time they moved it

groaned in expostulation, for the springs had been broken long ago; in front of them was a pile of sewing on the square table and Marion's music on the open piano. He became unusually gloomy, it was no use her cheering him with their lively prospects, he with a ship and a gay time at Gibraltar ahead, she with no prospects at all.

He said, 'Do wait for me, Biddy.'

He looked at her as though she were already distant, he saw dimly that time and absence might not be on their side.

But he could not say what he feared, he only damned the sofa which was worse than ever that day, and then Jane came in and said she had got to lay the supper because she was going out directly after to an extra class, and she rushed out with the armfuls of sewing, and in with a clattering tray, and Frank said, 'There's always a fuss in this house.' But he was sorry he was cross, they told each other how lovely it would be next time they met, and each thought that next time would somehow be in perfect surroundings with space and leisure and time all round them.

And Bridget who had already written two or three letters from the Red House to her Dearest Frank, had told him in each how perfect it would be if he could ever come and see her here in her very own sitting-room.

She did not say it in the letter she was now writing. She nibbled the butt end of her pencil and sang,

"And when he is a Captain bold
He's coming home to marry me-e-ee-eee,"

as she described Mr. Sark in fresh detail and a flattering light, because though of course it was lovely that Frank was having such a good time at Gib, he really needn't have rubbed it in so much about the chic and flair of the smart girl with the small sleek black head like a billiard ball, when she had no chance to retaliate with anything but the elderly married man whose children she was teaching.

It was possible that Frank had used the smart girl as a retaliation to the elderly married man, for her last letter had contained much of Peregrine's conversation, but she had forgotten that in her present sense of injury.

She ceased to worry her pencil and her mouth opened wider into a broad smile before she wrote, "Aren't children funny? We'd been playing at the story of Prince Fickle and Fair Helena and I was Fair

Helena, so when Very saw your photo she said, 'Is that Prince Fickle?' So I said, 'Well, he may be, but he is disguised as a nice young man in the Navy,' and John said, 'I expect Prince Fickle would go into the Navy as they have a wife in every port.' " She admired the look of this before she added, "John is an awfully nice little boy, three years younger than Very who is eleven and rather grown up, but John is very shrewd and clever in some ways."

She signed herself "his always loving Bridget" and ran downstairs in a hurry for the post, licking the flaps of her envelopes. She did not notice Mr. Sark watching her in this absorbing but unbecoming occupation until he spoke, when she jumped and put her tongue behind her teeth and her hands behind her back.

He was standing in the doorway of his study and told her the post had gone, but if her letters mattered he would get out the car and catch up the postman at the next village in no time. She declared that her letters did not matter the least little bit, they mattered so little that anyone might have wondered why she should have written them at all.

For it had instantly occurred to her that the Hand of Fate might have withheld her letters from the post in order that she should receive another and much nicer one from Frank next morning saying that the smart girl was an affected cat and that he disliked pomade, in which case she would destroy the labour of the last hour and write another and much, much nicer letter to him with far less of the silly vain part about Mr. Sark talking so much to her.

So convinced was she that the powers of the universe were actively interesting themselves on her behalf and against the girl whom Frank had described as "rather slinky" (a term of approbation as she knew, though to her it suggested the unpleasing combination of slimy and inky), that both these letters might have been written and read with equal mutual satisfaction by the time she had accepted Mr. Sark's invitation to come into the study and see what he had to show her.

The study was full of sunshine and flashes of colour. She stood by a table of red lacquer and looked down on her father's face.

It was looking back at her from a broad sheet of paper with that heavy, half-dazed look she knew so well. The right under eyelid sagged a little and looked prematurely old, but the rest of the face

was young. There was weakness in the full curved lips which turned down at the corners instead of up like hers. The eyes looked back at her, not seeing her, helpless, doomed, indomitable.

She felt the same stab of anxiety, of protective terror, that she used to have on seeing his writing on an envelope in the hall.

There was Da at last. Oh, what was going to happen now?

The letters came so seldom, at the end there had not been any for more than a year; every day one looked in the hall and said to oneself, 'No letter from Da!' but it was a relief, you still did not know, and he might have written a very cheerful letter which had just gone astray, in any case it was all put off for one more day.

For when at last a letter did come, she knew her mother felt sick as she opened it, she did herself, watching her, for one never knew about Da, anything might have happened to him. She said to herself, 'Well, he is safe now, safe at last, nothing can ever happen to him any more,' but she wanted to cry. The world was cruel and cold and hateful, it had been too difficult for him and he could not live in it, poor gentle helpless old thing with that flaring gift that had been no use to him.

So the fairies give gifts, maliciously, to the wrong people, who are encumbered by them. Half the time he did not know what to do with it, he would try to write poetry when he ought to be painting, but he tore it all up, it was all bad he said, and she could only remember one line of all she had seen, "I wander on because I must, and not because I will."

He could not help it. Her mother had too much to do and too little money, but he gave or sent them all he ever made, sent it through the bank too, because if ever it were sent in a letter something always happened. But she had been harsh and horrid, she had told him he wasted time over his verses; she had once even wished to tell him it was his fault Billy had died, the only boy and so much the nicest, of course he would be the one to die. A better doctor would have saved him, she and her mother had realized that. If Da had too, then it was worse for him than for any of them. She thought of him alone and suffering and longing to come back to them. But now he would never come back.

She said, "Where did you get this? Father must have done it himself."

"So you would think. But it was done by the pupil you told me of."

"Mr. Wem——"

"Yes, David Wem. That is why I've been in London the last two days, following him up. He has done no work that's worth while since he left O'Farrell."

"*That* is. Oh, but that was done then of course."

"Yes. I brought it as hostage for his coming."

He was opening a drawer and now laid another sheet before her, covering her father's face. It was a small and uncannily vivid painting of an apple-tree. There were no leaves on it, there was no room for them, it supported by magic an enormous crop of large red and golden apples. In the background was an orange-coloured cornfield gleaming as though it had been enamelled rather than painted against a thunderous sky.

"*That* is Father's," she said, "no one else could have done it."

She had not known that he could himself.

"No one else," said Mr. Sark.

His voice sounded thick. He was looking at the picture with so intent and devouring an expression that she exclaimed:

"You want to eat them."

"Eat—what—those apples? Yes. And the cornfield. Look, can you see, even at that distance on the hillside, the sensuous fullness of the ears of corn, bursting open to show each grain like a jewel? You couldn't actually see that at such a distance of course. It's a miracle, like the tree. He's called it the 'Miracle.' "

"Is it yours?"

"No. But it will be."

She saw him again as the hawk, swooping on his quarry. 'The harvest also shall be mine.'

But since it was only a picture, and her father's, which he admired and meant to possess, why should she shrink from him?

"Who bought it?" she asked.

So few people had bought his pictures, though he had had more luck abroad.

"No one. He gave it to a French curé who was kind to him."

A weary impatience fell on her. He saw it, and that it had been familiar. "No," he said, "it would have been of no use to him to sell it then. He painted it when he knew he was going to die."

It was incredible that a dying man should have done it. Incredible of anyone but Da. It was a picture of unconquerable life, of his own mind.

She had heard from her mother of the curé who had come to see her father two or three times just before his death and brought him paints when he had none left. Her mother had written their gratitude to him and asked for any further news that he could give, and Mr. Sark had very kindly translated her letter into proper French for her and sent it off to Algiers where the curé had lately been sent, but there had been no answer, and Mr. Sark had said he was an illiterate fellow and unlikely to write.

She now asked more questions but his answers were abrupt and repressive, it was no wonder he found the subject painful, all the more since it was more painful to her. An uncomfortable silence fell between them over the magic tree, until he said, "Wem comes this evening. He is going to paint the frescoes in the church for me. Do you think he can do them like that?"

"I'm certain he can't," said O'Farrell's daughter.

"He could have once, under your father's influence. What he could do once, he can do again."

He lifted the picture and looked long at the face of the man beneath.

"A man like that," he said, "should have lived for ever. And he had no sense of life, he threw it away. He should have been a public institution, the nation should have given him beautiful houses and money to make into paper boats so as to minister to his sense of unbridled power; a guard should have attended his walks abroad, the best doctors visited him daily, he should never have been allowed to be poor or ill or in want of the least thing, and above all not allowed to die."

"Oh, poor Da!" cried Bridget, "you couldn't keep an artist like that, you couldn't keep any man alive."

"No, only dead I suppose. How do you know these things?"

He looked at her with humility and awe. He trembled on a discovery which he could not prevent. Could one keep anything unless it were dead?

He was suddenly old and tired. O'Farrell was right. That was why he had never cared to keep the beauty that only he could make. As soon as it was done, it was dead to him; and he cared only for what he could do next, the living thing yet unborn.

"The plans I made for him that day in Paris!" he burst out. "I was going to take him back to my hotel, back here, take him in hand, make him work, make him known. I saw it all, his masterpieces, their fame, his fortune, and I patting myself on the back behind it all, Mæcenas and Egeria rolled into one prolific though presumably epicene power."

"That day in Paris?" repeated Bridget.

He was looking at the figure of the Cybele on the chimney-piece.

"Yes," he said, "I saw it all then. And then I saw something else. One thing drives out another, you know."

"But were you looking for my father?"

A persistent, dogged sort of girl. He did not think she had charm. Hair was not charm. It was the most impersonal of the beauties.

"I was always looking for your father," he began with a touch of irritation, for why should she have that lost, frightened look? Her father had done nothing for her, could be nothing to her, and now for the first time he had seen her look like O'Farrell, but O'Farrell in his rare moments of startled perplexity, a changeling on whom it dawned that the world was not always kind; so bewildered and unhappy she looked, and just like O'Farrell.

"Always looking for him," he said, "ever since I ran up against him under a street lamp in Alexandria after my pockets had been picked, and he thrust all the money he had on him into my hands. I gave him my address, he had none to give me but swore he would send it as soon as he had one. He never did. He never understood the sacred nature of property. When he had money he gave it to anyone who wanted it, and when he hadn't he expected anyone to give it to him. It was this simple misapprehension of human nature that brought about—" he paused, for to O'Farrell's daughter he could not say, 'his death,' so he said, "my life."

She stared at him, she wondered if he were a little mad, but he explained how, thanks to that loan, he had met Ella on board the boat he had thus been able to catch at Alexandria, and in her won beauty, happiness, more money, luck in the war through her family's military influence, his life as it now was.

As he spoke, he saw his life built on O'Farrell's death. "Your father, unlucky himself, had a way of bringing luck to others. It is the quality of the sacred victim, sacrificed for that purpose."

"But no one sacrificed my father."

How near he got to it, just touching her with it and then flicking it away. It had the irresistible temptation that urges a murderer to revisit the place of his crime. It was playing with fire, playing with danger for himself and her, playing with his own uneasy remorse, and yet it quickened him with a sense of the vital importance of his actions; he went for a walk in Paris and was given the powers of life and death, and all unknowing he had chosen death.

*Was* it all unknowing? Did he, for all his sense of the splendour of life, yet value dead things more than living, possessions, the beauty he could not make, only acquire and keep?

He did not look at her, he put his hand on the Cybele, picked it up, turned it round, as if counting its perfections, and said with a lightness that sounded flippant, "Well sacrifice isn't done now, is it? I was only saying that I never could find him again, nor had a chance to pay back his loan. Only one chance," he added under his breath.

She heard, but she did not notice. She was wondering how her father had died. Wasn't anybody kind to him besides the curé? He was so kind when he remembered people were there, and he would be so patient in suffering, like a great shaggy dog. Die like a dog. Was that how he had died?

She saw the eyes in the portrait looking at her in agony from the corner of some dirty, airless room where people drank and played and shouted and did not even turn to see him die. If only she could have gone to him, sat by him and soothed his head with her hands, pressing her fingers up over his forehead and back into his hair, over and over and over again, for she could do that, it had sometimes rested him wonderfully, and he had been so grateful, almost worshipping her for it, 'so kind and lovely,' he had said, and he had called her Bridget Bride, the mother of all living things.

Tears choked her and came thick into her eyes, so that the only relief from that agony of pity was rage against the well-groomed, well-bred, well-fed man who had failed to find her father.

He had all the luck. It wasn't fair. All his beautiful things. She looked at the figure on the chimney-piece that he had just handled, and her face flushed as Peregrine had seen O'Farrell flush at school when those strange, unseeing rages came on him, for she wanted to seize it and smash it down into the fire.

But Da wouldn't have wanted that, Da never thought of things as fair or unfair, he would want her to think of him when he was happy, as he was so often, making a Robinson Crusoe house in the garden for them, sailing boats on the pond with them, splashing and shouting through the water, as free from care as a wild creature. He must have been more than happy to have painted that picture; and he painted it when he was going to die.

She said, "I expect Da would have thought himself lucky to have brought you luck. He never thought he was unlucky, you know."

And her face, which before that angry flush had been overcast with a grey, strained expression like an ugly and ill-fitting dress that poverty and anxiety and responsibility had forced her to wear, now lit up into a broad dancing smile, a glory of happiness, that made him see her once again in a coat embroidered with as many flowers as a meadow.

'Jocund she was and carolling all day.'

Yes, perhaps after all she had a modicum of charm, she was young and very impressionable, she was changing all the time like spring weather; but her last remark had irritated him; it was too true, too like O'Farrell, no one had any right to carry magnificence so carelessly.

He longed for it, and since he could not attain it, wished to destroy it.

What if he told her how her father had died, how nearly he could have prevented it?

He said gruffly that tea must have gone in long ago, and held open the door.

As she went through it, he lingered to put O'Farrell's painting back into the drawer in the red lacquer table. It had been lent to him by the prison chaplain who had refused to sell it. From him he had learnt that the prisoner's only request had been for paints. The curé had not told the authorities of this; he had bought and smuggled the paints in on his own responsibility, and the prisoner had given him the painting in return for his kindness. The curé told Peregrine that there was an apple tree growing just outside the prison yard, but it was not really like the tree in the picture, which, however, he valued as a souvenir.

'That was a remarkable character,' he had said. 'No man was

ever less intended by his nature to take life. He could not even take money without bungling it. As one of our profane authors has remarked, some of our actions do not at all resemble us; they are like little negro children conceived in our sleep.'

The curé was not an illiterate man. Nor had he gone to Algiers.

A gratified roar greeted Peregrine as he followed Bridget into the drawing-room; Baby Dick had been brought down by Nanny and as usual was allowed to roll all over the Aubusson carpet and make as much noise as he pleased. Ella spoiled him as she had never done the other two, though he paid no attention to it; he was superbly independent of everybody except his father, and to him he instantly scrambled, demanding to be thrown to the ceiling.

Peregrine tossed him up at arm's length above his head while Baby Dick shouted rapturously at his proud eminence, and Peregrine shouted back at him, "You beauty! You splendid specimen! Shall I show you along with my bull for a thousand-pound prize? Now you're as tall as the ceiling, my young giant. Not afraid? Not you. I say, Ella, it's amazing how he's grown just lately."

Bridget saw that Ella didn't like it, was alarmed at Baby Dick being tossed about and would rather he were a little alarmed too; she was sure Ella preferred children to be tiny and helpless or to have something the matter with them, and shrank almost with fear from her husband's pride in his huge handsome vociferous child. And as though he had heard Bridget think it, or had told her to think it first, Mr. Sark said, "Cheer up, Ella. He may get whooping-cough any day."

Ella was quite unperturbed. She said, "What nonsense you talk, Perry," and tried to pet Baby Dick, who yelled his complaints and fought to get down when she took him on her knee. Very had no better luck, and with happy nonchalance he kicked over the castle of bricks that John was building for him.

Bridget was glad that she had kept out of it when Nanny, a cheerful chubby-faced young woman, caught him up and told him to behave nicely now, and he thumped her in the chest and roared that he wanted nuvver Nanny. When informed that this was rude, he protested that he *had* a nuvver Nanny and a much bigger Nanny too.

Very, who was still unavailingly trying to take charge of him, said, oh yes, for some time he had been talking about a great big Nanny as high as the ceiling who came to his cot when his own Nanny was at her supper, and took him up in her arms and put him into the nursery fire. When asked if this were not painful, he had declared that it was not, but lubbly gloo, a term of satisfaction that he always applied to warmth and comfort; and that after a short time this other Nanny removed him thence back into his cot.

"He seems to thrive on it anyway," said Peregrine, "nothing of the morbid little dreamer about him, hey, Ella?"

Ella hoped people would not encourage Baby to pretend that his make-up stories really happened, as it made it so difficult to discriminate between imagination and lies.

"Difficult? Impossible," he answered, "since the two are one. Life is unendurable without lies, that is why we have invented religion, art and love. Of course Baby Dick cannot be content with a plain unvarnished Nanny."

Ella was panic-stricken lest Nanny should notice that she had been called plain, and dismissed her from the room on a flimsy pretext; but Peregrine did not notice, he said Baby Dick must have heard the story of the Earth Goddess that he had told Very and John, and had decided that he was the baby boy whom the goddess, when wandering in disguise, had nursed and put in the fire to make him strong and immortal like the gods. He had created for himself this Other Nanny out of the figure on the study chimney-piece. Any decent baby would see to it that he had a goddess to nurse him, and one moreover who would let him roll in the fire that he was never allowed to play with, just as any decent man saw to it that he loved a goddess rather than a woman, that he wrote poetry rather than doggerel, that he worshipped, not an ordinary man, but a god born of a dove and a virgin.

Fortunately, thought Ella, the children were now engrossed in halma, but it was a pity Williams had come in to clear away the tea. She looked as though she were being beaten about the head, until Bridget hated her for her tired white face. It was touching of Mr. Sark to think she had brought him beauty and happiness and life, whereas she was dull and bored with him, and he must really be rather lonely inside. She hoped at least that he was rather lonely, it made

him less overpoweringly successful and different from anyone else she had known.

Everything was easy to him.

"By the way, Ella, I've just had a wire. Mr. Wem is coming to-night after all. He'll be here to dinner."

"Oh, but Perry——"

"Splendid, isn't it? I told him to come the first moment he could."

"Yes, but Perry——"

"He can start work to-morrow morning."

"But the Van Leerens are coming to dinner."

"Good for Wem. He'll get a better dinner."

"But you said he was so highbrow, and they——"

"Oh, that's all right. Cheery chap, Wem. As good as a death's head at any feast." As this failed to reassure her, he added, "We'll get Canon Chas. in as a make-weight. Williams, go and tell the Rector he's got to come and be a medium brow. Wait while I write a note."

He wrote it, talking all the time. It was only one line straggling across a sheet of notepaper, and Bridget noticed that it was in Greek characters. What fun he and his friends must have, asking each other to dinner in classic quotations. How clever he was, and how stupid Ella with all those buts, and looking so anxious, all about a dull thing like a dinner, though there were heaps of food in the house and someone to cook it, and she would only have to go and change her dress.

She ought to be Mammy for a bit, thought Bridget savagely. That would teach her to have something to worry about. Bills, bills, bills. Can the children go to school next term? Aunt Hetty paid for them last term but she can't do it again. Not enough good food just when they are growing and needing it most. No nourishment in bread and jam.

'Oh, but, Mammy, there's lots of vitamins in cabbage and brown bread and it goes further than white.'

'Biddy, my darling, we oughtn't to have Frank to dinner again; won't tea do instead?'

'I do call it a shame. He always brings cakes or something and they last on. Everybody else can ask people to dinner, it isn't fair.'

Had it after all been worth while to worry about Frank coming to dinner? Would he talk as interestingly as Mr. Sark when he was his age? Not he. He'd be a flirtatious old admiral dancing with slinky-young girls. She saw him with a white beard under his laughing snubby nose, surrounded by a lot of heads like seals as though he were a keeper in the Zoo, and the heads belonged to girls in exquisite dresses who screamed and chattered and sat on the arm of his chair and on his knee and pulled that venerable beard which on him looked merely silly. She had been getting on quite well without him but now she was miserable. It was not jealousy. It was merely disgust. It was That She at Last Realized the Truth. She would not get another letter in the morning. She would probably never get another letter at all. He would not even trouble to let her know that All was Over. Not he. And it was undoubtedly Fate or God or whatever you like to call it that had prevented her posting her letter to-day, for she was not going to be the last to write. Not she.

So bitter and intense were her reflections that she now paid still less attention than Ella to Peregrine's interesting talk.

She did not even notice that he had stopped talking, and was looking at her with admiration of her youthful capacity for becoming quite suddenly so acutely, glowingly, perfectly unhappy.

This was not the ageing sadness with which she had looked on the past, on things pitiful and now inevitable, but the rich and hopeful sorrows of youth, of egotism and desire.

And the cause of that smouldering splendour was some sentimental curate or crude subaltern or perhaps even a pasty youth in an office ; the result of them, a clumsy and ignorant boy husband, too many children in a tiny villa, fatigue, worry, a grey pinched face. That splendour should lead to squalor!

In that moment he hated the meanness and insignificance of little lives with a rancour that startled him, for mingled with it was that cruel emotion, envy. O'Farrell had married unwisely, had had too many children and too little money, had sunk through weakness, folly and hunger to the most horrible death a man can die, yet O'Farrell had lived more than he, who had always got what he wanted almost before he knew what it was. O'Farrell had created, suffered, and for others. What was it his daughter had said in the study? 'You can't deny a man the right to suffer,'—no, she had not said that at

all, but she knew it; she too had suffered, and for others. She was older, she had lived more than he.

He felt that only he in all the world had been denied life.

## *Five*

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PEREGRINE was no 'genre' collector, he liked variety in people as well as in his other possessions. In the short time since Bridget's arrival, there had already been flying visits from friends who drove up amid a bustle of greetings; elegant women who exclaimed that the Red House had grown more marvellous than ever, clever-looking men who joked with Peregrine in dry, assured voices and, when Bridget's alarm of them had been lulled by their apparently childish remarks, revealed sudden enormous depths of knowledge of science and economics and American plays and mid-European politics. They went, scattering counter invitations, and Bridget drew a breath of relief and thought, 'Here we are again,' for the Red House was the fuller, not the emptier, when these shadows had passed across its deep sunlight.

Mr. Van Leeren was not like any of the other visitors. He had a car the size of a small train; a pearl in his tie the size of a small egg, and a blue-and-gold wife the size of a large doll; he talked of commerce and clubs and restaurants in a cosmopolitan accent; he was six feet two and stout, with no top to his head, and his heavy features hung in folds. It was Peregrine's pride to have collected this massive piece of vulgarity that reminded him of some slow, huge burgher in velvets and gold chains, painted not too kindly in a seventeenth-century Dutch picture. It pleased him also to talk knowingly with him about the course of the markets, while the Rector delighted the ladies; and Mr. Wem looked meekly at the table.

Ella's forebodings were justified. She could not quite believe that anyone could be as miserable as the young man looked; but she had no doubt that their dear Canon Chas. was not as happy as he usually was in the presence of exquisitely cooked and chosen food, good wines and pretty women. Pussy Van Leeren was as pretty as a

Christmas-tree decoration, but she trilled across him to Ella the low prices of all her clothes, for she had learnt that it was unfashionable to be wealthy and that the thing was to talk about your overdraft. He did not bear with bad manners patiently, and Ella trembled, wondering whether she should in all kindness snub poor Mrs. Van Leeren herself, to save her from his sarcasm and its accompanying flash from beneath his half-shut eyelids. It was such a pity he could not have had Bridget next him, for her silent, smiling calm had impressed him favourably; he had already begun to lend her books and ask her opinion of them with that sincere modesty which was his most subtle compliment.

She felt that the worst was falling when the Van Leerens made their bow to art and antiquity.

"I would not haf minded twenty or dirty pound, I gave dat for de picture in our dining-room in Berkeley Square, but Pussy wanted me to give two hondred for dat leetle picture I told you of, it was too moch."

"Oh, but, Freddy," the blonde reasoned with him, "that picture was nearly a hundred years old and ours is only about sixty—you have to give more money for forty more years, don't you, Mr. Wem?"

And she leaned across the table with a dazzling smile at the drab little man, too faded to be called young, who sat with bent head and downcast eyes and a deceptive air of humility; at least it deceived Mrs. Van Leeren, who decided that the poor little artist must be crushed by their splendour, for he had not dressed and was even wearing carpet slippers which must denote poverty or extreme ignorance.

Peregrine had listened to her with a rich satisfaction which reached its full content with the appeal to Mr. Wem and the despair it brought into that sallow face. Mr. Wem spoke very little, in a tired voice and words mostly of one syllable; this made everyone else sound very talkative and silly, even Canon Goodchild who had told him a good Common-room story from his last visit to Oxford and been met with an unresponsive blink. Peregrine had prophesied that the two would fall in hate at first sight. Ella wondered how she could prevent their continually meeting at the Red House; Perry would not help; their antagonism would only give him a fiendish glee as she knew it was doing now, even while he led Van Leeren on to the

subject of food, on which the Dutch financier showed intelligence and so much appreciation that a great part of each summer had perforce to be spent at Carlsbad. He could, he boasted, get a job any day as a chef, and turning to Bridget, he told her exactly how a chicken should be cooked, stuffed with butter.

"But you must never leave it, you must treat it like your baby, every five minutes you must baste it. I once did it for a dinner-party, they laughed and thought, 'Oh, the old man will make a mess of it.' That chicken was——" the big man kissed his fingers to express his rapture; in the simplicity of his enthusiasm he looked like a Gargantuan child. The Rector almost forgave him his wife, and described to him the details of a feast at Lucullus with a recipe for cooking peacock. They agreed that this dish, though showy when dressed with the spread tail feathers, proved the Romans to have but coarse palates. Their best cooks came from Cyrene. Culinary and classic lore intermingled; they talked so happily that they interrupted each other.

The conversation was rising a note or two as the excellent claret circulated. Only on Mr. Wem did it shed none of its benign influence, and Ella regretted her Good Deed for that day in placing the shy new-comer, instead of the Rector, beside her so as to put him at his ease, for it had only resulted in the destruction of her own. *Was* he really shy? Certainly he made her shyer than she had ever been in her life as she asked him increasingly timid questions; about his mother, who, he said, was "very bright" and "gives clever parties"; about So-and-so's books or pictures, with a short sad silence between each; for either he had never heard of them, or the answer was "Thin," or "Poor," or "Vile." The question she longed to ask was why he wore carpet slippers?—and one yet more important, if Perry could, or would, ask him to refrain from wearing them again? If only Perry would help her out with the talk about pictures! Yes, here he came swooping into their broken silences as if in answer to her wish, but it was not much use, something about inconsistency, why shouldn't one like Manet better than Monet this year because one liked Monet better than Manet last year? And anyway, what he really meant was that he liked money better than either. Mr. Wem looked fixedly at his plate.

Ella thought Peregrine was being very good. He had taken Mrs. Van Leeren entirely off the Rector's hands; there was a possibility

that that snub need never be administered now after all, though she had her doubts, for the Rector did not lightly forget his revenges.

But Bridget did not think he was being good. She thought it extraordinary of him to have such friends, and to be flirting brazenly with that horrid tawdry little thing with the twanging voice and the cracked tinkle of a laugh. They were talking utter nonsense she told herself, but was as unable to restrain her admiration of their worldly badinage as of the few magazines that had found their way into her home and thrilled her with their images of gaiety, incredible luxury and the enchanting occupation of silliness.

"Why do men always dance with their mouths open?"

"Why do women kiss with their eyes shut?"

"Oh, I don't know. You mustn't ask me. I only kiss dogs, if I know they won't bite," purred Pussy, her pink manicured claws spread on the table.

"Well, I'd only kiss cats if I knew they wouldn't scratch."

"Oh, Mr. Sark, you *really*—I'll tell Freddy."

So that was how one ought to talk. So that was the sort of woman men admired. That was what the seal-headed girl was like. If Mr. Sark could have such bad taste it wasn't surprising that Frank had. Perhaps he would have gone on liking her best if only they had been together. She hated her employers for keeping her prisoner when she might have been with Frank. She was tired of these clever people, and their beautiful things. Frank was quite ordinary. He laughed all over his face so that his eyes disappeared and his mouth showed that broken tooth which ought to make him hideous, but it didn't matter because he was such a darling; and his arms were too long for his height, like a gorilla, so that if the tailor wasn't careful he looked like a schoolboy growing out of his coat sleeves, but 'all the better to hug you with, my dear,' he would say as he caught her up in those long, strong, straggling arms.

When she had been with him all the tiresome things had been so important. But now she felt that for the first time she knew how she loved him, and how to show it; and he was a thousand miles away. What a waste it was!

Her silence was neither calm nor smiling.

The table formed a charmed circle; outside it, dim figures skirted, deft and silent in the dispersal of food; its circumference was a bright crackle of conversation, a ring of softly shaded faces, intent and

unaware, they surrounded the pool of dark wood where reflections of glass and silver glimmered like fishes; in its centre, floating in light, were the flowers in the bowl of Dragon's Blood china.

These were dark irises native to the Syrian hills that saw the birth of the gods, silken and uncertain queens who went down into hell with Persephone and return each year to greet her, but only in her own birthplace, for ever hostile to the colder lands of younger divinities. But Peregrine had this autumn succeeded in growing them, and described his exploit to Bridget in the poetic terms, but without due acknowledgement, of Farrer's *English Rock Garden.*

She looked at them, sullen and irreconcilable in her exile as they. She was caught within the circle, but not of it. She bit her lips till they were scarlet to keep back tears or laughter that had nothing to do with what was there.

Peregrine, perceiving some part of the effect on her of his flirtation with Mrs. Van Leeren, was amused, then interested; he saw her for the first time divested of any association with her father; saw her passionate, absent, with the contained vitality of a young savage.

'She is like me,' he thought, and then remembered that she was twenty-one and he forty-seven, that his family, though never ill, were apt to die soon after fifty, that he who had always detested age, baldness, tolerance, false teeth, mildness, deafness, minor ailments, tepid enthusiasms, corpulence and scragginess, was now old, although he had none of these accompaniments. And his intolerable thirst for life made him feel parched and withered and a hundred years older than his age.

'So little left of life,' he told himself as he peeled one of his Têton de Venus peaches and heard Van Leeren extol its aromatic vinous flavour, a noble fruit, known to Merlet in the reign of Charles II, for it was Peregrine's pleasure to revive old fruits now rarely seen, but 'So little left of life,' he told himself as he tasted the fruit of his efforts. 'So little left to do with it.'

Bridget, he saw, though she was hungry, had in this mood no perception nor appreciation of what she ate, it might as well have been the cheese and cabbage she had at home. He envied her indifference, her scorn and impatience; and her youth.

"Oh, how can you! I hope Miss O'Farrell doesn't understand. I'm sure she oughtn't."

"Caviare, cream, and melted botter. You would not think it, no,

you would say it is too moch. But wait till I tell you what you must add——"

"I have not heard of his work."

"Gibbon missed a point. He should have traced a parallel between the growth of Christianity and the preference for sweet spice in cookery. Now a palate that cannot keep pace with a conscience——"

'Jabber, jabber, what *are* they saying? What would happen if I called out, "I hate you all"? I suppose I'd be sent back to-morrow, no, Mr. Sark might think it funny, and keep me as a specimen. I won't be a specimen. I won't be a blue-and-gold butterfly with a pin through me. Only she doesn't know he's got a pin through her. She thinks it's all because he likes her. He can't like her, he can't. Oh,' wailed Bridget to herself, 'why can't I be tiny and tinkly with a glittering frock?'

For the first time she watched Peregrine warm the great bowl of his brandy glass in his hand, and crackle a cigar like a Zeppelin beside his ear, with an awed perception that these must be the actions of a man of the world. Beside him Frank would be an unsophisticated schoolboy. But Frank wouldn't admire Pussy. Wouldn't he, though? How about the seal-headed girl? There was no chance for her anywhere.

They went into the hall.

"And now you will sing to us, won't you?" said Ella to Pussy, adding in her mistaken hopes of reconciliation, "Canon Goodchild will love to hear your songs."

"Oh no, not really? Freddy calls them cheap."

He said with shut eyes, "My dear Mrs. Van Leeren, I am sure that your songs like your clothes 'have their price.' "

Peregrine pulled him away. "Borgia! You've been waiting for that chance all through dinner. Is it your Christian humility that you think everyone worthy of your steel? She hasn't understood a word."

"You misjudge her. She had the grace to blush with becoming modesty."

"So you're appeased. If she had blushed with an unbecoming modesty, all over her nose as well as cheeks, a lot you'd care for that maidenly virtue!"

The two birds of a feather preened themselves and chuckled.

"Love me, loathe my friends," said Peregrine, "how you detest little Wem!"

"No more than he despises me."

"No more than he despises everyone and everything, except the sound of his own voice not talking."

"Ah," observed the Rector, "a young man so 'terribly at ease in Zion' that he can pretend not to be."

And he turned to blissful contemplation of Ella's flowers. Her hyacinth bulbs had bloomed very early this year; it was like spring in the drawing-room, and Ella herself like a branch of hollow silver honesty seeds left over from the winter decorations, she sat so still in that lovely room that had grown to be more alive than she.

Mrs. Van Leeren perched on the piano stool, she trilled and twittered and sang in a thin exquisite treble, clear and inhuman as a flute or a bird, the Wandering Indian Merchant's song from Sadko.

The languishing air had served as accompaniment to a tornedos Rossini that the Flemish giant had eaten at Monte Carlo. "I do not care for restaurant music," he said heavily to Peregrine, who agreed that no mingling of the arts could be successful. Van Leeren sighed.

"When I was young I used to stand in the threepenny gallery at good concerts. But now I find the stalls too oncomfortable."

They discussed the growing of Alfalfa grass for pasture in the Argentine, the roots grew thirty or forty feet deep and were independent of any drought.

"Here in England your farmers are at the mercy of chance."

"Chance has done me pretty well this year," said Peregrine, and at the same moment Ella answered Van Leeren, "Yes, it is a pity," rather surprisingly, for no one expected her to speak out of her turn.

Old Mrs. Crickle had got pneumonia in the recent early frost and might be dying by now, and yet had never sent up to the Red House for soups and flannels as she had always done before as soon as she started a bit of a cold. Ella had only heard of it this evening through a maid. They would be starting influenza in the village next. But Baby was exceptionally strong. Influenza and old Mrs. Crickle, some misunderstanding perhaps down in the village, the Red House might have offended and would never know how, so deep and

hidden were the workings of country minds, they knew things before they happened, so that Mrs. Crickle's avoidance of the Red House now appeared to her a foreboding. Her thoughts drifted sadly in the wake of that sighing, wandering, homesick tune.

She wished she were coming down to the white-and-gold drawing-room at home where she would be safe from fears and from disconcertingly barbaric visitors, and have nothing to attend to but her best-dressed doll and fragments from the unending history of lovely Aunt Adelaide. 'Nothing ever stays the same,' she said to herself.

Through the closed door of John's room had come a thread of song, so thin and long-drawn-out, from so far away, that it could only just reach his room and there fade into the darkness. Yet John, who was just dropping asleep, was drawn out of bed as though by strong cords, for he did not want to get out of his warm bed, and he was afraid to grope for the door handle lest he should put his hand on something that he did not expect to find, something alive and moving. But he had to follow that thread, for he thought that one of the gorgeous birds in the study curtains had opened its beak and was singing to him in a human voice.

He sat on the stairs with his head pressed against the banisters, he was quite awake now and knew that the voice unaccountably proceeded from the cackly lady with the yellow hair whom he had previously watched as she entered the house in a bundle of fur. Yet still he believed that by some stranger reality it issued from the beak of a tropic bird in a hot, dusky forest.

Some night he would go down into the study and see for himself; some other night, but not to-night; nor did he think out what it was in the study that he would see for himself, for it might have something to do with his father's new goddess who sat all alone on the chimney-piece, staring at everyone who came into the room but too grand to care about them.

Bridget had heard that tune on Frank's gramophone; they had danced to it all alone in the room. Frank had looked at her, his laughing face was grave, he bent his head, his lips met hers; locked together, they floated through space. Did he remember that now when he heard this tune? Or had he kissed another girl while dancing it?

The company round were happy and comfortable because they were old and could not feel. They had all married the people they

wanted, and for so long that it did not much matter whom they had married, all except the Rector, who had never wanted to marry anyone, and Mr. Wem, who did not count.

She slipped out through the French window on to the terrace where the moon shone full and bright. She tried to pretend that Frank was beside her. Would they ever marry? Not for years and years, not till long waiting had dulled their feelings. She could never feel again as she did now. But the moment was squandered on the empty moonlight.

Ella had noticed her go, thought the night air must be chilly, and whispered to Peregrine to find a wrap and take it out to her. He looked first through the drawing-room window, and where his shadow fell on the pane he had a glimpse of the world outside, bewitched out of its colours into a frozen stillness. He saw Bridget standing on the terrace with her back to him, her head upturned, her arms raised a little way before her, stiff and straight, with the palms upwards, in a strange, solemn gesture like a prayer. The red dress glowed a smoky blood colour against the moonlight.

The scene was enclosed in the lighted reflection of the drawing-room; Peregrine drew back, and now nothing could be seen on the dark glass but lamps and flowers and gleaming dresses and Van Leeren's hand moving in ponderous exposition.

He went into the hall and picked up a white Chinese shawl of Ella's that had been dropped on the hearth-stool, and then went out by a back way and along the grass path on the lower terrace so that Bridget should not hear him coming. She was still there, her arms hung stiffly down at her sides, her dress clung close about her, the moon, now full on her, stripped her of all colour, turned her stillness into that of a statue, looked on her with the same chill gaze that had looked in ages past on priest and human victim.

She stood above him for the youth of the world, of the gods. He remembered the terrible belief that has persisted down through the ages that the rape of a young virgin can renew a man's life. He walked up the steps to her and said, " My wife thinks you must be getting chilly. Will you wear this shawl, or are you coming in now?"

She said, "Oh, damn the shawl."

Then she remembered that she was the governess. But he did not. He swooped down on her, but instead of touching her, stared into her

face so that she fell back and began to stammer out, "That was rude—I'm sorry."

He drew back. She wondered if he did not hear her, if he were laughing, if it were the moonlight that made him look so strange; she found with amazement and terror that she was wanting him to put the shawl round her, to rest his hands on her shoulders, to swoop again upon her, but not again draw back. 'There's Frank,' she cried to herself, but where was Frank? Dancing with the seal-headed girl, kissing her, as she now wanted Mr. Sark to kiss herself.

He saw everything, he saw through her, his eyes were black caverns against the moonlight, but she knew the laughter was mounting in them, that flashing, formidable laughter. She ran along the terrace, down the slope at the far end and disappeared.

He stood looking after her. He dared not move. He said to himself several times, 'One does not seduce the governess.' He said it was lucky that she ran from him, but he did not think so, unless he could run after her. Women were made to be run after. They wished it. She had wanted him to kiss her. She was young and ardent, she was burning to waste in his empty house. He had been faithful to Ella all these years and it had not been worth while, she had not cared about it, she had sent him after Bridget with her shawl. He stared at the white silk in his hand. He forgot Ella. A nymph had run from him and left her garment in his grasp. Youth, love, life itself, had left him, and he dared not pursue them.

He laughed, and the sound was so strange that he said aloud, "What does Lord A. do next?" "Return to the house and tell his wife that the governess is taking sufficiently violent exercise not to require her shawl." But the conduct in etiquette books is not interesting. Why shouldn't he go after her? He still had the shawl as chaperon, he could say, 'Oh, Miss O'Farrell, I daren't face my wife with this,' but they had begun to call her Bridget, so perhaps Miss O'Farrell would look rather marked. 'Lord A. must not stand upon ceremony but be easy and affable with those beneath him.' Beneath him, indeed! The creature was wild but royal. What a neck she had, what broad, benignant brows.

He went to the end of the terrace, but compromised by walking. The scene round him was hollow, devoid of life or meaning. His ordinary self would go on talking, telling him that if he found her,

it would be difficult, most awkward, refusing to recognize this usurper that had risen in him, half beast, half god.

A young beech tree stood before him, spreading its branches against the sky. He had the fancy that Bridget had been here a moment ago, that she was here now, that had he been here a moment ago, he would have seen her turn into the young beech tree. He leaned his head against the cool rough bark.

All his plans and activities, 'the demonic energy' the Rector had praised, stretched before him as a string of futile devices to kill time.

> 'The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees
> Is left this vault to brag of.'

On his return to the house he told the Rector that the classic fables of pursuing satyrs, and nymphs transformed into trees, found their origin in the senile fancies of baffled dotards.

But when Bridget returned a few minutes later, he perceived a greater transformation, of the goddess, the victim and the nymph, into the awkward and contrite college girl who tried but did not know how to answer Ella's question if she were romantic.

## *Six*

✲

MISS MININGHAM had two windows.

One was in the church. The other looked on to the village street and there it was believed she sat all day concealed behind the lace curtains until she could enmesh the unwary passer-by in the web of her intricate and ceaseless conversation. Very and John would go miles out of their way to avoid the village street, it was so much quicker in the long run, for she was always offended if they were in a hurry, even if they told her the first gong must have gone hours ago.

She apparently never had meals herself and when they said so at home their mother said vaguely, "Poor thing, that is quite possible," which was just like Mother, for of course it was quite impossible, everyone had to have meals. Perhaps Miss Miningham had hers on

a tray in the window so that she should not miss even the barest chance of somebody going by, and indeed Very remembered that she had once said she liked "something on a tray," one of the few opinions with which she found herself in agreement, for it suggested that delicious treat, when one had a cold, of breakfast in bed with a poached egg.

Once every month they went to tea with her and it was extraordinary how often that day came round. Miss Miningham always suggested babyish games, not that Very and John minded playing Hunt the Thimble if she really wanted to do so, but it was obvious that she loathed it as much as they did, and yet if they went home a moment before they had to, or even changed the day, she would be dreadfully upset though she would pretend not to be, and would jerk back her head and say a lot of sentences ending with "But," or "Still," or "Even so."

"She is very fond of you, my dears, and that is why she minds."

That was what their mother said, who always made them remember some long and elaborate message that sounded like an excuse when she sent them down, as she was always doing, with fruit or pheasants from the Red House. And their father said, "She wants what you can't give and what she couldn't take if you could give it, but all the same she wants it. We all do."

"Wants *what*, Father?" For it couldn't be the pheasants or fruit, though Miss Miningham certainly seemed to have difficulty in taking them, and they had to repeat the message or excuse or whatever it was ten times over before she did.

"You'll know some day."

And at that he would become impatient and swing his hands about as though to brush away an invisible gnat that often appeared to hover above his head, humming and threatening to sting, or so one judged from his sudden look of annoyance and that hasty upward gesture. Bridget once laughed at him for it and asked if he had a bee in his bonnet, and he said of course, a whole hive, but none of them made any honey.

This last time at tea Miss Miningham kept bringing the conversation back to Bridget. It was a good thing of course to have anything to talk about, and one couldn't have a new governess as a subject every day, but "Even so." That was what Very said on the way home and John answered, "Still."

She had seen their dear father teaching her to ride; it was extraordinarily kind of him. Once, when things at home had been a little—well—difficult, she had taken a purely temporary post as a governess, in a friend's house of course, but no one had ever taken her for rides.

"Perhaps there weren't any horses," said John.

There were not, but it did not seem to appease Miss Miningham.

"And so you call her Bridget," she said, "that is very odd with a governess."

"She's not a bit like a governess," said John.

"Isn't she really? How very interesting. And what makes you say that?"

Very had kicked John under the table. She wished, as most people did, to be non-committal with Miss Miningham. So John tried to reprieve his error, whatever it was, and said, "Oh, I don't know. I expect she is really. She writes a lot too many letters anyway. They all do that."

"Really. A lot of letters. Too many——"

"I mean, when we want her to come and play, it's sickening if she will stick up there by herself writing away."

Somehow he and Very always wanted to run down the people they talked about to Miss Miningham. But Very's scowl did not reassure him. He wanted to howl, to break all the china on the table, to throw those nasty pink cakes out of the window. They were stale because the grocer only came out from Sherne twice a week. He was the smallest person in it but he felt three sizes too large for this crowded little room.

But Miss Miningham seemed content; she said, "Really. By herself. Writing away. Poor girl. I expect she feels lonely. But your parents like her very much, don't they?"

It wasn't fair. It was Very's turn. But she only stared at the window in her most uppish manner as if she scorned to notice anybody or anything in that beastly hole, although she took jolly good care to get the slice of cake with the candied peel on it.

So John had to plunge again and said, "Oh rather. Father says" —and stopped dead, because whatever it was Father had said, Very would tell him he had been a silly to give it away to Miss Miningham. And not all Miss Miningham's efforts could get it out of him, though

he became scarlet in the face and tried to pretend he had choked over a crumb, and finally upset his tea on purpose.

That caused a distraction all right. Miss Miningham was terribly disconcerted. Her best tablecloth. Such a pity Amy was not here: "it is so difficult to get accustomed to being without a maid," although she had been without one for thirteen years, so she certainly ought to have got accustomed to it; and she did not know where there was a duster, and she did not mind for herself, not the least little bit, but poor little Very's pretty frock, and really it did look as though John had almost meant to be so clumsy, and Very said, "Yes you did. You did it on purpose, you little beast," and John felt that after one more horrible full-to-bursting moment he would cry with rage, he, John, at eight years old, and scream out, 'Yes I did. I did it to stop you asking what Father said. And Cook said you are a prying old cat.'

But by a rigid fit of sulks he managed to preserve his silence and was rewarded by a merciful freak of providence which turned Miss Miningham's attention to the surprising fact of an artist at work on Gawcomb Mazzard Church. It had been too great a wealth of material to squander in conjunction with a new governess, for though there had been many alarums and excursions in his direction from her window she had not as yet really settled down to talk of him.

And then just as they had got really started and she had said quite mildly and good-humouredly but just a little bit playfully what a strange notion it was, but their father was such a clever man he must always be having notions, only this was really quite out-of-the-way and must cost a terrible lot of money, and though of course their father was so beautifully generous, such an example to everybody in that way, yet it did cost the village something too, as they spent their money on these bazaars and concerts that their father had got up to help the expenses, such a wonderful organizer, quite a village Napoleon she always said, and of course it was quite right that the village should help towards beautifying their own church, still everybody didn't always see quite alike in these matters and some people might think it was all just a little strange in a simple country church and she did hope it would not spoil it, the dear children would understand her anxiety as it was in such a very special, such a very sacred way, her own church; and here her voice dropped on to the funereal

note that she always reserved for these dark references to her father, the late Rector of Gawcomb Mazzard, to whom she never alluded openly, as though in dying thirty years ago of a bronchial chill at the age of eighty-three, he had done something so unforeseen, so unheard-of, as to make him for ever unmentionable.

So that after a reverential pause they had to start all over again, and then just as they were once more in full swing, and Miss Miningham had told them that she had once known a very interesting artist who had wanted to paint her portrait when she was a young girl, but she had had no time for such things then, there had been so many demands on her, but he was undoubtedly a very clever man and their dear father who knew all about such things was sure to know his name only at this moment she could not remember it, and of course in the past so many artists had done things in churches, but it seemed very strange to have one in Gawcomb Mazzard Church and she had thought him a peculiar-looking man—but here Very had a sudden access of affability, whether from a fevered determination to interrupt Miss Miningham, or from the simple desire to show off, John could not decide, but there she was giving away everything right and left in just the way that if it had been he, would have made her call him a silly little boy.

She actually gave away their own private name for Mr. Wem; Nanny and Young Bill the chauffeur and Old Williams the butler and Harold and Gilly the gardener's boys and Canon Chas. and old Mr. Mytton and Jenny Mytton and at least half a dozen of the village boys, all knew that they called him the Camel, because of the superior, sneering look of his long upper lip, but that was no reason why Miss Miningham should know it. You did not want Miss Miningham to know anything.

"So he is going to stay on at the Red House," said Miss Miningham, "but your dear father is always so hospitable. So many people. And that will be nice for Miss O'Farrell."

Whereupon Very threw away the last rags of decency and told Miss Miningham:

"Oh no, she doesn't like him."

"And he doesn't like her," shrilled John, who didn't see why he should be out of it in this orgy of indiscretion. "He said she wasn't pretty."

"John, he didn't! He said she was."

"Oh, did he? Well, it was the same thing. He said it sort of contumptuously."

"Con*tem*ptuously, silly."

They raced on, unheeding each other's side blows in the excitement of the gossip, which Miss Miningham swallowed in gulps, turning her head from one to the other.

"He is very cold and scornful."

"He speaks in a funny little wheezy voice."

"Father says he's got chilblains in the blood."

"He has hair growing down the sides of his cheeks."

"That's side whiskers. They are fashionable with artists," explained Very, and added hastily so as to keep her turn in the antiphony, "He is awfully tired."

But John had the last word.

"*I* think he is awfully tired on purpose."

Miss Miningham certainly had her fill of information. She seemed quite stuffed with it and unable to speak for some time beyond murmuring, "What an odd young man. Really. How very." And then began something about pictures in church distracting one's attention and she did hope.

But at that moment a barking of dogs and a great robust voice came crashing in through the window, breaking up all the twittering tinkling little noises of teacups, and of the chirping fluttering bird in the window, and of Miss Miningham.

"How jolly you look in there," said their father. "I recognize your special brand of pink cakes, Miss Miningham. Can I come in and have one?"

So in he came and the spaniels were left outside, George Eliot jumping up with his paws on the window-sill and the puppy, Maggie Tulliver, yapping below, for they had got their names regardless of sex on account of their ringleted ears and long, solemn, Victorian faces.

The room seemed at once a great deal smaller and more crowded, and as for Miss Miningham, she shrank till she was nearly as small as the bird, chirping and fluttering and hopping about from perch to perch, while he towered above them all on the hearthrug and ate two and even three of the nasty cakes and said they never got anything like that at home, which was quite true, and admired a flower painting that Miss Miningham's mother had done as a girl and asked how

it was she had never shown him that before, and told them about the church and how fast and splendidly Mr. Wem was getting on with the frescoes he was painting there of the life and death of John Barleycorn, for that was what the children called them, only the children. It was really a very sacred subject, the life of the grain from a seed in the earth to its harvest, showing in parable the Christian belief in resurrection and the future life.

"Parables are very," murmured Miss Miningham, none could say whether in approval or the contrary.

He asked almost diffidently if she didn't think it a good idea to do something for the church. Miss Miningham did; as one who had done something for the church herself, she had to concede the point; you could not but feel however that in her thoughts, as in the Squire's, there was a world of difference between the window she had put up to her father's memory, and the frescoes that were now sprouting so surprisingly on the walls of the church.

At her sidelong reference to her window, something seemed to flash and take fire between them. The little room was changed, it had become a battlefield.

The Squire spoke urbanely of the beauty of old glass, the pity it was that for the last three centuries it had been a lost art.

He was leading an attack; the children shivered and felt miserable, something bad was coming, yes, here it was:

"Even that beautiful window, Miss Miningham, to your father——"

"The very best glass now made," said Miss Miningham stiffly, for in her sight thirty years were but as yesterday, and glass might improve or decline but none could be better than the glass she had given her father.

"Now, yes," said the Squire's voice, pleasantly sympathetic. "But think what it would have been if you had had the glass of fourteenth-century Florence to make yours a window into heaven."

But Miss Miningham was obstinately refusing to think, and Very did not blame her. She was in an agony of nervousness as to what her father might say next. Their mother said there was only one thing that mattered in manners, never to hurt anyone's feelings. Why did he do it?

John too was uncomfortable though without knowing why, except

that Miss Miningham had gone stiff and prickly. He wished he hadn't upset his tea on purpose over her best table-cloth.

And Father was funny, all sparkling and dangerous.

But the next moment they felt happy again, for Peregrine, without changing the subject, was telling them the story of another window, a fourteenth-century piece of Flemish glass which he had seen just lately. "Saint Bernard of Cluny you know was a sound working saint. He was dictating a letter to his secretary out of doors when it came on to rain, so instead of troubling to go in, he just ordered a miracle, and the tree-topped mound on which they sat remained in sunshine, while the storm raged all round them. There they are for all time in that mysterious darkness lit with gold and purple; blue-black clouds and sepia rain all round—in the background, a monastery the colour and almost the size of a mulberry, and in front, under a little golden tree, two brown monks, one of them with a ferocious and admonitory gleam in his eye. The weather knew its job when Saint Bernard was around."

"Oh, Father, I wish you were Saint Bernard."

"Then it needn't ever rain at the Red House."

"Can we see the window? Wouldn't you like to, Miss Miningham?" in eager propitiation from Very.

Yes, Miss Miningham was graciously amused at the quaint old fable, so strangely Pagan some of those Early Fathers, so *very* strange the Anglo-Catholics could hold to them as they did, as for the Romans they were of course frankly heathen, she so well remembered a very interesting answer in a very interesting old Sunday book she had had as a child, she wondered if the dear children might like to borrow it for a Sunday book. ("Oh, *rather*," they asserted with overdone cordiality.) One of the children in the book—it was called *The Fairchild Family*, she now remembered—had asked, "What are Roman Catholics, Mamma? Are they Christians?" and Mrs. Fairchild had answered, "Roman Catholics, my dear, are *called* Christians, but." At least that was all Miss Miningham could remember of the answer, but she was sure it was very interesting.

They were all almost unnaturally affable, for there was still that sense of steel and sparks in the air, but the sparks had been smothered and the steel hidden, and the Squire wanted her to come with them to see the artist at work on one particular thing before the daylight faded, but she wouldn't, no, she really wouldn't, she thanked him

very much but she did not think. That is she had not intended to go out again this evening, it was extremely kind of Mr. Sark but on the whole.

So with a great deal of expostulation and repetition they managed to get through the door, and when at last Miss Miningham had shut it, she congratulated herself on her firmness in not going with them, for she had been sure that it was better not, she had an instinct in these matters, a *savoir-faire*, and this consoled her for the fact that the children had been carried off at least an hour before their usual time, that she had missed the opportunity to tell Mr. Sark about the friend of Mr. Ruskin's who had praised that flower painting of her mother's, and that she could not be sure whether she had not once, or possibly even twice before, brought it in, though quite carelessly and naturally, that her grandfather had been mentioned in one of Nelson's despatches. In talking with a man of the world like Mr. Sark she might perhaps be a little over-anxious to show that though she was no doubt what people called an old maid, and led a very quiet life now, yet she also had had her links with it. Still she did hope.

For the Squire was a most charming man, though perhaps a little. And just lately perhaps a little more. Or was it that the other people she watched from her window were different? That they had not talked for a moment after he had gone by, that there had been perhaps something sullen, even suspicious, in the way they looked after him as he went swinging past them on foot, clattering past on horseback, whizzing past in the car? Yet he was always so kind, most generous, they could have no reason to fear him. But his eyes had glowed so when he spoke of that foolish fable of Saint Bernard; or was it when he spoke of the window of it that he had discovered? He was always discovering things, it was a pity, she was sure his wife would like it better if it did not do it so much.

Her hopes were changed to fluttering fears for which she had to find a name, so she wondered if the dear children had enjoyed their little treat as much as usual, in spite of poor little John's naughty clumsiness, and perhaps if she went on having them to tea she would get to know them really well so that they would come and tell her their little troubles, only unfortunately—no, of course she did not mean unfortunately, she could not think why such a word had slipped into her head, but they did seem to be remarkably happy children,

and very, very spoilt, it was that that was unfortunate. Perhaps when they were older, or perhaps if there were a fire at the Red House and they were brought in to her nearly dead from the shock, and her resourceful and tender care would save their lives, or perhaps that sweet girl Miss O'Farrell, for there was something very sweet about her if only she were not always half-smiling which made her look too well pleased with herself, but perhaps one day she would come running in all pale and distraught: 'There is only one thing I can do now, I must kill myself,' and after great patience and kindness she would induce the poor child to tell her that the Squire—but here Miss Miningham recognized in time that her desire to render service was carrying her beyond the bounds of taste and discretion.

## *Seven*

✲

OUT in the village street Very and John at once began to shout and jump with the spaniels and throw sticks for them with much more noise than usual. "Geor*gina!*" they yelled. "Here, Maggie, here! Jump for it!" and they tugged at their father's arm and told him to race them to the church, and he had to tell them twice over to look back and wave to Miss Miningham at the window, and by the time they did so she had gone.

"Oh, never mind," cried Very, who had bothered quite enough about Miss Miningham for one day. "Father, what is it? You've got a plan, I know you've got a plan. Is that why you came for us?"

Yes, he had got a plan, but he would not tell them. They would know some day. It was always old Some day.

"A lovely plan?"

"A lovely plan. A wish come true, at least it will. Look, there's Canon Chas. Let's catch him before he goes in. Hi! Rector!"

"Canon Chas.!" they called.

Canon Goodchild was shambling into the Rectory gate with his head down, for he was writing something on the back of an envelope and looking so little where he was going that it was wonderful he

found his way through his gate at all. They shouted to him to come and look at the paintings.

He had not had his tea yet, only a cup at old Mrs. Keevil of the Steps up over yonder at the Long Leaze, which didn't count, for her tea was as strong as death, as red as blood, and as sweet as treacle, and the Rector took his tea seriously. Yet he came along too, murmuring something obscure about berries, and speaking of berries, he had never seen anything like the blackberries in their shrubbery, they were suffering from swelled heads this year and fancying themselves as plums.

"My Lucretias," murmured Peregrine tenderly, and reminded the Rector that those jet black and shining berries had originally come from West Virginia in the 'seventies.

The Rector nodded. Virginia had doubtless been discovered three centuries previously so that the Squire's blackberries should draw an alpha plus.

"Why don't you plant trees?" he asked, "oaks and cedars? It is soothing to the restless and irritable vanity of man and teaches him to take long views," and here he shut his eyes altogether and then opened them very brightly, as he always did when saying something scathing, for he knew that it was impossible to Peregrine to plant trees for those who would live after him and would not even know he had planted them.

All the time the Rector talked he went on jabbing at the envelope in his hand with a stump of pencil and looking at it over his spectacles, which by some accident had just managed to remain perched on the extreme end of his nose.

"I am writing a poem," he explained, "on a subject suggested by a learned friend," and here he bowed to one of the group, they could not be sure which.

"Who—who—who's your learned friend?" sang John lustily, dancing round him.

"One who informed me for the first time of the name of those little pink berries that dangle on short sticks up on the hills, by complaining that she had squashed a bilberry on her Burberry."

"*Me!*" cried Very. "*I'm* the learned friend!" Her pleased pride was so great that he forgot his regret that she was not a pretty little girl. Her mother he admired faithfully, for she had been lovely when he first knew her, and was always cool, gracious and benign; aloof,

as he liked women to be, for he did not want them to come too near and bother him; he disliked being bothered with personalities, and his parishioners did it far too much.

He rather unreasonably would have liked Very to be benign and gracious too, instead of gauche, sprawling, and sometimes rather rude or at least abrupt in her Latin lessons with him. When he was displeased with her he sometimes paid her mother compliments through her, and she vaguely perceived and resented his intention, which he invariably regretted.

It was to make amends now for some such shadow on that morning, that he had written his poem on her harmonious phrase, "A Bilberry on my Burberry," and now read it aloud with many false starts, fresh fixings of spectacles, and pauses to explain a Latin tag, a quotation, or to suggest an emendation.

It sealed their peace. Arm in arm he and Very followed the others into the church, disregarding the frenzied outcry of Georgina and Maggie, abandoned by human caprice.

There the Camel sat crouched on his high stool with his face to the wall, and before him the wall was blank and cold, but behind him there had sprung up a gay arabesque of vine-scrolls that kept breaking out into flowers and fruit and even faces, some lovely and calm as flowers and some queer and goblin as though the intricate maze were making faces at them. There were two pictures already, one of thick woolly sleepy sheep, and one of a pear tree in blossom patterned against an old red wall. It was all woven, spider-like, out of the vitals of the little hunched creature on the stool, who now turned round from the end of his miraculous web and sat blinking at them through the darkening church with heavy, leathern-lidded eyes.

John, having heard his father talk of him as a new man, had been surprised at first by his appearance, which was far from fresh.

Bridget was there too, for she had brought him his tea which he did not appear to have touched. She had wrapped an old French peasant's cape round her that had belonged to her father, and her hair looked unusually bright against its shabby black hood.

Peregrine laughed at Mr. Wem, asking him what he had eaten to-day, for he had not come in to lunch; no, he thought not, he had not wasted one gleam of the daylight in eating; but he must not be a fool and work himself to death.

But he could not work fast enough for Peregrine, who saw the

shapes and colours so clearly before they came that the blank part of the wall hurt his eyes with a sense of physical shock. Since he could not paint it himself, David Wem must paint it for him, faster and faster.

Those sheep were good, the thickness of them, and the blackness of those trees, heavy, satisfying, something to get your teeth into. He contemplated them in unaccustomed silence. O'Farrell would have got more into the pear tree. Wem should have seen it as it had blossomed in the Red House garden last spring, as it would be next spring, yes, it would be better next spring, it would have swollen bunches of blossom like hydrangeas or white cabbages, and behind them leaves superbly dark and glossy, like black and white enamel, like jewel work, like thick, encrusted Chinese embroidery. Even the kidney beans beneath it would be three times their usual size, the leaves flapping like elephants' ears.

He said, "A modern philosopher has defined the desire for immortality as the desire to grow immeasurably fat," and sighed, for he was as thin as a husk and felt himself as empty. His pear tree must grow fat for him.

Mr. Wem whispered wearily, "I suppose you mean Bertie."

Mr. Wem knew everyone who was a philosopher or politician or artist or writer or thinker, or rather, everyone whom he counted as such, which did not mean that his acquaintance was at all wide. It was in fact limited to a part of London that Peregrine had referred to, in Wem's absence from lunch, as Gloomsbury.

"Where's that, Father?"

"It is a circle, my fair child, composed of a few squares where all the couples are triangles."

"Perry dear, what *are* you saying?"

The children could not understand, but there was Miss O'Farrell; and you never knew with girls. But since the day when he had seen through Ella, she had been far too light to act as a brake.

Everybody had felt easier because Mr. Wem was not there. They had been led to expect someone very clever, but they did not know that when you were as clever as all that, it was no longer the thing to be clever.

Mr. Wem was so carefully simple that he often sounded quite silly, and it was difficult to know whether he meant to be funny and when you ought to laugh, for he never laughed himself.

He thought Miss Miningham "a very interesting person," and was

anxious to go and have tea with her. (They were made for each other, Peregrine had said at lunch.)

The most living thing in his life was his admiration of O'Farrell's only half-fulfilled genius. In O'Farrell's life-time, as his pupil, it had amounted to devotion.

Since then he had followed thinner gods, or spectres that he took for gods, and found himself a lesser artist than he had thought. He had abandoned the technique he had learnt from O'Farrell and had experimented in most modern variations but in none to his satisfaction. He had been a Cubist, a Futurist and a Sur-réaliste, he had written *vers libre* and edited an art paper which had just missed the fame of being suppressed, and died instead of inanition. He had experimented in black magic, vice, Roman Catholicism and psychoanalysis and abandoned them all as equally childish. He never drank nor smoked, and his furnished lodgings in London were hideous because everything was equally bad nowadays, and it was not worth while to try and aim at anything else.

For several years he had failed to enjoy a sad attachment to an elderly poetess who was engaged in one of the three-cornered ménages to which Peregrine had referred in geometrical terms. She had once been noted for her wit and her statue-like beauty, but having reached the *ne plus ultra* of these as of all else, her grey hair hung in wisps across her grey furrowed face and she talked, if at all, of her children or the servants, quoting little things they said with humorous intention though with no display of it. It was from Mrs. Mangan that David Wem had learnt to be monotonous and monosyllabic, for he was terrified of boring her, he knew there was unceasing supervision behind that quiet exterior, and that anything effective or 'brilliant' would rouse her criticism to merciless activity.

Sitting by her side, evening after evening, watching her in her dingy gown and thick black laced-up shoes, he had learnt to eliminate from his life everything that most men consider makes life worth living.

Into the dusty north light of his studio a tall stranger had crashed one day, full of the fact that his stockbroker's office was open when Harrods had shut. He could not satisfy his children's demand for more gramophone records, or that of his female dependants for more silk next the skin. So he had bought instead a thousand shares in Columbias and a thousand in Courtaulds.

Not till he had explained all this did he lay before Wem his scheme that he should paint some frescoes in a remote country church, on condition that he should do it in his earlier manner, "when," as the emphatic stranger bluntly put it, "you were under O'Farrell's influence."

"That may not be possible," said Wem. "He is dead."

But all that the Philistine would say was, "Come to Gawcomb Mazzard and see."

David Wem came, and found it more possible than he had thought. He had long wished to return to that earlier manner; he found to his surprise that he could, and with more conviction than he had ever shown except at the height of his achievement under O'Farrell. He explained it to himself at first by saying, 'There is now a demand for it,' and that the least commercial of artists can respond to that stimulus.

The demand was stronger than he had thought, it came from all round him, from the fertility and beauty of the gardens at the Red House, from the rapid florid talk of its master, the urgency that he conveyed into all his schemes, his furious visual sense of all that Wem was to do.

He lay awake at night seeing against the darkness the pictures he was to paint; overhanging cornshocks, vehement branches like outstretched arms, the black, fecund earth between the ploughshares, upturned to receive new seed. These images were not merely of what he had seen since his coming into the country; they seemed always to have lain deep at the back of his mind, and were now by some quickening power warmed, and forced up into his consciousness: nor was this all; he discovered that they were not part of him, but he of them; he saw his fields and fruit trees from the inside, and with a sudden violence of vision, as though his life had entered into theirs.

Where did it all come from? he asked of this life that was stronger than any he had known before in himself; that was all round him as well as in himself; flowing through the very house, making of him a ceaseless hurrying demand.

What was he to do with it? What had he come for? But the answer to that last was simple; he had come here to paint the frescoes that O'Farrell would have painted had he lived.

"Are you asleep or awake, O'Farrell?" came into his head one night just as he was falling asleep, so that he sat up with a start and

did not know what had wakened him; and then remembered his own fancy, and wondered for a moment if the house were haunted, but not with any dead, forgotten ghost; rather with a presage of new life, a magical fruition.

He never felt tired now; the place must be extraordinarily healthy, giving his body an unusual vigour to cope with that demand on it. Even his nerves must be stronger. He did not even feel irritated when the Squire came and played Mæcenas over him in the church, showing off his work to his children and to that absurd old piece of pedantic vanity, his Rector, as though they were all equally his property. His work did not suffer, it seemed even to benefit from the Squire's presence, and he felt a revival of that inspiration, the power to see what he was to paint, that O'Farrell had always given him.

So that when Bridget asked if he did not mind their breathing down the back of his neck, he replied, "You do not breathe to my detriment," and never noticed that while happily engrossed he had used a half-crown word where a sixpenny one would do.

Bridget held a letter in her hand under the folds of her cloak; she turned it over, feeling the thin foreign envelope, the stamp, the firmly closed flap. Everything she had written in it was so vivid in her mind that it was strange the words did not show through the cloak. It was the loveliest letter she had ever written to Frank, and though to-day's post had gone, yet she would post it now, at once and irrevocably, so that whatever happened to change her mind in the next twenty-four hours—though what could happen to change it? Nothing in the world could change what she had written. But whatever happened, or could not happen, Frank would still have it, and nothing could change that, not even the unknown girl who far away in another country breathed to her detriment; not even the ever-present, insistent image of an elderly, laughing cynic.

She went out of the church and the last of the daylight went with her.

David Wem had begun to pack up his paints.

The Rector had not known what to say to his painting, and Wem condemned the poor man of storing up the word, 'modern.' But Canon Chas. was attending to a more important matter; he was listening seriously to John, who was complaining that someone called James had not paid them a call for ages now.

"Well, he's getting a very old gentleman and he detests boys. I

know that you, John, have always revered him as he deserves, but now your Airedales have started puppies, what can you expect? Maggie was bad enough. Just listen to her—I mean him, outside."

"James does dribble so," complained Very.

"He does even that majestically. And he has lost his small side teeth," the Rector added sympathetically.

John took up the defence, he said that James was a splendid hunter still, he could catch big rats and the moor-hens off the pond, and he followed the Rector into the vestry with an account of James' latest exploit.

"Who is James?" asked Wem sadly.

Peregrine told him he was a magnificent old whiskered guardsman, transformed, at the moment of dressing for dinner, to a huge black cat, and retaining even in that guise his spotless white shirt front and gloves.

"He put up at the Red House for some years," he said, as he climbed up and measured the lamentable Late Victorian window for what he now remarked must be the seventh time, "we did him very well, but he was bored by John's slavish efforts to ingratiate himself, he missed the impersonal calm of his club, and deciding that a bachelor's quarters would suit him better, he moved to the Rectory."

'Ungrateful old beast,' thought Very, who took a moral view of the universe. She did not say it aloud for some instinct told her that her father had not noticed she had stayed behind when John went into the vestry, and she wanted to know what he was doing with that window. She did not like his standing up there on the stone window sill; he looked so tall, his outstretched arms sprawling against it with his measuring rule, like a great bat. It was dark all round him, but the coloured light through the thin glass turned his crisp red hair into orange and blue flames.

"Yes," he said. "It'll have to have a border of plain glass to make the Saint Bernard long enough, but it need not spoil the proportions if it is wider at the top than at the bottom. An amber tinted glass do you think, Wem? No, the sunlit tree must be the one golden thing in the window, of course. Mulberry then, I think, the same colour as the monastery in the background."

David Wem looked up at him from under his eyelids.

"You will not get it," he said.

"What then do you advise?"

"What you wish. But you will not get it."

Peregrine's hearty crack of laughter sounded strange in the dim church.

"Don't be too sure. Modern glass is not what it was thirty years ago. There's a new process they've discovered in Vienna, I may run over and see. I think I shall get what I wish."

"But that's Miss Miningham's window," said Very.

Yes, they had forgotten she was standing there behind them. Mr. Wem started, but her father only grinned down on her from his height.

"She is a delightful old lady," he said, "she will be reasonable. One cannot have the church defaced for ever because her father died a natural death at the age of eighty-three."

"But it's her window."

She was an obstinate child, but Peregrine was as always good-humoured.

"It will be all right. Don't talk about it to her or anyone else till I have done so. You can keep a secret, I know." He had jumped down and put a hand on her shoulder in confiding good fellowship.

Her look of pride satisfied him, and he continued: "Don't you think it a lovely plan to have Saint Bernard there?"

But it couldn't be a lovely plan for Miss Miningham. She did not know what to say, but it was her father's plan and his secret, and at that moment the Rector and John came back from the vestry and she only remembered that she knew what they did not. Her superiority made her feel very benign and gracious to the Rector; it was a pity he could not recognize it.

He proudly told her father that the amount from the last bazaar was the unprecedented sum of £750, and that everything turned to gold under his Midas touch. "Not," he added with gentle malice, "that that proved an unmixed blessing. It seldom does when the gods take sides."

"It suits a Christian to say so," replied the Squire. "Have I ever properly shown you my goddess? For all we know, it may have been her temple that was once on this very site. There's the Roman altar in the crypt and Cybele was a favourite goddess. It's in her honour you know, Rector, that I've decorated the church."

Canon Goodchild smiled amicably back at this counter thrust.

"The gods," he said, "are what we choose to make them. The church has good reason to thank you for what you have made of the Cybele."

His simple gratitude irritated Peregrine. He recognized in it a beauty that nothing he himself said or did could ever possess. Since he could not have nor use it, he wished in that moment to destroy it, to blot out the admiring friendliness from the Rector's face.

Goodchild was too complacent, he believed in everybody because it kept him comfortable to do so. He would like to tell him of the price he had paid for the Cybele in O'Farrell's death; yes, and Wem too, that poor insipid piece of modern grey matter, an empty bladder blown up only with O'Farrell's genius.

He said, "Come into the study, both of you."

He knew as he spoke that of course he could not tell them that story; he could never tell it.

## *Eight*

✲

IN the churchyard the darkening evening air struck sharp and autumnal with a taste of mist in it, and a smell of wet leaves and of distant bonfires and of a drove of cows that were slowly squelching their way down the muddy lane into the hill field, which looked like a great crouching beast, black against the pale sky.

As the Squire's party came through the lych-gate in riotous reunion with the spaniels, they saw Bridget hurrying down the lane with her dark cloak held tight round her. They called to her, and Peregrine ran after her to ask her to come with them, for he was going to show Mr. Wem his Cybele. She replied something confused about going to the post, at which Very and John shrieked in expostulation that the post had gone years ago, that it would not go again till half-past four to-morrow afternoon, so what on earth could be the point of going now to the post? And their father asked her something, low and smiling.

But whatever she answered them could not be heard, for she did not even turn her head as she called back to them, and in another

moment she was nothing but a shadow, flitting away into the deep darkness of the lane.

She went into the village street where the rain puddles gleamed like silver, and the voices of children calling to each other at their play, and of a dog growling, and of a cow lowing on a soft sorrowful note, sounded remote as though the dusk had muffled them, together with the huddled shapes of the cottages, in a velvet pall.

She stood in front of the pillar-box in the village shop for about five minutes; sometimes her hand went up to it and was withdrawn; once she held it there almost inside the slit, but all the time Mr. Sark's question at the lych-gate echoed in her mind, low and teasing. He had said, 'Are you in such a hurry to jog Fate's elbow?'

She was afraid to do that, as when she had been five years old and afraid to ask Father Christmas for the present she most wanted. No, she would not post her letter now, it was silly since it could make no difference.

She pulled back her hand and slipped the letter inside her pocket and then looked up and saw the shining eyes of a little girl who was watching her from a cottage doorway quite near.

There was firelight in the cottage, and a smell of woodsmoke and strong tea came out through the open door, and the sound of a baby whimpering; and then someone came and put a red lamp on the table and the shape of the little girl and her round head at once became much darker and more sharply cut against the light, and her pinafore and her pointed face a dimmer white. But Bridget could still see the eyes that watched her with an intent and frightened interest.

She went up to her and said, "Good evening. It's Jenny Mytton, isn't it?"

Very, in a rare outbreak of disloyalty, prompted by a desire to be worldly and knowing, had blurted out to her John's secret admiration for Jenny Mytton, and that of late he had been perplexed and troubled because she seemed to avoid him.

The little girl backed further into the doorway and did not answer. Yes, it was Jenny Mytton, but why did Jenny not answer her, and why did Jenny look at her with those startled, questioning eyes? Did Jenny know something of her that she herself did not know? She felt that she was someone in a story, and Jenny knew a little of the story but she herself did not.

She walked away, slowly now and hesitatingly, as if there were

nowhere now for her to go, and so drifted across the lane and into the hill field where the yearling calves had been pastured, and so down to the little wood where the stream ran through, but now it was only an invisible murmur in the darkness among the trees.

She told herself that if Frank did not love her she could not live; but it was not his face that had come into her mind, it was Mr. Sark's face, laughing at her.

"Oh, Heaven, what am I to do?" she whispered to the stream, but she was not thinking of what she said; it had floated into her head from a story she had been reading to the children, and as in the story the stream seemed to answer her:

'Alas, alas, if thy mother knew it,
Sorely, sorely her heart would rue it.'

'But if only Frank were here,' she thought, 'I know it would be all right.'

She turned and hurried out of the wood on to the open hillside. The grass was drenched with dew, the sky was pale, streaked with black and silver; the calves stood still, their shapes were humped and angular as if made of wood under their rough fur, their large eyes shone, looking at her as Jenny Mytton had looked, startled and shy, at a being of an alien race.

'Kneel, little calf, kneel.
Be faithful and leal,
Not like Prince Fickle
Who once on a time
Left his fair Helena
Under the lime.'

It was a silly rhyme, she had not meant to think of it.

She went in by the garden gate and across the lawn. The study curtains had not been drawn and from the study windows shone firelight and the shaded light of electric lamps. To look into the room was like looking into a fire opal. Three dark shapes moved about in it, bending or uplifting their heads to look at things.

The three men were performing acts of worship, and one was high priest expounding his divinities. She saw him take the lamp and an object from the chimney-piece and place them on a very low table,

and then the three heads bowed themselves low over it, and three monstrous shadows bobbed up against the wall and shot over the ceiling. They drew apart and now there appeared the shadow of what the Squire had placed on the table.

The dim outline of a throne rose up against the wall, and above the throne the high crown of flowers on the goddess, who was now life-size in the shadow. As the object was slowly lifted from the table, two vast shadows of hands appeared against the wall on either side of it, enclosing it, owning it, clutching it.

## *Nine*

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THERE was a letter from Frank on Bridget's plate at breakfast next morning. She had known all along it would be all right. Now she could wait to enjoy her letter in peace and quiet when breakfast was over. This confident serenity lasted as long as the first cup of coffee; then she decided she would just glance through it to see if Frank knew yet how long they would be stationed at Gib. She could see there was nothing about the seal-headed girl, that must be all over, but it did not seem to be about anything in particular, it was apparently a "talky" letter such as Frank very seldom wrote, and then not at all like this.

For the letter was so brisk and assured and sensible and man-of-the-worldly that it vaguely disconcerted her as though he had put her in her proper place, and she was not quite sure where that was, but found it an uncomfortable position. She did not see why Frank should assure her of her common sense and her enlightenment and her general broadmindedness. They were not qualities in her that had previously impressed him. Not that he said much about her or about him; it was all unusually abstract and might have been a dissertation on the Duties of a Young Man to Himself. It expounded that a fellow could never be any good in the world until he had Knocked About a Bit, that one could justly estimate the value of Real Love only when one had tried something of Other Things, which were of no value and importance in themselves, but helped one to Under-

stand. That it was a great mistake to let Some Things stand in the way of Other Things and waste one's Opportunities, since every sane and reasonable person naturally wanted to get Everything Out of Life.

Bridget stared at these remarkable statements and then across the table as though to discover there any solution to them. She met Mr. Sark's eyes and felt that they had not swerved from her since she had opened her letter. She had grown to fear that gift in him that had first attracted her, of understanding what one did not say. But at this moment it was she who understood, for the exact words that he would say if he read her letter, flashed into her mind as though she heard him say them and heard him laughing as he spoke.

Breakfast was over and she ran upstairs to say it herself, and so for a few minutes showed the common sense that had been credited to her, though it was not hers.

She enclosed Frank's letter in a paper wrapper and labelled it "Confession of First Infidelity. New Style." Then after some furious and grinning nibbling at her pencil she added as a footnote, "What about me? I suppose I'm to knock about too?" and began to sing a low song of Marie Lloyd's she had heard Mr. Sark sing, "I'm one of the ruins that Cromwell knocked a—bout a bit." That cheered her up, she felt reckless and dashing and almost as much a woman of the world as Frank had asked her to be.

She put the package into an envelope, addressed it to him, stamped and closed it so firmly that the table shook, her grin gaping wider and wider until it became the open-mouthed grimace of a child that is just about to break into a prolonged howl, and then broke, not into a howl, but into a sudden smarting rush of tears interspersed with a few sobbed-out names for Frank, of which the kindest was, "Faithless beast," and the worst was "Smug selfish prig."

She knew she ought to have posted her letter last night but she had not done so, and now it would never go, and Frank would never read all those lovely things she had written, they were all wasted, and this made her tears flow more bitterly than for any other cause.

Her agony lasted till lesson time, when she washed her face and stalked into the schoolroom with an unnaturally severe expression, which however wore off before it could have its effect, for Very and John were conveniently late. They said their father had kept them, he wanted them to have a half-holiday as it was such a fine day; they

were all to ride up to the Devil's Chair and they would start directly after lunch.

He had done this for her; it was not true then that men were all alike and he also a selfish beast. This so cheered her failing belief in human nature that when lessons were over she looked at her wrapper, laughed, thought it 'a shame,' tore it off, told herself that she was a jealous cat for grudging Frank his good time, that she herself would love to be dancing every night while men with sleek heads made love to her, that Frank had treated her as a True Friend and that if she were not Enlightened and Broadminded she would let him down and make him feel it was better to deceive her.

There was no time to write anything else, and she suddenly decided to send the lovely letter after all, as though she had posted it last night before receiving his. She would post it herself when she came in from the ride, for she was shy of leaving too many letters to Gibraltar on the hall table.

Ella never rode now, and did not think she would join them in the car, though perhaps she might come up at tea-time if the clouds held off and she had finished in time.

"Finished what? The things you do are never finished," Peregrine said in an exasperated tone so that Bridget could not but feel he was sometimes rather rude to his wife. But he added, " 'Never finished, for always in absolute beauty there is something beyond the reach of art,' " and though she did not quite see what he meant, yet it sounded charming, and his smile showed that intention; but Ella, who recognized in it his satisfaction at having used a favourite quotation, did not take the compliment to herself.

It was a lovely picnic. On the way there they rode races, they were robbers and runaway princesses, and though Very also expressed a sudden and unaccountable determination to be Little Lord Fauntleroy and give up her pony to a cripple boy who wasn't really a cripple at all but had corns from wearing his brother's boots which he had probably stolen, but it evidently made her feel just as noble, yet their concerted efforts did in time get her over this fit of virtue, and the untoward incident cast no more than a passing shadow.

Miss Miningham at her window in the dusk heard a clatter of hoofs and voices calling and children's shrill laughter. She saw their dark shapes riding home at a gallop, the children well ahead for they had been given a start, then the tall lean form of their father, his head

turned, looking back and laughing, and then the girl, hatless, her long hair loose and blowing in a cloud about her face which was tilted upwards like a crescent moon in the dusk.

They went past Miss Miningham's window and never turned their heads to see if she were looking out, but perhaps they thought it was too late for her. They went past her and up the road to the Red House where she could no longer see them, but she could see the lighted windows of the Red House high above the trees, red with firelight, and then there was a noise of dogs barking in welcome and presently more windows lit up in the Red House and then there was silence.

The Red House felt very warm after their ride so that the blood rushed to their faces, tingling as with a sudden new access of life. Peregrine told them to come into the study and get warm. The fire roared and crackled its welcome almost as noisily as the dogs in the yard had done just now. The room was so bright that there was no need for a lamp. The goddess sat there waiting for them; the children turned away from the fireplace, but the room was full of her.

Peregrine drew the curtains, shutting out the thin grey darkness. The tropical forest that now grew at that end of the room quivered and glowed as the light of the flames leaped on it. John, staring at it, dazzled, thought that the flowers looked as though they were actually growing on the waving branches, and there was a plum with a velvety bloom that made him long to stroke it; if he did, he might perhaps put his hand all round it and feel it soft and firm and plump between his fingers. Unobtrusively, so that no one should see, he took the curtains in his hands. They were only folds of thick stuff in his hands, but supposing one day they really came alive just as they now seemed about to do?

Which was the bird that had sung to him in a human voice, that night when he had sat on the stairs and listened to a tune so strange and lovely that ever since, although he had forgotten all about it, he had felt homesick for a land he had never seen? One night he would follow that thin melody into a hot dusky forest where no one had ever gone before.

Very stood firmly on the rug with her back to him and her legs wide apart, eating peppermints which he hated because they made his mouth cold, but the room did not smell of peppermint, it was too full of the smell of burning pine logs.

He saw his father's face, suddenly, as he had seen the plum in the curtains, as though it had just come alive. It was turned sideways to him, looking at Bridget, and John saw it hatchet-shaped, dark against the light, talking, talking, talking as usual. John did not hear a word he said, and he had the idea that his father did not hear what he was saying either; his face was intent and greedy as though he too were staring at a plum that he wanted to pick.

John felt tired and oppressed, he wanted to get out of the study, he wished Very would come along too but she also was talking, in obstinate short sentences, arguing as usual.

Only Bridget's face was quite still, floating in the firelight as though it too had only just come there, like a flower that suddenly looked at one with a human face.

It was too hot in the study. John went out of it and upstairs, where he waited about for Very, getting more and more cross and restless because she did not come, and when she came there she was still arguing away, and all about some silly little things he didn't want to hear about, just the rugs in the study.

She did not like them because she had once heard that they were made by little Turkish girls who had to sit all hunched up to work at them and got so cramped that they never grew up tall and straight and pretty, but were gradually turned into stunted hideous dwarfs, and when she had said this just now to her father he had said, well and why not, since their beauty had gone into the carpets they made instead of into themselves, so it was not wasted, and you could not get anything unless you sacrificed something for it.

But Very did not think it fair, for the little girls did not get the carpets, it was her father who had got them, and it was not he who had had to sacrifice anything, it was the little girls. She wanted, too, to know how their beauty had gone into the rugs, *had* it gone into the rugs? She did not say it, but it seemed to her that in walking on them she walked on the straight slim bodies of little girls.

But John could not make out what she was bothering about and why it should matter anyway; the rugs had been made ages and ages ago and you couldn't do anything about it now.

They went to undress, and Very looked in on Baby Dick to see if he were asleep. No, there he was sitting up in his cot as if in a triumphal chariot, boasting of Nuvver Nanny and how she had put him in the fire again to-night, and he was all sparkling and rebellious

when Nanny tried to get him to be a good boy and lie down now and go to sleep.

She did not want Miss Very to encourage Baby by asking questions, and John who had come in after her didn't want it either, he didn't like the idea of a gigantic Nuvver Nanny wandering about the house after you were in bed and putting you in the fire, though of course he could not say it or it would sound babyish. Very said doubtfully, rather as though she too were wanting to reassure herself, "Well he seems to like it, don't you my boo'ful boy? Heavens, Nanny, he is huge. I can hardly lift him now. Father says he'll be three times the size of John."

"And knows it too," said Nanny.

He jumped up and down, crowing, as though by some divine favour he was the strongest, the bravest, the healthiest, the most beautiful, magnificent, cocksure and completely conquering baby in the whole world. John felt exasperated. How did Baby Dick know he was going to be three times his size? Ten to one he wouldn't be, in spite of all his swank. Let him just wait and see.

He went out of the nursery and hung over the stairs. The house was still and bright. It seemed to be waiting for something. He wondered if they had turned on the light in the study or if it were still full of firelight. Bridget was still there he supposed and his father still talking. He wished the study door would open and somebody come out. He wished something would happen. The house would burst if something did not happen. And still he watched the study door as though it must be through that door or behind that door that something would happen.

He stayed there until Very called to him that she had had her bath and he must hurry up, and then he went to bed and fell asleep at once.

Peregrine had not gone on talking. He had been laughing at Very about the rugs, and when she left the room he was leaning back against the table looking into the fire. He raised his eyes to see Bridget looking at him.

'Oh, Heaven,' thought Bridget, 'what am I to do?'

She moved to go past him out of the room, she moved her lips to say something polite and grateful about the picnic, but nothing came out. She stood still though he had not stopped her. But he had stopped her, his look told her to wait, that he had something to say

to her. But he said nothing, and he did not move. He looked at her, and the light of a flame, sucked up in a sudden draught, leaped up on his face, she did not know if it were that that made it look flushed.

If she could think of something easy and natural to say, she could get out of the room. She tried suddenly, desperately, as though she were calling to him in danger, to think of Frank, of his freckles, his wide, laughing nose. They were not there.

A burning face was just in front of her, swooping down on her. His arms clutched her, lifted her up into them, her mouth was drawn up into his; her struggling thoughts, her whole being was sucked up in a sudden draught and drawn out of her.

The first thing that she saw again was the figure of the Cybele that stood by itself on the chimney-piece. Bridget held on to the chimney-piece with both hands, staring at the smiling goddess of Fruitfulness and Plenty who sat there enthroned, triumphant.

The clamour of the Chinese gong broke on her ears. She must go upstairs and have her bath and dress and sit at dinner between Mr. and Mrs. Sark.

Mr. Sark held open the door for her and she went upstairs. On her dressing-table was her lovely letter to Frank that she had not posted last night, that she had been going to post to-day, but they had come back from their ride too late for the post. She heard Mr. Sark come up the stairs, and the door of his dressing-room open and shut. She took up the letter and looked at the name and address as though she did not know it.

She opened her door again and went downstairs and stood in front of the study door, staring at the copper knob, and presently she put out her hand and touched the knob and then turned it slowly and went in.

The study was there, waiting to receive her, hot and still and bright. She walked across it and put her letter to Frank in the fire. The flames sprang up crackling from it and played on her face, and on the face of the goddess which glowed as in the light from a burnt offering.

## *Ten*

*

EVERYONE in the house was asleep, thought Bridget, only the house was awake. The house never slept.

Towards morning, she slept. When she woke she wrote:

"DEAR FRANK,—

"What are you worrying about? You don't really think we are engaged, do you, because we said so as children. But we are not children now, not by a long, *long* way. You are not in the least in love with me nor I with you now, so nobody's hurt and we're both free to get all we can out of life. I'm glad you've got someone else too. Here's luck to you, and me.

BRIDGET."

This time she did not post it herself, and so it went. It might be cheap but anything was better than the sickly mush of her previous letter, now so fortunately burnt. Frank did not love her. Since Peregrine had kissed her, she had known how a man could love, she wished she did not know, she wished not to think of it, she had not thought of him before as Peregrine, it suited him rather terribly, he *was* like a hawk, perhaps a caged hawk, the hungry eagerness of his talk was like the beating of fierce wings against the bars.

He went that day to Vienna in search of mulberry-tinted glass, and the house dropped into a deep pool of quiet. At first there seemed nothing in it but his absence; then the people that moved there in the background began to distinguish each other.

Ella again noticed Bridget's expression at breakfast when the one post of the day came in. It was always the same thing, the governesses were always in love, even the last who had been so plain.

She had said so to Peregrine, but without malice for it was without jealousy. She was glad of Bridget's attraction for him, as she was glad of his interest in the church frescoes and other activities, for all these things lessened his claims on her attention and she had the more time to herself, though she could not have said why she wanted so much, nor what she did with it in that cool, secluded drawing-room

of hers into which she withdrew more and more, as into a green shell that admits no echo from the outside world.

When she watched Bridget playing with her children she wondered if she were not growing older and more tired than she should be at her age. Perhaps if she had had the proper training she might have known better how to play with children. It was odd she could not, for she remembered so well what she had been like as a child, and how frightened she had been of her father who was always complaining of the War Office, and of English cooks who couldn't make curries, and of things in the newspaper at breakfast. But he in his turn was frightened of her mother as Ella never was; for Lady Winteringham's aquiline and angular austerity sheltered her as a high spiked wall encloses a trim garden.

She wished she could tell her children, as she had been told, of lovely Aunt Adelaide who had danced her light fantastic way through laughter and broken hearts and flowers and verses, stepped through them as through a shower of confetti, into her early grave.

'But, Mamma, why did she die so young?'

'Everybody loved her, my dear, and they say that those whom the gods love, die young.'

This discouraging reflection consoled Ella for her despair of ever being like Aunt Adelaide.

But her own children were so different. They were never frightened of anyone, not even their father, and she could never tell them the stories her mother used to tell her, for although she could remember the words quite clearly in her head, they never came out right, it was like thinking of a tune that you could not hum. And Very only thought Aunt Adelaide silly to care so much about parties and dresses and admirers, *she* only wanted to grow up if she could be a man and go to sea, and she had never liked dolls even when she was quite tiny, though Ella had secretly nursed hers until the age of fourteen. She remembered too hearing with pride a visitor say what a wonderful thing was the mother instinct, and that little Ella at the age of five nursed her doll in the crook of her arm exactly as though she were a cottage woman with her tenth baby.

Ella would have liked to have ten babies. Her mother had objected strongly when she heard that Baby Dick was coming, and declared that she had not sufficient strength for a third, and Peregrine too had wondered if it would not be too much strain on her vitality.

But Ella thought she would rather use what little vitality she had, and she supposed she had only a little, she certainly felt it when she was with Perry but then he had so much, it wasn't surprising one should notice the contrast, and there seemed no way for her to use it except in having babies.

But now her children were no longer babies. Very had taught John not to say Little Miss Daisies, and they both seemed to have grown more fanciful and silly lately, and even Baby had begun to play his make-up games with that talk about Nuvver Nanny. And this new, odd, abrupt girl, who did not like her, who had only been in the house a few weeks, and knew and cared nothing of the trouble Very had had with her first tooth or the wonderful little shell-like hands and feet John had had when he was born, and who would not really mind, would indeed be very glad if she could go away to-morrow, even if she were never to see them again, yet this new girl knew what they thought about and liked to play at, better than Ella had ever known.

As she watched them pursuing Bridget down to the bottom of the lawn and there hold consultation, Bridget talking low and quick, pointing, explaining, waving her arms, very earnest and emphatic, and then her children jumping and flapping their arms up and down in the funny way she never had, and crying "Oh *let's!*" and "Yes, *rather!*"; as she watched her children, after a few minutes' tense pause, follow Bridget through the arch of that flame-coloured creeper that Peregrine had brought from Italy, she felt as though this running leaping laughing girl were leading them away from her for ever, away through an arch of fiery flowers into a strange country from which they would never return.

And at that Ella had a slight shock, for she wondered if she too had for one moment been playing a make-up game, but a very sad game, sadder than the story of lovely Aunt Adelaide.

Her sadness hurt her so much that she even wondered if make-up games might not also be real, since however sensibly she thought of it she could not but see Bridget taking her children away from her into a country where she could not follow. But there was nothing she could do about it, nor could the children, nor the girl, nor anyone, not even her mother. She went in and took an aspirin.

Bridget went alone through the fiery arch into another country. The others were to follow after counting a hundred and they would

find, not Bridget, but somebody else, they did not know whom, Bridget herself did not know whom. She went into that other country and looked round her at all the grass paths stretching away from her like widespread green fingers pointing in all directions, and thought, 'Who shall I be?'

Starry single dahlias stared at her, sunflowers nodded as a wind went by, it turned all the leaves on the apple trees so that they rustled and shone like dry, crackling gold, and then hushed as the wind died.

The branches of a damson tree, heavy with dark fruit, leaned towards her through the deep yellow sunshine. She stretched up her arms among them and picked a damson that almost fell into her hand, and bit it, and found the golden flesh inside as sweet and ripe and juicy as if it were one of Peregrine's famous Blue Imperatrice plums, that 'noble fruit born in the purple,' and laughed, because it was so gorgeous to be eating damsons straight off the tree, because she was so happy that it must mean it was all right really about Frank, though indeed she did not need him nor anyone in the world.

Should she be a robber? One was always being a robber. Or a pirate or a princess or an old witch or a tribe of savages? The last would be the most popular with John, but it was a monotonous procedure, you went on saying "Hurlu, burlu, burlu," and brandished a stick and pranced until you were defeated, and you had always to be defeated.

Here they came, running through the arch, down the paths, calling to her,

"Where are you?"

"Who are you?"

John's voice came shrill above their questions,

"There she is!"

Yes, there she was, dodging behind the rockery, running back through the apple trees and the late roses, melting into them, flashing out clear again on the sunlit paths until she was lost, she was hidden, she was silent; they did not know where she was nor who she was, everything round them was red and gold in the still sunshine, and there was nobody there.

They stopped calling. They stood under the damson tree and stared at each other. Very said, "You go that way and look and I'll go this," and John said, "No, let's go together," and Very was just going to say, 'Are you frightened, silly?' but changed it to "All

right," and added, to cover her faint uneasiness, "But I think I like rounders best really," when down the long path towards them, under the flowering arches, came someone very stately in a crown of flame-coloured creeper, bearing a sunflower. They at once recognized the Sun-god, the Inca of Peru, for Bridget had been telling them about him. He led them to his palace and showed his gardens, where the flowers were made of beaten gold and silver and studded with jewels, to these lean, steel-clad adventurers whose eyes grew wolfish with greed.

"Beaten gold," muttered stout Cortez, fingering the row of sunflowers, unaware that he should have been in Mexico.

"Rubies and black pearls," hissed an equally stout Spaniard, plucking the curved pod of a Japanese peony which had burst open to show its double rows of black and crimson teeth.

They feasted on fruit in the gardens of the palace, red wine ran in the fountain in the pond garden, slaves danced to languorous Indian airs on the mouth organ; then when all slept, the Spaniards arose stealthily, they killed their innocent and candid hosts, they plundered the gardens, they bound the Inca with cords and set him high on a funeral pyre on the very top of the rockery to be burned.

Bridget stood there with her face upturned to the sun, waiting for the flames. Now she looked down again and all the air was full of revolving suns, and troops of Spaniards, and her mother's sunbonnet, and Jane's voice reading her holiday task in a droning monotony until suddenly it broke in the middle of the Inca's death into a sharp 'Oh how I *hate* the Spaniards!' And at any moment she might hear Frank shouting, 'May I come to tea? I've brought some buns,' and that was why she was so happy, but no it wasn't, for Frank was a thousand miles away, and for that matter she did not know if he cared two straws for her now ; but at that she laughed so that her executioners were shocked and told her she wasn't playing properly, but she could not help it, she laughed and laughed, it was such fun to be playing like this, to have all the glory of this garden round her in the sun, to know that one man loved her and another found her lovely, 'Love to be loved whilst thou art lovely lest thou love too late,' to be Bridget Bride and the Inca of Peru and 'Who else shall I be?' she wondered, for in that warm still brightness you could not be sure what might happen next. Perhaps Peregrine, who was coming home to-day, would walk through the fiery arch and see her here, the

god and victim, standing bound on top of the rockery with her face upturned to the sun.

But no one came, nothing happened, the Chinese gong boomed out from the house. "That is in honour of a god's death," she said, and they went in to tea.

On the hall table was a letter from Frank which Young Bill must have brought out from the town, for you got the second post if you happened to drive in fifteen miles to Sherne.

She read it standing in the hall, for it was brief.

"All right. You've made it quite clear. I'm sorry I bothered you with my affairs at all as it doesn't appear to have been necessary. I shan't again.

FRANK"

She stared at it, she laughed, it was so absurd that they should pretend to quarrel like this. And she had been so happy just now, she had even thought she must be happy because it was all right really with Frank; she could not have been cheated like that.

Then she remembered that she had written him a very nasty letter ages and ages, no, a few days ago. But that had been just after Peregrine had kissed her, and he had been away ever since then, and it must have been a sort of accident and couldn't really count. But her letter had counted. What had she said? That of course they weren't engaged and she was glad he had got someone else too. *Too!* Too absurd. As though she really thought she had got Mr. Sark, a middle-aged married man, whose children she was teaching and had just been playing with in the garden. She must have been very angry to have written that, and with herself rather than Frank. But he had taken it as a dismissal, as indeed it was. 'Perhaps he was glad to take it as that,' she thought, and looked round her as though she were lost in this house, as indeed she was, so she went out of it and down the village. But Miss Miningham was in the village.

She remembered this just too late, for it was the sight of Miss Miningham's head protruding from her window that reminded her, and if Miss Miningham, who was very long-sighted, saw her turn back now, she might think the truth, which was that she did not wish to meet Miss Miningham. So she went on.

Miss Miningham was addressing a small reluctant boy who stood rather far away so that her comments on his non-attendance at

Sunday school, uttered in a deprecatory, timidly cheerful tone, were audible to Bridget for some time before she arrived. Though Miss Miningham must have seen her long before, she did not appear to do so until Bridget had actually reached her window, when she gave a start of surprise, and asked how it was that tea was over so early, and what lessons had the dear children been doing this afternoon; yes, yes, of course she knew they had no lessons on Wednesday afternoon, how stupid of her to forget, that is, she had forgotten it was Wednesday, not for one moment had she forgotten that Wednesday was a half-holiday.

She was determined to make this point clear all the time that she was insisting, but yes, she really must insist, that Bridget should come in and see the blouse she had made from a paper pattern Miss Wolaston the post-mistress had lent her. Miss Wolaston was always a great stand-by, she had worked at the Rectory at the end of—well, of the old days—and was perhaps a little rough, but staunch, quite like an old family retainer in fact, for this excused her confidential relations with dear Woolly as she addressed her in moments of expansion. And Miss Wolaston's little niece was going to be a typist in London and would want nice things now. Wasn't she bold to start making blouses? But she had always been clever with her fingers and it was pleasant to do things for others, did not Miss O'Farrell think so?

"It doesn't matter so much if they go wrong," murmured Bridget dully, but this was not at all the sort of thing to say, Miss Miningham might even think she was making fun of her, so she hastily admired the blouse, an intricate affair with stripes running wild in every direction.

Miss Miningham did not cease to talk as Bridget spoke, so that Bridget wondered how she had so much to tell of what other people had said to her, since she must so rarely listen to them saying it. She was so much needed, people came to her in their troubles and said how well she understood, for she had had her own, and perhaps dear Miss O'Farrell might make more effort to keep her hair up, dear Miss O'Farrell would not mind her saying this, she was so much older, it was perhaps a pity; and here the canary joined in the conversation, chirping louder and louder against their chatter, while Miss Miningham threw more and more pauses into her talk, looking up into Bridget's face with an inquiring, hungry gaze.

By this Bridget understood that she must have been looking different, sad or something, and stretched her mouth into a smile, trying to fasten it at the corners as if with safety pins. All the little incongruous objects round her were huddled close together as though anxious not to be left alone. The sunlight through the muslin blinds lay spread on them like a thin yellow veil, it added nothing to their colour, for they had none, but gave them a faintly dusty look. She thought of the study when she had gone into it to burn her letter to Frank; it had been there waiting for her, hot and still and bright, and as that room had seemed full, so did this crowded, chirping, chattering room seem empty.

'Perhaps this is what I shall be,' she thought. She saw the present moment as her whole life. Nothing would ever happen to her again, nothing for ever and ever.

She wished she could do something for Miss Miningham, or was it for herself? But Miss Miningham jerked back her head when you did anything for her. She hated it. The only thing you could do for her was to ask something of her. That was why she liked to hear of people in trouble, so that someday, somehow, she might come to feel that she had been of use.

Bridget said, "I loved someone and he's in love with someone else now."

She had not wanted to say it, she had only wanted to get away. It would be all over the village now, but what did it matter? It was true, and that was all that mattered. She sat awaiting a flood of sympathy and inquiry and pats and jerks and reminiscences of a story just like hers to be poured over her.

But Miss Miningham sat silent. She had been awed into utter stillness. Somebody had at last confided in her.

Bridget had gone and Miss Miningham had said nothing, done nothing. But what was she to say or do? Such a dreadful, such a crushing, humiliating, unbearable sorrow. She doubted if she herself could ever have recovered from the shock.

For Miss Miningham, having had no sorrows but her lack of them, was inclined to exaggerate their importance.

But the dear girl had confided in her, wanting her help and advice, and she had not even shown her any sympathy, and it would be so awkward to go back to it when she saw her again; if it were herself she could not bear it, but then if it were herself she could not have

borne to tell it. The poor child must regret bitterly by now that she had done so, and with no particular reason for it, no questions nor even comments, for though she had noticed something odd and strained about her, Miss Miningham had had far too much tact and delicacy to refer to it. Confidences were not to be dropped, or rather thrown, in this hurried, inadvertent fashion; they belonged to a special and carefully prepared atmosphere, a long talk, a darkened room, a great many previous admonitions that this was never to be told to anyone else.

But then she was dreadfully sensitive, she knew it to be quite a fault with her. Still. And her fault gave her a sense of superiority to the lack of dignity in Bridget, which greatly increased her affection for that impulsive and lovable but unreserved girl. She must say or write, yes, a little note, that would be it, 'I feel I must say one word.' Just one word which should express all her understanding and kindness and solicitude and distress and desire to help. But what should that one word be? Not even in Johnson's Dictionary could she find it.

All the rest of that day she thought about it, wrote notes and tore them up, remembered things in her own life that had been just like that, or might have been, if just a little more had happened first. All the rest of the day she was happily and industriously sad. For though it was very sad there should be so many sad things in life, yet it was a great thing to feel that you too knew all about it, and shared in it.

Bridget forgot what she had said to Miss Miningham before she had latched the gate behind her. She had got out of her house more quickly than she had dared hope, and now she was in the village street, walking fast, when she heard a voice calling her, and turned to see David Wem coming through the lych-gate, his spectacles opaque against the light so that he looked like a blind thing coming towards her.

She had always thought he disliked her to the point of repulsion, as he seemed to do most people. He must have something important to say. But he said nothing when he joined her, only walked along beside her with his head bent and his eyes on the ground, until she grew so recklessly ill at ease that she was on the point of saying something to make conversation, though she knew it was the worst crime

she could commit in his eyes. But he saved her from it by at last dropping out in a negligent little voice,

"What do you think about this place?"

"I don't think anything. Do you?"

"Yes."

It seemed the conversation would end there, but presently he began again.

"You're outside it as I am. We're both parasites. I don't mean of course that we're idle. But we're living on the place, not *in* it. We ought to be able to see more than those who are in it. I would like to know if you see it at all the same as I do."

She could not help being flattered. This wretched little sneering man who despised everybody just because he had once had the luck to learn from her father, yet she wanted to be liked even by him; more than ever, she wanted to be liked by everybody, now that Frank had shown he could get on without her as easily as if she were nobody at all. 'Who shall I be?' she had asked herself in that afternoon's game, and the answer had come, 'Nobody. Nobody at all.'

She must think of something very intelligent to say, but unluckily she had been thinking of all this instead of what he had said, and when her answer to it came out, it was only, "I don't know what you mean."

But he did not blink his eyes and turn away as if he were going to be sick. He continued as though she had answered him quite sensibly.

"I don't either. But there's my work for instance. Isn't it rather odd I should be able to paint like this?"

Bridget, who had seen some of his work since he had left her father, thought it more polite not to agree too fervently.

"I suppose you're getting it back," she said lamely, "change, fresh surroundings and all that. You haven't been in the country for some time have you, and this is such marvellous country."

"Marvellous," he assented dryly.

Now he was being detestable again. She prodded herself on to say, "And you are stronger than you used to be, aren't you?"

"Marvellously."

At his ironic repetition of the word, she looked at him and thought that for a man who was marvellously stronger, he looked remarkably

lifeless, as though he were being depleted, drained, of some essential force. The discovery shocked her out of herself; she said sharply, "What are you afraid of?"

"I don't know." He was nice again now. He added, as if to reassure or at any rate reason with himself, "And am I afraid? I don't know. I find it interesting. I would like to know what O'Farrell would have made of it. I doubt if even he could have got more than I did into that ploughed field and the red full moon."

He ended abruptly, "Mr. Sark's coming home to-day."

He had before watched Mr. Sark and herself together, contemptuously noting a possible flirtation between governess and employer. But this evening it was not quite like that; there was no covert sneer in his tone, and he must have been aware that he had betrayed a genuine anxiety, for he added, "I cannot think why I should bother. There are many worse evils than seduction."

She was too much astonished to give an answer; it would have been hard to find one; but at that moment they sprang apart to opposite sides of the road to avoid being run down by Peregrine in the car.

He pulled up sharply and swore. "Never saw such fools," he said, "sticking in the middle of the road and taking no notice of my hoots. What can you have been talking about? Must have been interesting."

For one wild instant Bridget wondered if Mr. Wem would say, but Peregrine's question was purely rhetorical, for he continued without pause. "Did Young Bill give anyone my message? I sent him back in the bus with the letters, there was one for you, did you get it?" he asked, swooping his head towards Bridget, who nodded and gulped and had no need for further answer, for on he went, " while I took on the car to see about the window and it's all right and you're all wrong, Wem, they can do that glass for the border in Vienna, just that colour, wish you'd seen it, look here, get in both of you and I'll go on for a bit while I tell you. We can all squash in in front. I've got a lot of quite pleasant golden wine,"—he spat out an unpronounceable name—"I'd got some of it already, we'll try it to-night. Oh, Vienna was fun. Always go to a foreign town to meet your friends. Mine were all round me. There we all were each night in the same café, hoping to be shocked, ready to greet the obscene with

a cheer. Only we never got it. It was more like a cabinet meeting, all British papers and politicians.

> God pardon us, nor harden us; we did not see so red,
> The night we went to Beaverbrook by way of Birkenhead.

That isn't impromptu, but it was then. I recited Chesterton's ballad to half the café and had to make up part of it. We have to keep up the British prestige for icy reserve, don't you think?" he shot at Mr. Wem over Bridget's head, so that the car swerved right across the road.

"I don't know. I've never been reserved," said Mr. Wem meekly. He looked very humble, squashed in on the other side of Bridget.

"Aren't you rather overdoing it?" asked Peregrine jovially. He was so glad to be back and telling them everything, so unaware of her in particular but full of a general hearty enjoyment, he had probably quite forgotten he had kissed her the night before he went away, and that ought perhaps to be insulting, but it was certainly reassuring. If he kept a diary like Pepys he would have just put, 'Mem. Kissed the governess this day,' only he wouldn't put it like that because he didn't think of her as the governess any more than he thought of Young Bill as the chauffeur or the groom or whichever Young Bill happened to be at the time.

Everything was twice as amusing and only half as important as it had been a moment ago.

"Yes, and it's been a free trip," he was saying. "Columbias and Courtaulds have each risen over a pound, and I took my profit coming back through town, £2000 net to me on the whole transaction. Of course they've risen another ten bob since."

There was a lot more in life than love. It was fun to be driving in this cracked fashion with the driver's attention only half on the car because there was so much else in the world to claim it. They had been a solemn, silent, absent-minded trio at dinner lately, and now to-night he would be there again, claiming all their attention, and just occasionally listening, with that alert, almost ferocious absorption in what he wished to hear, the red lamplight glowing on his intent face, until in the middle of what they were saying, no matter how thrilling, Ella would rise, 'lonely as a cloud,' and drift out of the room, and Bridget would have to follow her.

And to-night they would all drink a pleasant golden wine with a name like the wicked goblin Rumpelstiltskin. And Courtaulds would leap-frog over Columbias and Columbias over Courtaulds, and the Governor of the Bank of England would restore the Golden Age. A bearded Zeus would fructify her account in the Post Office Savings Bank, and Peregrine would amalgamate the Note Issues with a shower of gold. She had not known business talk was so interesting.

Only ninnies bothered, like those two poor tired tepid pieces of half-life—no, of death—that she had just been with, Miss Miningham and Mr. Wem, who shrank beside her, much diminished, in spite of his sarcasm, while on the other side Peregrine swelled with the gusto of his enjoyment. Within half an hour of telling Miss Miningham her heart was broken or words to that effect, she had been seen rattling past her window between the two men, gay, laughing, and, yes, her hair *had* come down again. She was shallow and heartless and forgetful of Frank, and was glad of it.

She was sitting next someone so gloriously secure that even trouble would wear a glitter and a triumph for him, even sorrow or sickness could not touch him as they did people who were poor and already anxious. They were grey and drab to start with, but for Peregrine, sad things would only bring a contrasting colour to his life. She shivered as though a shadow had fallen on her, and so it had, a shadow from the Real Trouble, that had begun before she was born, that had drawn her mother's face so that on bad days when she was very tired and worried, it looked no more than a thin mask of suffering, that had bound herself from childhood in a love that hurt, in compassion and fear, for her father.

Had he died of starvation?

No, she would not think of him. He was dead, he could need her no longer. She would never be sorry for anyone else, she would never again love so that it hurt, she would live only to enjoy, to make her life full and important. Peregrine Sark was beside her. She turned her head and laughed up into his face.

## *Eleven*

*

VERY saw that the hibiscus flower Mr. Wem had just painted was putting out a long wicked tongue at her. Her father called it "princess hibiscus," had read her a poem that didn't look like a poem, about 'the Eastern, exquisite royal plants, that noble blood has brought us down the ages.'

Princesses shouldn't put out their tongues.

Wild animals leaped in and out of the pattern of wreathing vines, conducting a mad dance through the austere church. The whole painted wall was laughing at her. She said, "Why do you do it like that?" and he said, "I have no idea."

In his last picture, people too were dancing and leaping, but Very did not think they were like real people; their frenzied gestures had the rhythm of movements seen in a haunted sleep; in delight, they led a youth who was crowned with flowers towards a great stone where an old man waited with a knife. Very thought the youth's face was rather like Bridget. She asked who he was, and Mr. Wem told her that he had been chosen by the people to represent God and Summer, that they crowned him with flowers and feasted him for a day before they killed him.

"But why do they kill him?"

"So as to keep their god for ever young and glorious. It is a common rite in vegetation worship. You will find an analogy in the Christian religion if you listen in church." In the absence of mind induced by his work, he concluded, "Beauty is best fostered by injustice."

She wondered as she went out past it why Miss Miningham's window was so bad; she thought the female saint rather pretty, and anyway she would not mind remembering it when she was in bed; she never remembered it at all, whereas Mr. Wem's pictures would dart across her closed eyelids and startle her into wakefulness and fears.

She went to find John, to pick blackberries with him in the shrubbery and to show by sighs, by self-interrupted sentences and an air of gloomy mystery, that she knew something of importance that he did not.

This happy project was spoiled by John's obtuseness; he asked no questions, and when she began to observe his inattention, she saw that he was behaving exactly as she had been herself. As the eldest, therefore, she was entitled to say sharply, "Don't be silly, John. If you've got a secret, either tell me or don't."

John, who had been too much engaged in his conduct to show the same discrimination with regard to hers, at once capitulated. "Well, you see, it was an accident my seeing it. Father said he wanted to show it to us both as a surprise."

"So it's Father's surprise?"

"Yes, rather."

"Nice one?"

"Ye-es,—rather."

There was a different meaning in the second 'rather.' Very had begun to feel doubtful about her father's surprises.

"Well, you've given it away now," she said unkindly, "so you might just as well show me. It's something one can see, then?"

"Yes, *rather*."

"Oh, shut up, John, or say something else. You're just wound up."

He was, for he was nervous and had answered mechanically. "I *can't* show you," he said. "Father said——"

"Nonsense. Father wouldn't mind me knowing now you do. Father's told me something *you* don't know."

"I don't care."

This, though unintentional, was a masterly stroke of policy. Very had to pretend not to hear, and went on,

"I'll tell you, if you'll show me."

"Well, tell away."

"Father's got a new window for the church and he's going to make Miss Miningham take away hers and put his in instead. That's why he's gone into Sherne with Bridget. He's gone to get it."

"Miss Miningham won't take away her window, will she?"

"She'll have to, if Father wants it."

"Well, I don't care. It's a beastly window and I'm jolly glad."

"But it's *her* window."

John had no right to call it beastly. How should he know? Just because Father had made him conceited over his cooking apples and yellow daisies.

"You only call it beastly because you've heard Father say so."

"I don't. I hate it anyway. Those silly old saints, they're as flat as pancakes."

"They're Miss Miningham's saints."

They had been *her* Michaelmas daisies, that mauve and white muddle she had arranged beneath them and so bitterly regretted, but they were hers. John at any rate shouldn't criticize them.

"Oh, do drop it. What are you so keen about Miss Miningham for?"

"I'm *not*. I don't care what happens to her or her old window, but I do think people ought to be fair."

"Father *is* fair."

"He isn't."

There was a rather long pause during which Very and John looked at each other across the blackberry bush. This was different from the occasional casual, almost playful, 'Father's a beast,' uttered in consequence of his teasing. A mature and considered judgment had been pronounced. So highly charged had the moral atmosphere become that Very added loftily, "And I don't want to see his old surprise. Not if he told you not to. You oughtn't to have thought of showing it me."

She left John speechless at her unfairness.

But after a few minutes she returned with her nose at its normal angle, and said, "I can hear the Toms tinking down in the village. Let's go and see if it's a horse."

He accepted her offer of peace and they went to watch the blacksmith. It was a horse, and a more or less white one. They stood contented, watching his massive and patient hind-quarters looming pale in the darkness of the forge, and the sleepy, steady flick of his long tail; watching young Tom's eager, pointed face leap into the fire-light and out again as the flames blew up and died down, and his red scrawny arms hold the piece of iron on the anvil, while old Tom's brown gnarled arms struck at it with a tink, tonk, tank, and a tink, tonk, tank; listening to that steady clanging rhythm, and to the eager roar of the fire under the bellows, and to the crackle of sparks in the dun-coloured air.

They were happy and at peace and had forgotten everything but the buttered toast they would have for tea, and to show this, Very slipped an arm into John's, and he crooked his elbow so as to hold it

more comfortably; but that reminded them of something vaguely troubling, they drew nearer to each other and wondered why they ever quarrelled and were not always as happy as this; and so, having ceased to be by thinking about it, they grew restless, and Very thought of Miss Miningham and Michaelmas daisies, and John of Frankie Dear's loutish son who had called "Spanish Apes" after him in the road, and what could he have meant? No one ever used to call anything after them, but everything was getting different.

He said, "Aren't his pictures *funny* now?" and she said, "What pictures? And don't fidget," and John said, "Fidget yourself," and they haughtily disengaged arms and went out of the forge just as Miss Miningham was passing.

She was as much disconcerted as they, for she was on her way up to the Red House to leave her little note for Bridget and wondered if it might be better not to mention it. For once Miss Miningham had not been at the window when the Red House car had gone past it last evening when Bridget sat between Mr. Sark and Mr. Wem and learnt how men talk business. Miss Miningham had been on the other side of her house in her bedroom, looking up quotations for her note to Bridget in a very beautiful little book called *Daily Crumbs*.

As they stood and stared and said nothing, not even 'How do you do?' or 'Good afternoon,' she lost her head and said, "I was just going up to call on your dear mother. Is she in this afternoon?" and realized too late that she had not got on her calling hat, and her cotton gloves looked so very. And worst of all, that she would meet Bridget up at the Red House, which would be so dreadfully embarrassing for the poor girl, who might indeed think that she was seeking her out in this obtrusive, positively vulgar fashion in order to reopen their sad and painful little talk of yesterday, nor would she ever have the audacity, the lack of delicacy, to give the note into Bridget's own hands, and could not think how she could ever now contrive to put it in the letter-box unobserved, and even if she could, it would look so very odd to see a note there in her handwriting just after she had paid a call.

All these considerations put her in such an anguish of perturbation, such a fervour of desire that the children should say their dear mother was not at home, that she hastily revised the happy pride she had felt since yesterday in her share of the turmoil of life, and longed for her former peace.

And of course their dear mother was in. She always was. They all had to walk up to the Red House together, very slowly, for Miss Miningham was slow, and felt hills, and moreover was wondering if it would show a loathsomely deceitful nature if she pretended to feel faint on the way and turn back, but it would frighten the dear children, they would run up and tell them at the Red House, and the Squire who was always so very kind would insist on fetching the doctor, who would discover that there was nothing the matter. And that would be the worst humiliation of all. Her fear of these possibilities gave her the courage to go on. She thought of her father and his irascible red face when he stormed at her for being nervous, and explained afterwards that it was all because he wanted her to be a soldier of Christ.

Very and John, staggering under the weight of her unaccustomed silence, heard their guilty secret concerning her throbbing in their heads. Each thought the other was sure to give it away and talked very fast to prevent it, snubbing or cutting short each other's most innocent remarks which had nothing whatever to do with windows. Even in her preoccupied state, Miss Miningham could not help noticing how they gabbled, and how often and how rudely they contradicted each other, and how cross they got. And she had thought them such dear children. It was a pity. They were dreadfully spoilt of course. She tried to change the subject from whatever it was they were bickering about, and said, "And is Miss O'Farrell not playing with you this afternoon?"

This was the last thing she had wanted to say. Of course, Miss O'Farrell was not playing with them, of course Miss O'Farrell had locked herself into her room and was weeping silently. She would come down to tea, pale and with red eyes, and bravely cheerful, though she would be dreadfully upset at seeing Miss Miningham; and here she was just beginning to reconsider her decision not to feel faint, when she was startled by John's voice, very bright and happy at answering what he took to be a safe question.

"No, father's taken her to—Ow! shut up, Very, you hurt."

"*John!*" exclaimed Very on a deep accusing note.

"It's all *right*. I wasn't going to——"

"John, shut *up*. He's just taken her a drive, that's all, Miss Miningham."

It was all most extraordinary. There were the children scowling

hideously at each other, and John nursing his arm which Very must have pinched. It was indeed very odd that the Squire should take Miss O'Farrell for a drive all alone. Why had he not taken the poor children too when there was plenty of room in the car? And why were the poor children so obviously embarrassed?

"And where have they gone?" she asked John kindly, so as to make him feel at ease again.

He mumbled sulkily, "Just for a drive," and Very in her feverish anxiety to get away from the subject burst into a silly song of their father's:

"They went to the funeral just for the ride
Just for the ride,
Just for the ride."

John flung himself into the chorus with a hoarse shout of relief, and together they bawled that vulgar ditty, nor did they cease at the end of the chorus but continued with yet more painful and unsuitable verses.

"She went to Heaven and flip flop she flied
Flip flop she flied
Flip flop she flied.

He went to—ahem!—and frizzled and fried
Frizzled and fried
Frizzled and fried."

Miss Miningham could not know that anxiety on her account kept them loudly singing, for fear of speech. She had turned a dull shade of magenta. She would not have believed they could behave so badly, shouting low songs in her company all the way up the village street. It was evident that Miss O'Farrell could have no control over them, perhaps she even set them a bad example; her conduct was indeed peculiar, going long drives alone with the Squire on the very next day that she had told her her heart was broken. Was there any use in leaving her little note after all? But perhaps it might touch something in her that was not yet quite hardened.

The song had unfortunate associations. Funerals, heaven and 'ahem,' led them firmly back to the window in memory of Miss Miningham's father. And now that the song was finished, and she

maintained an icy silence, the children could think of nothing but the two splay-footed saints with upturned eyes, flat as the soles swimming upwards against the glass in the zoo aquarium, suspended just above the body of a severe, whiskered old gentleman in a baggy coat, with a gamp beside him, whom they knew from his photograph to be Miss Miningham's father. It became humanly impossible to contemplate this image any longer in silence.

"What was your father like?" asked Very.

"A very good and great Christian," said Miss Miningham in sepulchral tones.

It threw no further light on the prostrate old gentleman. They began to suppose he had always been in that position.

"A Christian *gentleman*!" said Miss Miningham with a glance at John, hoping he would realize that no gentleman would sing in the village street.

Mr. Miningham remained dead.

"A Christian *soldier*!" said Miss Miningham with a still severe but martial air.

Mr. Miningham showed signs of life. He sat up, he brandished his gamp as if once again to wallop old Grandfather Mytton. His whiskers fell off, his baggy coat turned into Peregrine's old British warm.

"Oh, was he a chaplain?" asked John. "Was there a war on then?"

His eager interest startled Miss Miningham, who had not mentioned her father for thirty years except to sigh. But they were, after all, extraordinary children, impulsive, flighty. John had perhaps quite forgotten that he had been singing a comic song just before he asked about her father. She mustn't be harsh with the little fellow.

"No, my dear. I meant a soldier in the best sense of the word, a gallant spirit who was never afraid to fight for the truth."

"Did he fight then?"

It was difficult to explain why her father should have had to fight for the truth in the parish that he had ruled for forty-five years with the tempered ferocity of a Diocletian. She fell back on the simpler and cruder bait for John.

"He wished to go into the Army, but. So many temptations. And my grandfather could not provide him with a sufficient allowance,

so. He was none the less a soldier for being a clergyman. And looked it too. Such a fine strong manly."

They had reached the gates of the drive of the Red House. Behind them, just round the curve of the road, came the hoot of a motor-horn, and then came the Red House car, very slowly and carefully. Very and John sent up a shout of relief at seeing their father and Bridget, but at an identical instant their shouts died in their throats as they realized that over the back seat of the car, strapped and tied down right across it, and protruding far beyond its sides, was an enormous frame of woodwork and lathes that could only contain the rival window.

"Open the gates!" roared Peregrine, not unnaturally exasperated at their stockish, staring stillness. They rushed to them now with nervous haste, but neglected to jump on them as usual as they swung back.

"How do you do, Miss Miningham," called the Squire as he waited, "are you coming up to see us? Good. Get in, get in, you'll never get Bridget to get in again."

For Bridget had jumped out of the car to offer her seat to Miss Miningham; she stood there smiling with her hand on the door. 'She is a lovely creature'; the discovery stabbed Miss Miningham before she could remember that she had never thought Miss O'Farrell really pretty, and then that she had no right to look so happy, so more than happy, a strange dancing light seemed to shine through her.

But Miss Miningham, though she was somehow induced in the middle of much unintelligible protestation and gratitude and apology to get into the car, declared that she was not really coming up to the Red House at all, that is she had not meant to pay a call, she had just been taking a little walk with the dear children and her tea was waiting for her and the kettle would be boiling over, and she showed such a panic-stricken desire to go home that all the Squire could do, having got her into the car, was to offer to run her down the hill again.

He turned the car while Bridget hung on the foot-board to direct and guide as he anxiously backed that immense package through his gates, and the children, one on either side, stared at it in a frozen contemplation, and avoided looking beyond it to where Miss Miningham, all unknowing, sat in her black bonnet in the front seat.

The car had gone, the gates swung back, John and Very each hanging on with one foot, the other dragging on the ground. They met in the middle and did not look at each other. Bridget had come up to them, and they joined her and still did not speak, though she said, "Hullo," but when she said, "What's up?" John said, "I suppose that's the window."

"Father shouldn't——" began Very, and stopped.

"You can't say things like that about him," said Bridget anxiously. "He's much bigger, I mean grander, I mean more important than any of us, and I expect he knows what one should or should not do."

This reassured John, who nodded emphatically, but it did not seem to reassure Bridget herself, who had gone suddenly dull; all the light went out of her and she put her hand to her head in a dazed way.

Very, in a rage that everything had gone wrong, seized her arm and said, "Oh, *don't* let's go on bothering about that old window!"

"Oh, *that*!" said Bridget, as though she had forgotten all about it, and it was something quite different that was bothering her.

## *Twelve*

✲

THE treachery of giving Miss Miningham a seat in the car that contained her means of destruction had not escaped Peregrine. How convenient it would be if he could have an accident which would demolish her and leave his window miraculously intact. It had been rash of him to insist on bringing it out from Sherne himself, but he had not been able to resist the pride and pleasure of carrying home his trophy. It was a mercy that Miss Miningham in her fluster hadn't yet asked what it was, it was also a mercy, though amazing, that the children had remained so silent. But he would have to get it over with her some time; he decided suddenly that he would do so now, and with that intent he smiled at her as he stopped the car in front of her little house, and asked if he might come in too and have a cup of tea.

And there was no tea ready and the kettle was not boiling over, it was not on at all.

Miss Miningham realized that once you left the straight and narrow path of truth. . . .

She had to hurry to put on the kettle and appear at her ease in her worst bonnet, while she collected the teacups out of the corner cupboard, and tried to collect her wits as well. There were no pink cakes and he so particularly. And it would take such a time to cut bread and butter.

"Nothing for me to eat, please," said the Squire mercifully.

He thought she would never stop fussing about; why did women ever make tea, especially when they had to do it themselves? Women complicated things, he decided, thinking partly of his last hour or two with Bridget, and partly in wonder why Miss Miningham didn't just keep a decanter of whisky and a siphon on the sideboard. But perhaps she couldn't afford whisky, he must send her some for Christmas.

He got impatient. 'Better get it over quickly,' he thought, and began without waiting for her to make the tea, while she was still poking into the cupboard, murmuring what he took to be the motto for her life, "Now let me see, what have I not got?"

So that she was caught at a disadvantage from the rear, when she heard the Squire say from his seat in the window, "Miss Miningham, do you feel yourself capable of a great sacrifice?"

She turned and straightened herself slowly and faced him with bewildered apprehension, for what could he mean by such a very strange question, though with her accustomed obedience, she would not think now of its possible applications, but gave all her mind to considering the question itself. It was odd that he should ask just the thing she had most often asked herself, for she had always longed to make some great sacrifice for someone who, just when it was all over and too late (though she was never quite sure what was over and what it was too late for), would realize how much she had loved him and how he had always loved her.

She wished she could have nursed her dear father through years of illness and refused many brilliant offers for his sake.

"I really," she said, and "I should wish of course."

"It isn't often one has the chance, is it?" said the Squire, "not of a really great sacrifice."

He spoke on a deep and sympathetic note. Why was he talking like this, so beautifully, but so unlike himself?

A fascinating man but strange. And very worldly. One would

not expect him to care about such things. With the slight acidity of an expert, to one who is encroaching on her special subject, she said, "I think I can say I have known what it is to make a great sacrifice."

"Yes?" said the Squire.

She had meant to purse her lips and say no more. But that gentle interrogation tempted her on to talk about herself to one who usually gave her no chance to do anything but listen in an intimidated admiration.

She had impoverished herself for life by putting up the window to her father, she had gone without a maid for years and sometimes without enough food. She had often said so with luxurious tears to Woolly, but Woolly was a coarse creature and her father would not have liked her to talk to her. Now perhaps even the Squire would see that she was something of a heroine.

"The window in the church," she said in a hushed tone, "that has meant a great sacrifice for me, and one that I was very glad."

"I know." The Squire's voice had dropped yet a note lower. The stuffy air was that of a church.

But she remembered how loud and gaily he had talked of windows, of arbitrary saints, of gold and purple, only the last time he had been in this room and eating her cakes, so very pleasant, so very affable, but there had been a threat in the air, a hidden danger. And then in a stunning yet half-expected moment, she heard him say:

"To give is a great sacrifice. To give up is a greater. Could you give up your window for one that would bring still more honour and glory to your father?"

She had known it. He had come into her house to do harm to her window. She had known it from the first. But he should never touch it, never, except over her dead body.

The deep persuasive voice was speaking.

"You have given all you could, what no one else could give, your love, your sacrifice. Will you let me add to it the little that I can bring? I have not your power of devotion, I have never had it for anyone, I never should have. I have only got money."

He was not acting now; he had been betrayed into a passionate sincerity, but he could make use of it. He was hoping desperately for a pleasant solution.

She sat on the edge of a chair, her hands folded on her lap; in the

muddled background of the crowded room she looked like a figure made out of Berlin wool, but inflexible.

His usual fascination for her now left her untouched. For the first time she saw arrogance under his affability; she did not even admire his looks, finding them too obviously and audaciously male, he seemed taller than ever, she thought his face and his hair too red, his expression sharp, almost wolfish. But in the moment of this discovery, for the first time she was not afraid of him. She was her father's daughter, defending her father's honour.

All he was saying amounted to this, that he was asking her to remove her window so that he should put his window—what right, pray, had *he* to a window?—in its place. He was actually suggesting that the tablet saying it was in her father's memory should be left under the new window, so that this thing she had never seen, that had been chosen and bought merely by the Squire, should still appear as her gift to the church and to her father.

She said she would never have believed.

She said she could not even.

She said she was exceedingly sorry such an unfortunate incident should have occurred, but.

She said it with pride, with pleasure. For the Squire had no pride; he pleaded anxiously, violently. So very unreserved. So unlike the traditions of our public schools. He did not seem to mind putting her in this superior position, where she could refuse him with all the dignity of an offended potentate, with all the triumph of a woman who at last knows what it is to refuse a man.

He might have been a little boy pleading with a severe aunt. "Miss Miningham. Please. Won't you do it? I want to be friends. Do let's be friends. Miss Miningham, think. My window's just made for Gawcomb Mazzard Church. All that glory of old glass made centuries ago just to please us. If you only saw it, that lovely darkness, that yellow tree, each leaf like a jewel. You would like to give it to your father, wouldn't you ? I don't come in at all. The plate stays the same. It's your gift, the window to your father that people will come for miles to see. Miss Miningham. Won't you?"

He fell silent. His face changed. All trace of the impetuous, confiding schoolboy dropped from it. She could not recognize what took its place.

The small room filled with hate.

And now beneath the confidence of her defiant will, her weak imagination fluttered in unaccustomed air. A host of obscure memories and fancies came to light for the first time in her mind. They circled tremulously round the finely cut head that was turned towards her, the face dim in the shadow, the hair burning in the dying light from the window behind him.

Through that window, the life of the village had come to her in thin fragments, splintered off and eagerly clutched by her; and in this instant she felt that what she had lately gathered had changed just a little.

She remembered the sound of heavy, slow footsteps tramping past in the dusk, back from the fields, back from the 'Barley Mow,' a gruff voice, a single phrase falling heavy and slow into her little room, and then again silence all round her house, except for the wind in the trees, the patter of raindrops on dead leaves, the footsteps of men going away past her house.

'A deal too red to my mind.'

She had heard them say that, yes, she too had felt that just now. She did not like red hair, it glowed so unnaturally. And from that thought another phrase darted across her memory, 'Aye, and a deal too lucky. It's against natur.' The last reproof was in frequent use in the village against aeroplanes, women's trousers, and modern appliances for farming.

But what now struck her was the hushed note in the disapprobation; they had not cared to speak up, nor to go on with what they were saying.

'I felt there was something,' she told herself in the sole articulate thought that struggled through this confused whirl, whose centre was the Squire's bright aggressive head.

She could not see very well, as usual she had lost her glasses, but she knew that the head was still turned towards her, looking at her, she thought it was just about to speak.

But no word fell in the muffled room, and nobody went past outside the window; she was cut off from all the rest of the world by a bright and darkly watching head.

'In such a deformed silence,' he was thinking, 'witches whisper their charms.'

He sat, wishing her dead, while he said pleasantly how the children loved to come to tea.

For she had had to burst through that creeping, imprisoning silence. She had, for the first time in her life, to force herself to speak. With a desperate effort to retain her proud position, she had said that she hoped the dear children need not be deprived of their little treat because of this—well—this mistake, and had said it in the manner of a conquering general making concessions to a defeated foe.

She rose, royally, to show him that the interview was at an end.

Not till he had left the room did she realize that she had not after all given him tea, though the kettle was really boiling over by now, for she could hear it in the kitchen and the floor must be flooded. Even this could not damp her triumph and her relief at his departure. She did not even rush to the rescue of the kettle. She went to the window and peeped behind the thick muslin curtains as the Squire came out of the house and examined and fidgeted with the great case at the back of the car before getting in.

As though it had become transparent, she was suddenly aware of what was in that case within a few feet of her. She had it in her power to throw the coal-box, the shovel, the tongs and the massive glass paper-weight on her father's writing-table, all straight on top of it, so that something would be sure to fall between the laths and smash the glass of the enemy window.

She did not of course really think of doing anything so lawless, unladylike, and, yes, she supposed it might be called unchristian. Still. A soldier of Christ. She was defending her father's memory and her love for him. She had defended it against the Squire himself and been successful. Her father's mantle had fallen on her, at last she had proved herself a worthy daughter. In the light of his unaccustomed approval, she thought of him, for the first time for thirty years, as alive; she thought of his devotion to her mother and hearty contempt for all other women, of his domineering and irascible temper which had kept her in a not altogether unpleasant state of anticipation.

She heard the hoot of the Squire's departing horn and actually felt an impulse to hoot back derisively. Well, well, she had once been a great tomboy, her mother had had to reprove her for wanting to play with the village boys.

As soon as she had had her tea, she would just run down to the post office and get a packet of hooks and eyes, and have a chat with Woolly. She needed reassurance from the sturdy good humour and common sense that shone in Woolly's cheerful red cheeks and beady

black eyes and even in her stiffly frizzed hair. A doubt trembled under her triumph. She had routed the Squire, but she could not rout his thoughts. And could he, could anyone, really think that her window, *her* window, for which she had given up so much, was not beautiful? Only 'think' of course, for it must really be so. The artist who did it had been such a truly religious man and had had a face like a saint in Burne-Jones' pictures, and everyone thought most highly of him. Still.

For an instant she saw yawning in a gulf at her feet the terrible idea that there might be no absolute standard of beauty. But this was too dizzying, she steadied herself by a vigorous pull on her flighty imagination. Her father would not care if the window were beautiful or not, since it was his. He did not care particularly about beauty, she remembered how he had once thrown a very beautiful pair of carpet slippers that she had embroidered for him, right across the room, just because they did not quite fit.

For once her mind had forgotten to follow its groove in which 'my dear father' came in shivering one cold day after a funeral, sat huddled in a cloak over the fire, spoke to her with ominous gentleness, went to bed and died.

She could find neither kettle-holder nor duster; Miss Miningham was not a neat and tidy old maid, and could never remember where she put anything. She put her hand in her pocket for her handkerchief and found a note, her note to Miss O'Farrell, actually forgotten all this time. So much had happened since that dreadful walk with the children only an hour ago, so overpowering was the fullness of life. But it did not overpower her. She looked twenty years younger and happy.

## *Thirteen*

*

"SHE won't make any odds," said the Squire to the Rector.

He had gone home and with the help of Old Williams the butler, and Young Bill, who was Old Williams' son, and Huish the head gardener, he had unloaded the car of its precious freight and

placed it inside a barn, and seen to it that the door was securely padlocked, and then gone on in the car to the Rectory, where he found Canon Goodchild playing chess with his housekeeper.

An inveterate bachelor, the Canon had his compensation in the art of making homes. Wherever he took lodgings, even if only for a few days, landladies became his slaves for life. Long and lucrative "lets" were thrown over at a moment's notice on receipt of an almost illegible scrawl which covered every corner of a postcard, referred intimately if obscurely to all members of the receiver's family, signed itself "Chas. G.," and remembered in a postscript to ask for rooms the day after to-morrow.

Then flowers filled his bedroom, fires were no extra, friends of the landlady's family dropped in to meet him again. Nor was the devotion all on their side. Mrs. Medlicot complained that half her time and of her master's money were spent on the birthday presents that she did up for the post and that he had chosen with as punctilious a care as the quotations in his critical essays.

His friends, different as they were in age, class and education, found themselves members of a large family who all treasured small objects that might have been picked up by a magpie for their bright colour, an old china pot, a coral, a ribbon or bonbonnière, old books, bound in red morocco, with inscriptions in Greek or Latin or epigrammatic verse, and letters, but more generally postcards, with a rhymed account of some book or country walk.

Mrs. Medlicot had at once become one of the family. She was the widow of Bert Medlicot up at Scammels, a rough character he'd been and a fair brute to her, and then, poor thing, her son died too and she had to go out to service, and she never in a gentleman's house before; thus the village had clucked prophecies of disaster when ten years ago she took service with the new Rector, and him a fine scholar from Oxford. By now, strangers frequently supposed her to be the lady of the house, for as feudal retainers used to take the names of the families they served, so Mrs. Medlicot had taken on something of the outward character of her master in her efforts to live up to what he never doubted her to be. She had even reached the point where she had given up gently boasting of the long talks she had with him about his books. Her figure was upright and full, but not 'faallen abraad' in the damaging phrase of the district, and her silver hair gave her distinction.

The Rector's belief that everybody's intellectual possibilities equalled his own, had persisted through innumerable lessons until at last he had succeeded in making her a very fair chess player; he would keep her up at it for hours past her usual bedtime, offering her her revenge, or more frequently insisting on having his own, until one or other would nod asleep over the board. But when by midnight even Mrs. Medlicot's devotion had given out and she had gone yawning to bed, he would grow wide awake, and collecting more and more books round him, would sit over the fire reading and writing until two or three in the morning.

Peregrine, who was a restless sleeper, had sometimes got up in the middle of the night and gone over to pay a call at the Rectory, nor had he ever yet been disappointed by finding the Rector in bed.

As he now entered the study, Mrs. Medlicot rose with the leisurely decision that belonged to all her actions, met the Squire with the faint vestige of a bob curtsey merging into a bow, and carried out the Chippendale tea-tray on which Peregrine noticed the crumbs of departed buttered toast, the old silver cream jug, the sugar basin the size of an urn. The room was dark with its lining of books, its litter of interesting or trumpery objects. James, whose imperturbable majesty seemed unaware of any movement in the room, seized the occasion and the best vacant chair. The Rector apologetically removed him as he welcomed his visitor, but James, with a lambent glance of reproach, rejected his proffered arm and landed himself in an indignant flump on to the floor.

Peregrine told him the result of his interview with Miss Miningham before he sat down.

"We must have another meeting of the Vestry," he said, "and they'll have to see that the consent of the original donor is not necessary."

"They can hardly do that," said the Rector, "except by declaring her of unsound mind."

"So she is."

"Squire, you are merciless."

"I have no chance to be. In a more humane age, for it had a wiser care for the health of the community, that evil old hag would have been burnt as a witch. The same spirit informs her, a deep malignity born of envy. Since she cannot have beauty herself, she would destroy it. She is not a living woman, she is a mausoleum of memories. She stands for death, against life."

"Death is a part of life," said the Rector, "you cannot eliminate it. She has as much right to her dead father as you to your——"

'Living Bride,' thought Peregrine, who did not wait to hear the Rector finish his sentence himself.

Inconceivable idea, that something which had ceased these thirty years even to be old Mr. Miningham, and was only a clod of earth in Gawcomb Mazzard churchyard, should be equal in any eyes to his desire.

"Death," quoted the Rector ruminatively, "is a tremendous thing."

"Don't put me off with Bacon," complained the Squire; there had flashed into his mind the memory of a funeral procession through a French market square, the thin chanting of white-robed figures, a black hearse covered with white flowers, and black figures veiled in crape to their feet. The shadow had passed through the sunlight and bustle of bareheaded women who were clustered round the stalls of fruit and fish and clucking poultry and embroidered shawls; a hush had fallen on the crisp emphatic voices that had been so eager in the practical business of living; the importance of that brightly coloured moment had been dimmed.

He shook off the memory. Death was a part of life only if you recognized it. He would not admit it into his shadowless, tireless world.

He said: "The chancellor of the diocese should be stuck in front of the two windows and told to choose."

"You've got to consider the human element," said the Rector unhappily.

"Then he can choose between Miss Miningham and myself. I'm conceited enough not to be afraid of the result. Ten to one she never applied properly for a faculty when she put up the window, but just did it with the consent of the Vestry and the last Rector, who was in mortal terror of her. In that case, it would be easy."

"It would be kinder to wait till she's dead."

"And how long will that be? Does anyone in the village know Miss Miningham's age? I thought not. But we know that her father did not die until he was eighty-three, and then only by special dispensation in the way of a wet funeral. She will outlive all of us unless a beneficent Providence sees fit to blast her. *And* her window," he added devoutly.

"I wish you wouldn't sit there cursing my lady parishioners. You promised me monastic peace when you got me this living, and look what you're doing to it, stirring up strife and hatred."

"Bah, you hate her yourself!"

The Squire spoke so explosively that James, though he was nearly stone-deaf, rose from beside his feet and removed himself to another part of the hearthrug where he looked with disapproval at this unnecessarily violent man, then turned his back on him.

"You hate her because of her cloth boots," said Peregrine, "because of her predilections for the cloth, because she is of the cloth clothy. Not all your Christian charity could lead you to forgive a plain woman."

A happy and malicious thought chased the perplexity from the Rector's brow; he rose in haste from the creaking depths of his basket chair, for his leather college chair had of course to be given up to his visitor, and began to run a fat forefinger along the crowded shelves that covered all the walls.

"What are you looking for?" demanded Peregrine.

"A book."

"I didn't suppose it was for the whisky."

"May the curse of Elishah fall on this generation of vipers. They take my books and never bring them back."

"You expect all the village boys to be scholars and gentlemen of course. And when at your lamented demise I buy up what ought to be this valuable collection, I doubt if I'll find a single complete set of volumes."

"Very likely. But I shall not be there to worry about it, and you will."

Peregrine could only worry about one thing at the moment. "Goodchild, you are Laodicean. I'd thought you would come in on my side on a question of beauty."

"Your use of the word is arbitrary."

"There can be no two opinions on that window that count."

"To whom?"

"To me," he roared. "This is the same argument as in our controversy on the hymns. Because some old Mrs. Crick or Crack or any senile parishioner of yours wants the Victorian trash that was slobbered on them in their childhood, we have to endure their treacly tunes and angel faces and vales of woe, along with the Psalms and

those magnificent Greek chants that you and Pike and I hunted out. You can't compare them."

The Rector, who had climbed a chair in order to search the upper shelves, looked down on him with flashing eyes.

"I am not such a fool," he said. "Nor can I compare Virgil with a Turkish bath, nor stained glass with filial piety."

"Touché. But don't hover over me like an avenging angel. Your righteous wrath might unbalance you on to my head and my punishment would be more than I could bear."

They had had hundreds of quarrels that had not mattered, but this time it might matter. He might poke up the Rector from King Log into King Stork, only to find him on the other side after all.

He stared at the wide chimney-piece before him and saw as if for the first time its litter of incongruous objects; the Dürer etching, the Early Roman lamp, the 'Shades' of Goodchild ancestors, tie-wigs and ringlets, noses pointed and bulbous, in sharp black silhouette against their background of powdery gold; the disused pipes, snap-shots in rubbishy frames, a tobacco jar with a gilt cigar for a handle. These last were kept because of some association, they had been given by an old nurse or a kindly landlady or reminded him of a school-fellow or a grandmother.

"Why," he asked abruptly, "do you keep a work-box made out of an ostrich egg in the drawing-room? Not that you use it much, I know, the drawing-room, I mean, not the work-box."

The Rector answered him, not his question, so frigidly that he guessed the work-box to have belonged to the late Mrs. Goodchild.

"All men like their mothers," Peregrine paraphrased sadly, "that's their tragedy."

He had his own admiration for his mother's figure and wit and the relics of that arrogant beauty that had made Albert Edward when Prince of Wales discard the rules of precedence and take her in to dinner when he met her on semi-official occasions. He had enjoyed her company, quarrelled with her frequently, and her death caused more loss to his pride than his affection. He could never again say, 'What d'you think is my mother's latest?'

The Rector could never say 'my mother' at all. He was of Miss Miningham's generation, who held their dead unspeakable. But his

reticence could not conceal from Peregrine his tormented depths of feeling for the probably tiresome old Mrs. Goodchild who had enslaved his devotion so that he had never married. That, however, was an advantage; he would not be nearly so delightful with the cares of a wife and family.

"Thank God for the Œdipus complex," he remarked, "though it's a pity for posterity, since one Good child deserves another."

And he mused on a bad German religious picture and a pith temple in a glass case, that must have the same excuse as the work-box to find themselves in the drawing-room among the Piranesi prints and the shelf of old Spode. These things had seemed as natural and proper a part of his friend's house as his rambling anecdotes were of his curious and ingenious mind.

But now there rose in him an impatience of this capacity for sentiment and reverence that held no beauties for himself. It occurred to him that the Rector looked on his Church as on his home, that the course of generations within its massive walls might leave their offerings of bad taste along with the good, and not disturb him. He endowed even inanimate objects with humanity; the church was not a treasure house to him but, like his home, a record of many people's feelings.

A chill presentiment rose in Peregrine. Was he himself, good fellow as he was, a hell of a fellow, yet lacking in humanity?

The Rector too grew uneasy, for Peregrine's silences were so rare and fell at such unexpected moments that they often proved more troubling than his most irritable rush of talk, and made one long for it to begin again, as though it were a many coloured web, spun to conceal the grey, fixed intensity of his mind.

But he could not forgo his chance of revenge, for he had at last found what he wanted, and still standing on the chair, he triumphantly asked his visitor, "Have you ever come across this letter from Lao Tze to Confucius?

"'Abandon your arrogant ways and countless desires, your suave demeanour and unbridled ambitions; for they promote not your welfare. That is all I have to say to you.' "

The Squire rose hurriedly from his chair, knocked the ashes out of his pipe, said in a low, quick, disturbed voice, "No doubt you're right. I must go," and without pausing for further farewell, left the room and the house in under one minute.

The Rector stood where he was, amazed. He could not think how he had upset the Squire by that harmless piece of friendly malice. And was he upset, suddenly, just because of Miss Miningham? He did not think it could be only that. There seemed to be a great deal going on in his mind.

He wished he were of more use to his friend, perhaps also to his parish. 'The Jesuits know their job,' he thought, 'they give one a sound psychological training.' But he detested psychology, prying into people's motives, making you think the worst of people, making you like that miserable little artist up at the Red House with his snake-like expression every time he, the Rector, told a story.

He climbed down from his eminence with a sigh that had more of relief than distress. He was about to sink into his college chair, now happily free for him, but no, James had reseated himself in it. Still the basket one was really quite comfortable; he relit his extinct pipe, looking round with satisfaction on his scholarly and unpsychological books in fine old bindings, on his fire, his bowl of bright autumnal flowers, on James whom he had so unselfishly left in the college chair.

There was no doubt that human nature like human life was in the main good.

Peregrine had been troubled because it was imprudent, unkind and caddish to kiss his children's governess in his wife's house, and now he wished to do it again.

He had forgotten about it in Vienna; then there had been that jolly home-coming, picking up her and little Wem, telling everybody everything, and the pleasant golden wine from the Wachan at dinner and all going splendidly, until he realized that there she was in front of him again, Bridget or Bride, for he liked to call her that in his mind, young, lovely, laughing, and living for him.

No, not for him. That was the worst of it. She was changing all the time, but not only as he influenced her.

Her clouds and smiles came flying at the beck of anyone's mood; John had only to call, or Very to take her arm, and she would light up as when he looked at her and spoke in that low and urgent tone which he knew now had power to thrill her. But so had so much else. A sunny morning, a run with the dogs, a pleasant word with little

Nanny or Old Williams, a thousand thoughts or fancies that he could not trace, all these were his rivals. A letter on her plate at breakfast, and she was lit with hope of all the brilliant possibilities of the world; then the handwriting on the envelope, and if it were feminine and youthful, a childish satisfaction settled on her, and if it were feminine and elderly, her hopes became three parts fears and her face wore that grey anxiety he resented, for it had been painted by experience alien to any that he had known; but if it were in a round schoolboy hand, then joy, terror, exultation and despair attended on her.

But now he thought that if he chose, he alone could play on that responsive instrument.

And that would make things very awkward.

He had been a fool to drive her into Sherne to-day to fetch his Saint Bernard window.

Just because he wanted her to be the first to see it.

Just because he hated driving, or indeed doing anything alone, and wanted her company more than anyone else's.

'One cannot act the irresponsible playboy with grace,' he told himself, 'if one is forty-seven and married to a faithfully devoted wife.'

He must 'abandon his arrogant ways'; his ambitions were bridled; he must count his desires. He had told himself there was only one thing worth having in life and he had missed it. Was he then to dribble with longing for what he had not the energy or courage to get for himself? To be one of the baffled dotards and old maids, the Miss Mininghams of the world? At the thought of Miss Miningham, he emitted a short yell.

If he were a scoundrel, he must make a good job of it. There could be no messy pretence of keeping a mistress in his wife's house as his children's governess.

In the meantime he must have action, novelty, company. After his humiliating anger with a sour old maid he wanted the purifying sacrament of standing a stranger a drink, a deed that expresses more spontaneously than any other a general goodwill to one's fellow creatures and desire to share one's pleasures with them.

He ran his car up on the side of the road and went into the 'Barley Mow.'

'This is humanity,' he thought as he looked round the dark and

thickly smelling room beneath its smoked rafters of three hundred years, at the round bucolic faces of the men slowly reddening through the gloom at sight of him, at a picture behind the beertap of humming birds and a ballet dancer and God Save the Queen, all made out of gilt or coloured cigar bands. 'This is life.'

No one was at the quoit board nor playing dominoes, the men were nearly all standing round the bar, and there had been a buzz of talk just before he entered, but now there was silence and a stare that came as it were from the backs of their necks. That was the pity of this pub, that they knew him.

He wanted the casual companionship of a crowded London pub where he could feel the thick muddled talk all round him like a fog, be drawn into it, perhaps with luck come in for a row.

'Only strangers are friends,' he told himself, and wished the world were one strange pub.

Intimacy frightened him; affection bored him; his emotions had been excited by other and impersonal methods, his restless pursuit of power and beauty; his desire for his unresponsive wife; talk; and drink.

He ordered a drink, and asked the elder Tom Pike, who happened to be next him, what was his; as he did so, he observed young Tom's anxious face behind the others. Young Tom, on catching his eye, began hastily to stammer to his neighbour how Harry Smout up at the Dyke had had his mother-in-law die on him while she was staying in his house, and they were burying her as soon as could be, in her own village, so that the corpse of a stranger should not bring a curse on the house. Harry Smout had been very friendly to Tom about it, offering him a ride along with the corpse. Out it all came in a nervous gabble, much more hurriedly than such a wealth of information was usually imparted.

The Squire finished his drink hastily as usual at a draught. For a moment it allayed the cold fever within him, and it pleased him to hear of Harry Smout's unusual hospitality. The Rector was right, death was a part of life, even of life's pleasures, and even he could accept the thought of it in conditions such as these.

He repeated the order, and his second drink invoked a memory which transformed the village louts before him into a host of abbots, 'purple as their vines,' of monks 'feeding and chattering together like parrots in the refectory,' and in their midst, rising, tottering, powerless

to hold the wine-cup, the giant Philistine Bishop Goliath, trolling out in dog Latin his famous song of drink and death.

> Die I must, but let me die drinking in an inn!
> Hold the wine-cup to my lips sparkling from the bin.
> So when angels flutter down to take me from my sin,
> 'Ah, God have mercy on this sot,' the cherubs will begin.

'I've kept that with me ever since school,' he thought with pride, and wondered where he had discovered it, but another scene impinged upon the orgy of mediæval satire, of two boys lounging in his room at school on a wet Sunday afternoon, and one said, 'You must be hard up for something to read if you've fallen back on old Green's history,' and the other showed him that passage he had just remembered, and proceeded to draw a picture of it in chalks on old Green's fly-leaf; and the one was himself, and the other his fag O'Farrell. This second scene gave him less pleasure.

He noticed that none of the men had answered young Tom, and that he had been talking rather feverishly at the air to cover what was evidently an awkward moment. There was bound to be a certain restraint at the Squire's entry, but he had always made them expand pretty quickly. Now it struck him that Tom's father had been more sheepish than usual in accepting his drink, and when at last he raised the glass to his mouth, Peregrine felt the action to be important. All the men round were watching it and himself in much the same way as a herd of bullocks watches a strange dog.

Whatever they had been talking about when he entered, it had not been Harry Smout and his mother-in-law's death. He would give a fiver to know what it was. He was sure now that it was of himself. That was nothing, but he had a keen scent for drama and sniffed it in this heavy and suspicious air. It was drama that meant danger.

He turned sharply on old Mytton who was sitting on the settle like a square block of wood, and said that was a good bargain Mytton had made with his Gloucestershire sow at Sherne last week.

Mytton said, "Ay, sir."

He asked Mytton if he would have the same as his, or what?

Mytton thanked him but he had drunk enough.

The silence of the next half-minute was weightier than any that had yet thumped down upon that ponderous company. It

seemed that it would never be broken by anything more than a stertorous breath or the scrape of a hobnailed boot on the wooden floor.

Old Mytton had refused a drink from the Squire.

"Well, that's a thing I've never done," said the Squire pleasantly. Very soft spoken he was being, and smiling too, but the herd drew insensibly a little nearer together; anxiety and fear raised their grey heads above the excitement. "Never been known to refuse a drink," said the Squire, "but then I have my principles. Anyone here who shares this particular principle can step forward and say what is his."

He looked at each man in turn, challenging him, but no one would meet his eye, their eyes fell or glanced sideways at their neighbours, and though there was more shuffling and scraping of feet, no one stepped forward for a drink. It had been a bold challenge, for their dread of doing anything conspicuous might alone have prevented them, but he thought the common feeling against the move must be pretty strong to hold back young Tom Pike, if none other, from showing that he wished to stand by him.

Their furtive opposition infuriated him. He guessed Joe Mytton to be at the head of it. He turned to him and said, "You had better tell me what is the matter," but still pleasantly. With an almost audible click, they all turned their thick necks and lumbering attention on old Mytton.

"Well, sir," said old Mytton, and pulled up.

"It's like this, sir," said old Mytton, and pulled up again.

"You'd speak more easily with another drink in your throat," said the Squire kindly.

The elder Pike ventured on a thick laugh.

"Reckon I showed sense," he said in an audible aside to Polly Bunce, the daughter of the 'Barley Mow's' proprietor, who was leaning across the bar with the happily impersonal interest of one who has only to play audience.

There was not a man except old Mytton who did not now agree with him. They had no wish to offend the Squire; had he been given the chance again, each would gladly now have stepped forward and said yes, thanking him kindly, he'd take that drink, instead of waiting hopefully for someone else to relieve him of the responsibility. Old Mytton was an outspoken man and apt to get funny with those who

didn't hold with him, it was a pity that worrying bitch had set him on with her caddle.

For the suspicious herd were regarding not only old Mytton but their mental image of a woman with cheerful red cheeks and black frizzed hair and high, tightly upholstered bosom that leaned across the post-office counter as she told all who came into the shop that evening of the Squire's evil intentions towards Miss Miningham.

Miss Miningham was of no use nor pleasure to the village, there was scarcely a person in it who had not found her meddlesome or troublesome; but she was poor and the Squire was rich; she was old and frail and he was hearty; she had honoured her father and he wished to please himself.

One after another they dropped into the 'Barley Mow' to see what the others were saying about it; and Tom Pike elder had said he had ought to wait till the old lady was dead, and young Tom had reckoned the Squire wouldn't hold to it when he found the old lady was so set on her window; and Joe Mytton, that stubborn devotee to the memory of Old Parson, who had barely tolerated his successors, and would never suffer any slur on his memory or on his daughter, old Joe Mytton had sat himself down on the settle, with his fist on the domino board in front of him, and said nothing at all.

And Frankie Dear the postman, shorn of the official glory of his uniform and looking in his mufti like any old hedgerow tramp, had held to it that Miss Wolaston she knew what she was about she did, and had an eye as sharp as a hawk's, and there must be good reason for it that there were now no more letters coming and going between the young lady up at the Red House and the place with the outlandish postmark and the big sprawling writing.

And George Ackell from Lower End had remarked that they went on having the devil's own luck at the Red House this autumn, the prices those prize cattle had fetched, you wouldn't believe, and they did say the Squire had made a mint of money out of nothing at all —just put a handful into something and when he took it out it was more than double as much, a thing fair unnatural that money should breed like rabbits.

At that, Polly Bunce was encouraged to believe it was often better weather up at the Red House to what it was down in the village, and they all chaffed her because she had spoken out what they were

thinking, for their jealousy must only find vent in guarded and darkly uttered hints that such a riot of luck boded 'no good.'

"When Spanish apes eat all the grapes,
What shall we do for sack?"

Joe Mytton had quoted the proverb some time back. No one had asked what he meant, any more than the Athenians asked their oracle. But they remembered it and said, "Spanish apes—a-ah."

The church frescoes had first aroused a popular pride in all except old Mytton, but now they too came under the same cloud of suspicion; outlandish they were, unsuitable to a Christian church; they could not say what would come of it all, though they affirmed with caution that if they lived longer they would see what they would see.

But in the presence of the Squire's robust good humour they were ashamed of such fantods if indeed they still remained conscious of them. The Squire had had luck and that was all you could put to it, and if it didn't seem fair that such a rich man should have such luck, well, it was written in the Bible that to him that hath, more shall be given, and if he had a mind to dress up the church with his trinkum-trankums, well, it surely was a foolish thing to quarrel with a man for the way he spends his money; or for that matter to quarrel with a man who has money to spend at all.

But old Mytton was main stomachy; he had got his head down and was charging into it.

With acute discomfort each man present heard him say in a voice that began as a husky whisper and ended as a bellow:

"With all respect, sir, we all says the same, sir, 'tain't acting right by the old lady to take away her window."

He had done it now. He had put the Squire on one side of the fence, and all of them, with old Mytton at their head, on the other.

The Squire said sharply, "My plans are not your business, nor anyone's here." Very nasty he looked, his long jaws snapping at old Mytton like a wolf. They had thought the first instant he would strike instead of speaking, but Joe Mytton was a tidy age and a good thing too. They waited miserably for what the Squire might say or do next; they were astonished to see him recover geniality as he looked round on them, and then straight at George Ackell from Lower End, while he said as pleasant as ever and as though he must have his joke:

"Will anyone here stand up as a champion for a lady in the good old-fashioned way?"

There was no one there of his height nor with anything like his training, but George Ackell was of massive weight and strength and counted as Gawcomb Mazzard's chief athlete. But neither George nor anyone else dreamed of taking the Squire's challenge seriously. There was a roar of laughter, exaggerated, raucous, showing their almost hysterical relief.

The Squire was a good fellow after all, the Squire must have his joke, the Squire must have his way; but he meant them no harm, he came into their pub just like one of themselves and talked to them straight he did with no beating about the bush, and when Joe Mytton got funny with him he snapped back but treated it all as a joke, asking who cared to speak up with his fists for the old lady. That was a good one. Fight with the Squire, and all because of that twilie old cat down in the village!

"Her and her window can go to hell for all I care," said Ackell from Lower End.

A spasm of irritation crossed Peregrine's face but was quickly converted into a grin. These clods would neither drink nor fight with him, and now they were trying to lick his boots. A fight was the one thing that could have cooled his temper; but there was no sense in having the whole village against him, he must get them round to his side.

"So you won't fight with me, George? Yet I'd lay you half-a-crown you've the better punch. Well, if you won't fight and you won't drink, I'm off to better company."

His movement to the door was a feint. As he had expected, George and two or three others stood in his way.

"No, sir, I'd take a drink from you, sir, and so would all of us."

"That's so," came a deep-throated chorus.

" 'Tis all a pack of women's tongues," came from the faithless Frankie, but they hushed him up, it was the present company that mattered.

"Mytton is an old man, don't pay no heed to he."

" 'Tis Old Parson he's thinking of," said Tom Pike younger.

The Squire nodded over his shoulder at the row of pewter pint pots, which Polly hastened to sling on to her fingers, three in a hand, and began to fill. The strained attention on the men's faces relaxed;

there was a sigh of relief and well-being. He leaned across the bar, and his low tone to Polly saying, "Put in a tot all round," fell like oil on the troubled waters. All was soothed and smoothed over, even the sounds were softer, the anxious scrape of the boots changed to a comfortable shuffle, and anticipatory grins lit up the scene.

Polly had actually dashed away a tear of excitement; it had all turned so quickly when the Squire caught her eye in that friendly way, and now that she was pouring in the rum, he signed to her to make the tot a double one, and a tender murmur of approval followed the course of the bottle. Oh, he was a proper gentleman he was and they knew it at last. She had been main feared it was all going wrong and the Squire leave in a tantrum. He had looked to be in a proper rage at one moment, like the devil himself he looked, so she said later on.

A pretty thing it would have been for him to get chuffed with them all on account of that old goose who was always hissing and cackling out of her window and pecking at people's art silk stockings because she hadn't had the luck to come in for short skirts when she was young. Tossed her head too at Polly she did, the quaddly old thing, for her good nature in serving the drinks when her father was in at Sherne, though she had been brought up as much of a lady as Miss Miningham and could play the piano in the parlour a sight better than she ever did, and wouldn't take rum in her beer even now, though the Squire had leant over inviting her to in a very special way, smiled just for her alone up one side of his mouth, and chaffed her about the chocolates he said he would have to treat her to instead.

Ah well, if they had both been that sort, she might have had him, but he wasn't, not any more than she, and it was all caddle what Miss Wolaston tried to make out from her prying at the letters, or no letters, that he was paying attentions to the young lady up at the Red House, and she no such great beauty neither; Polly had seen smarter ladies drive up to their week-ends at the Red House scores of times, and what was to prevent his picking out one of them if he had the mind? A pack of pecking geese, that's all these old women were.

She flounced over to Joe Mytton where he sat on the settle and plumped his pint pot down by him so that it splashed over the domino board, challenging him with a very bright eye which just did not wink as she turned back towards the others. A pause had fallen on their content, none actually looked at old Mytton to see if he would take

his drink; but all knew when he did not take it. He sat there stolidly motionless, staring in front of him. They remained uneasily conscious of him while their attention swung away from him, centred round the Squire.

But Peregrine, drinking, chaffing Polly, jollying the men, being a good fellow, a hell of a fellow, was getting more and more irked by his company. The men's laughter was over loud and eager, they were too anxious to please; they had been against him when he came in, they would be so again when he went out. If this village inn were life and humanity, then he had been made to feel he was outside it.

And glad to be outside. The men were a lot of toadies. There was only one thing in this smoky beery room that was important to him, that was strong as he, perhaps stronger; and that was the pig-headed loyalty of old Mytton who sat on the settle by the deserted domino board, and still would not drink with him. He could neither win it nor destroy it, it was beyond the reach of his acquisition and his understanding. He watched it, baffled, behind all his friendly joking with the others, and his angry impatience grew until he knew he had better go before he showed it.

He went outside. The dark air was cool on his face. There was a hearty chorus of good-nights, then he heard the silence follow him. He walked a few steps softly, then paused, but could hear no man speak. The lighted doorway was as quiet as if it opened into an empty room, instead of a crowded pub where men had been drinking hard.

'How long will it take,' he asked himself, 'for them to swing back to old Mytton?'

## *Fourteen*

✲

HE got into the car and drove fast at first, but soon he had to slow down because the lights were not working. The road before him glimmered into darkness, when at the end of it, red-purple, swollen, the full moon staggered up out of the low-lying mists.

In his state of unnatural tension, he looked on the advancing night as if for the first time. He forgot the accustomed attitude

towards the world as a well-ordered machine, moving through the seasons with clockwork regularity. He saw it as some hardly human savage, before the growth of memory, saw a miracle when darkness settled on the earth, howled as a wolf howls at the white alien thing that rides aloof through the darkness, that sheds a light wherein familiar objects become strange, that changes its shape from a curved thread of silver to a slice of melon, and then to a full and melancholy face, a thing that grows and diminishes, dies, and is born again.

To-night she was a Bacchante, a drunken witch, a disconsolate female Silenus. Gazing on her, Peregrine achieved a poem in place of the howl of his prototype:

> Bibulous, blood-red,
> Out of her swoon,
> Monstrous, magnificent,
> Up rose the moon.

In the ploughed fields on either side of him the darkness was red in the furrows between the moonlight, as though the fires of earth had burned to its surface.

He drove on until he realized that there was nowhere for him to go but home, and turned there. He installed the car, but instead of entering the Red House, he went up into the park.

From the highest ground he could look down and see the village crouched below him, its houses warmly sunk into the earth, huddled together, protected, almost hidden except for here and there a small red eye. He could distinguish the church and the Rectory, and thought that one malevolently watchful eye must be Miss Miningham's window.

A thousand or two thousand years ago, he could have stood on that hill and seen the village, the houses of its god, its priest, its field labourers, and doubtless its old maid. It had always lain there, snug and complete, a community in itself, building up by slow degrees its own customs, beliefs and legends. It had changed little from the time when the earth goddess was worshipped there instead of Christ. The people were dolts then as now, barely civilized, sodden and lumpish like their own wet earth. They had always lived down there, huddled in their tiny rooms, eating the watery stews and cabbage which was all their women had the wit to cook, caring only for their sluggish lusts, their snivelling children, and comfort for

their slow, weak dotage. The smoke from their cottages rose like a miasma, like their living breath in the thick, damp air. It breathed to his detriment.

Down in those misty fields at midnight on Christmas Eve, old Mytton had as a boy seen all the cows kneel down to worship. It mattered nothing to them that the date of Christmas had been changed. Vague watery superstitions oozing out of the wet soil.

His mind turned from their muddled reverence, the confused consolations of their Christianity, to tiny Italian hill villages like brightly painted toys that he had wanted to pick up and put in his pocket, to sharp, strong gestures and clear voices in the sunlight. Italy had led the world out of the murk of the Middle Ages, to the pride of life and the delight of the eye, to the divinity of the intellect and the cruel magnificence of men who saw themselves as gods.

But this village of his was still in the Dark Ages, too stupid to appreciate what he was doing for it; first indifferent, then sullen, now hostile.

It had taken Miss Miningham's side, against him.

These clods whose position he had improved and enriched, had dared to raise their heads against him. They criticized, they condemned his schemes for imperishable beauty, for life, always more life.

"You rotting corpses!" he cried and shook his fist at the air in a fury that was all the sharper because he felt it to be absurd.

His anger appeared for a moment to blot out the village, but it was only the effect of a cloud that had passed over the moon.

He was one of a long line of men who had been driven by their superior knowledge and power outside the common herd and led to take sides with the hidden powers of the universe against it.

Joan of Arc had God and His angels for allies, and was burnt as a witch.

Galileo took sides with the stars, and was executed.

Seers and alchemists, scientists or sorcerers, stood above the dolts of their little day, and paid the price in doltish envy and hatred, and in the isolation of their own pride.

At the end of that lonely procession came one who had aspired to be a god, and then a devil; it was the brutal ignorance of his fellow men that had created this monster; so Peregrine believed, and felt in that moment a kinship with the soul of Gilles de Rais.

He had always felt a good-humoured kindliness for the village, as

for Miss Miningham, and now that was gone. They had driven it out, for they had turned against him; it was not his fault. But he was bewildered, for he could not recognize in himself what had come in its place.

Looking up, he saw that the sky had become overcast with huge columns of cloud which near the moon were tinged with a red and angry light. The air now was very still. 'There will be a storm,' he thought, and went down the hill to the Red House.

He was astonished to find that dinner was long since over, that Ella and Bridget had gone to bed. He now remembered that the moon had been high in the sky when he had last looked at her, but he had no idea how he had passed all those hours, he was sure he had not been so very long on the road. It must have been on the hillside, looking down on the village, that he had lost count of time.

"They thought you were dining with the Rector," said Mr. Wem, who was sitting over the fire in the hall, reading *Maria Edgeworth.* "It's turned very cold," he said and put on another log.

"Well, I wasn't, and I'm ravenous, and it isn't, for I'm suffocating," said the Squire, and went to forage in the kitchen, but he did not know where anything was kept, and all he could find was a tureen of gravy which he bore up to the dining-room and heated in the chafing dish and consumed with biscuits and brandy.

"You ought to have been out to-night," he said, "the shadows in the ploughed fields were extraordinary, quite red. That was when the moon was just rising and almost crimson. I've never seen her look so debauched. What's the matter?"

"Oh. Nothing," said Mr. Wem quietly, stooping to pick up *Maria Edgeworth*, which had fallen to the floor. "You have not been into the church since your return from Vienna, have you?"

"No, I've been too busy. Why?"

"Only that I think I have anticipated your wishes."

He riveted his eyes on his book. Peregrine could not tell what was behind his now carefully toneless voice. What was the matter with everybody? He felt that he was the only straightforward simple human being in the place; all the others were muttering suspicions that could not come out into the open.

"I shall be sick if I eat any more gravy," he observed. "You haven't any objection, I suppose, to anticipating my wishes by accident."

"No. And I doubt if O'Farrell could have got more into it. It is very like him."

Again Peregrine wanted to shout, "Why not?" but kept silence.

"I sometimes doubt," continued David Wem, rising and carefully closing *Maria Edgeworth* after putting a marker between the pages, "whether I am painting as myself or only as O'Farrell's medium."

He started so violently that he sat back into his chair again, for Peregrine had burst into a roar of laughter.

"Well, of all the superstitious whim-whams!" he exclaimed, and handed him a glass of brandy, "here, you'd better drink that for once and make yourself a double Wem-Wem. Have you been talking with Miss Miningham? She's full of ghost stories."

But his laughter was for quite a different reason, and that was that so insignificant and dejected a spirit as Wem's should prefer to be himself.

"Why O'Farrell's medium?" he asked. "Why not mine?"

David Wem glanced at him and then away. He said, scarcely audibly, "And whose medium are you?"

It had struck him that from Peregrine's cheerful and ruddy face there had shone the bright eternal smile, harsh and aloof, of an inhuman deity.

'He has looked too long on his goddess,' thought Wem.

He rose and went to bed.

Wem *had* been talking with Miss Miningham. He had looked in on his way back from the church, and sat on the edge of an uncomfortably sloping chair, and observed her light the lamp and clear away the tea, with the inquisitive interest that he always paid to her fluttering and uncertain movements.

She had talked to him brightly of a missionary lecture she had heard last week at Sherne from a splendid wide-minded Mr. Bostock who had given them all a very straight talk.

Only at the end did she mention Mr. Sark's visit, not its object, and then Wem saw what must have been the reason for her unwonted air of vivacious assurance. It now perturbed him that this old and feeble creature should dare raise her withered head in defiance; he himself had felt apprehensive when he had looked just now at the laughing Squire.

But he did not know why he should fear also for Miss Miningham,

for whom he had never imagined he felt more than a malicious curiosity. Nor did he wish to write of his visit to her in one of those long, gravely foolish letters to Mrs. Mangan, which caused him increasing effort. She had grown dusty in his mind as well as in fact. It was difficult to remember that she was beautiful, or rather, as he now thought, to realize that she had been beautiful.

He went slowly upstairs and at each step he looked back at the study door, expecting to see the copper knob turn and the door open and Bridget come out of the empty study. At any minute something might happen, and he tried to think what could happen that should fill him with such foreboding, for he could not bring himself to believe that it should be anything so commonplace as the seduction of a pretty but foolish girl by her elderly employer.

He left his door ajar and heard the elderly employer come upstairs with a step more buoyant and youthful than his own had ever been. He heard him go to his room; and then he lay awake listening until, as he had expected, he heard the door open again and Peregrine come out of it, but he did not hear the steps, as he had expected, going up the little side staircase towards Bridget's room; they went next door to his wife's.

'True, he has a choice,' thought Wem, 'and no doubt if he preferred to go on further upstairs to the maids, he would find them equally accommodating.'

He dug his nails into his hands and thought that he was despising human nature, but the study of psychology had left him no such refuge, and he had soon to face the fact that he was bitterly envious. He himself was nothing, a negation, a dead thing. Even the life that flowed through him daily into his work was not his. Whence then did it come?

He lay awake listening, not now for Peregrine's footsteps, but for the living pulse that sometimes, just as he was falling asleep, he fancied he could hear throbbing through the house.

'I can hear its heart beating,' he had once told himself before he was aware of his thought.

He listened so hard for it now that he did not hear the low thunder come creeping up from over the hills, nearer and nearer to the house.

Peregrine went into his wife's room where she lay reading by a green-shaded lamp. The silk eiderdown on the great bed was pale blue, the furniture was silver ash, the walls were pearl-coloured.

Ella's hair lay like gossamer on the pillow, she was like a mermaid in a cave. He went over to the dressing-table and opened a silver box, a mother-of-pearl box, and a box of white and black enamel, but he noticed nothing that they contained. He went to the window and drew back the glimmering curtains, and saw the lightning on the hills and the great rocks of the Devil's Chair sharp against it.

His wife said, "Oh, Perry, you will catch cold in your pyjamas, and why didn't you put on your slippers? It has turned so cold and yet I heard thunder just now."

"There is a storm over there," he said, and then, "Why should they hate me, no, they don't hate me, what is it? They're afraid, not when I'm there, but behind my back. It's before I've come or after I've gone. But I've done them no harm. I've not hurt anybody."

The thunder came again and followed close on another flash. He watched the storm come nearer to him. The thunder was the voice of God, the lightning His wrath. He could believe that, when he saw the night riven and the distant hills suddenly near.

'Was it a miracle, Father?'

'What isn't?'

His answer to John in the church had come glibly enough then; now he dreaded to acknowledge it. He lived for the pride of life, the delight of the eye, and these things were once held a sin by ignorant superstition; but so was the regard for death an ignorant superstition; and people still regarded it. Did the old God of death and duty and intolerance still defend His own? Had He come to do so, to blast the Red House and destroy his goddess that sat there enthroned? 'Now the works of the flesh are manifest:—Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, strife, envyings——'

Why should he have thought of that? It was Miss Miningham who was the witch, who had made an idol of her dead father, and sacrificed everything to it. A barren and evil hag, a negative force, a destroyer.

"But I am not evil," he said aloud, "I am not a cruel man, and I have never been unfaithful to you, except in thought, except in thought."

"How strange you are, Perry. Of course you are a good man, and of course thought does not count."

There was that young lieutenant she had danced with so often

while Perry was in Egypt and Mesopotamia in the war, he had been so gentle, he was delicate and needed looking after, but no, thought did not count.

Yet as a result of it she spoke with a tenderness she did not often venture. "Dear, you will get so cold. Let me feel your hands. Oh no, you are hot, as hot as fire."

"It is you who are cold," he said, and got into the bed, holding her in his arms to warm her, but she lay there stiff and chill, all the warmth of life seemed to have left her body for his.

The desire to protect and comfort, which was her love, lay frozen within her, she could not give it out; round him, for all his passion, she had always felt a barrier.

He who took so much from her, could not take that.

"It is you who are cold," she said, repeating his words. She was sorry for Perry, she did not know why, nor how to show it.

He never needed her care. He was never unhappy, except for no reason, so that she could not help; never ill; never tired; in their London life when he was working at his hardest, he would sometimes fall off his chair, asleep, and wherever he was, he would sleep till he woke refreshed. One day he would fall off his chair, dead; she would have no chance to look after him till then.

Her love remained incommunicable, herself solitary.

Lightning filled the room. Every object in it was lividly distinct, at the same instant thunder crashed overhead. An instant later another crash sounded below, it seemed very close. Something near by had been struck, perhaps it was a tree, perhaps it was one of the barns, yes, it was the barn where like a fool he had placed his window.

The jealous God was angry. He had rejected the offering that had been made in no religious spirit, but in the pride of life and for the delight of the eye. He had destroyed the window for His church.

"Oh, shut the window, Perry, and draw the curtains. I know something was struck. There is the rain. Will the house get struck? I must go to Baby."

"I will go," he said.

He sprang out of bed, and in the light of another flash he saw the rain come down like a rattling iron sheet. He flung up his arms to shut the window, it looked like a gesture of defiance and delight. "I'll win yet," he called, laughing, as the thunder bellowed back.

He went out into the passage and turned, not to the nursery but to the little staircase up to Bride's room. She would be sitting up in bed watching the storm through the open window. He would go into the dark room and suddenly she would be before him, for one instant in the lightning, her face and hair and shoulders dazzlingly alight, and she would hold out her arms to him and say, 'I knew you would come,' and he would say, 'God is angry. He's backed Miss Miningham and broken my window and I've come to take you from Him and from Miss Miningham, anyway I've come to take you,' or perhaps, better still, for once he would say nothing at all.

'But that won't do,' he thought, and stopped and fumbled in his pockets for a pipe (but as he was in his pyjamas there was none), for it had now occurred to him, as though it were about someone else, that he had but just left his wife. He had gone instinctively to her in his perplexity, for even if she never understood, she was always there, always anxious to reassure, and to-night almost intimately tender.

And there was this someone else, this stranger, this self that he did not know or at any rate refused to acknowledge, sneaking straight from his wife's bed into the governess's. Certainly he did not know the bounder, he had nothing to do with him. What he wanted was a pipe to bite on, immediately, and he turned back towards the stairs; but was aware as he did so that his action was mechanical, prompted by memory rather than impulse; and that he himself, or else this stranger that had come to be himself, could recognize no sound motive for it.

'They say a chicken walks on after its head is cut off,' he thought, 'but not for long.'

In front of him, coming out of the door, was Nanny, distracted and clutching her curling pins as the thunder pealed.

"Is Baby Dick all right?" asked Peregrine, remembering what he had come out for.

"Baby! Oh, sir! He's sitting up clapping his hands at the pretty lightning and shouts at the thunder and he says the other Nanny told him it's all for him, and he wants me to take him to the window and it's all I can do to keep him in his cot. Oh, that last crash!"

She would plainly have preferred Baby Dick to be frightened too. She went back to him and Peregrine heard her trying to soothe and

expostulate with his vociferous son. He too felt a touch of irritation. All for him indeed. Baby Dick was getting above himself. Who was he to commandeer a thunderstorm?

He went up into the attics and looked from each of the windows to see if the barns had been struck. The storm was now more distant, the rain quieter, and the thunder slow after the lightning.

Down the hill in the village, lights were moving about; there had been some damage there, a smoky fire splashed the darkness, he could not tell where, it was probably a hayrick that had caught fire. But the crash he had heard had been much nearer than the village. In sudden terror he hurried to the north attic window where he could see the church.

As he leaned from it, the clouds cleared round the moon and he saw the dumpy body of the church safe before him. Then he saw that a tree had fallen against it; the fir tree in the churchyard had been struck, and there it was just caught by the projecting edge of the roof. It would soon be slipping with its whole weight against the wall.

He was turning to call up Young Bill to come with him to the rescue when it struck him that in the part of the church wall immediately in front of the fir tree was the window in honour of Edward Miningham, late Rector of this Parish.

If he left the tree poised at its present precarious angle, in half an hour at most it would crash through that miserable rubbish of thin modern glass and remove all difficulty in the way of fulfilling his generous offer of a new window to the church.

His luck astounded him. Who was he to commandeer a thunderstorm? he asked, chuckling, but it was his pride, not his modesty that was disconcerted. He could have managed that little affair of the window by himself; he had no need or at any rate no wish that the powers of the universe should come to his aid against Miss Miningham. A gently mocking phrase of the Rector's disturbed him though he could only remember half of it, something about the gods taking sides. Such championship was beyond his control.

It was of course an accident. But were all accidents to be in his favour? He felt uneasy, he was forced into an unfair position, he was more embarrassed at the thought of meeting Miss Miningham than he would have been if he had broken her window himself. He had not broken it, and yet he felt responsible, as though his monstrous

egotism had indeed in some way interfered with the course of nature and set it working only to his advantage.

And in that case where would it stop? where would his luck lead him?

'It was not I who began it,' he said to himself, and there he was back in the doorway of the Jew's shop in Paris, blinking his eyes against the sudden darkness. All he had entered the shop for was to ask the way to O'Farrell's lodging.

He had not asked the way.

Instead, the Cybele reigned in the Red House.

He had played with the idea so long that in this strange hour he could wonder what was the extent of her power. Why should Baby Dick believe so firmly that a goddess nursed him, gave him thunder and lightning to play with, and placed him in the fire each night, as the Earth Goddess had placed the infant Telemachus to render him immune from human ills?

Clouds again covered the moon, but the storm had stopped and only a thin rain fell. Down in the darkness he saw a lantern come into the churchyard and stop beside the fallen tree. After a moment or two it went away in the direction from which it came, and Peregrine could now distinguish against its light the thick-set, stooping form of an old man.

The sexton's cottage was close by the churchyard; Joe Mytton had been down to help the others with the burning hayrick or whatever it was, and on his return had seen the disaster impending on Miss Miningham's window, and had gone to seek help against it.

Now that it was again a contest, all Peregrine's instincts rose in furious defence of his luck. If the gods had really taken sides with him, they might have done their job better. That feeble spite in setting fire to a hayrick in the village would just spoil this really good bit of work with the tree. They had not been used to the business for a long time, and were bungling matters in this newer other world.

But it was no use doing anything himself. There was old Mytton already returning with two or three others and their lanterns; he could only have had to go down as far as the lych-gate and call. They set the lanterns on the ground; by their light Peregrine could see the black figures moving in and out of the darkness; he thought he could distinguish the elder Tom Pike, the only man who had been prompt to take a drink from him that evening, and Timothy Bunce,

proprietor of the 'Barley Mow,' with whom Miss Miningham had waged a life-long war in the cause of temperance.

Yet these two were treacherously taking her side against him. They helped to fetch and carry, to drive staves into the ground and knot a rope to the tree, to haul on it, sitting on it on the ground to get it taut. Old Mytton sat on it alone while they went to get more rope; and all were careful not to call to each other and so, possibly, attract the attention of any at the Red House, little knowing how all the time they were working under the eyes of the Squire.

And he could do nothing. They were fulfilling their right and proper duty, helping the sexton protect the church from any further damage caused by the storm.

All together they hauled at the rope, fastening it as taut as they could to the staves, drawing it tighter and tighter in a mighty tug of war, five men against a stricken tree. They looked like dwarfs beside it, malignant kobolds with their lanterns, working mischief in the night. But he could do nothing. His impotent fury held him spell-bound at the window, watching the men of his village work against him.

When they had gone away, he still stood there. He could not bear to go to bed. At any other time he would have paid one of his nocturnal visits to the Rectory. On summer nights he had often gone over in his dressing-gown and slippers, walking delicately on account of the bottle of Château Margaux held tenderly in his arms.

The two friends would sit over their glasses till dawn, capping Belloc with Petronius and Gibbon with Herodotus. Occasionally one of them would mention a mutual friend from Oxford, but their talk was generally impersonal and never of women. Moonlight and sunrise were excluded; the precious smoke-laden frowst, pure atmosphere of masculine intimacy, unpolluted by hygiene, aesthetics, or femininity, gave Peregrine his nearest approach to peace. Here he was as he had been in *statu pupillari* and at his happiest, when he and all his friends were equally glorious, when women were only the irritating creatures who said, "quite too amusing" to him at dinner parties, and had not yet begun to disturb him as beings that could be possessed but never assimilated.

But now he could not go to the Rectory. If he told the Rector what he had just been watching, he would take sides against him.

## *Fifteen*

✲

WINTER came suddenly down on Gawcomb Mazzard. It was the storm that brought it, breaking the weather of that hitherto fine autumn. It had damaged the remaining fruit; a barn had been struck; and a hayrick in the village had been burned; the fallen fir tree in the churchyard was cut up and carted away to the Red House for firewood.

Heavy rains followed, and floods and influenza; the stream at Lower End rose so rapidly one bad night that it washed away hencoops and poultry, and stores of corn and hay out of the Dutch barns. For the first time for many years the water got into the tumps of potatoes, mangel-wurzels and other roots, so that the best part of them rotted.

John and Very splashed about the floods in wading boots, throwing sticks into the torrent to see how fast they rushed down.

"Ooh ay, it be a Sark year fur sure," Bridget called to them as she sat on the stone bridge, dangling her feet over the foaming water, drawing them back just as it touched her toes. She looked like their picture of the water kelpie, laughing and mocking, the silver lights from the water below flickering across her face.

The corn came swirling down-stream and got dammed up against the further fence, and John shouted "What fun!" but Young Bill spoke to him very sharply for that, he said there was enough mischief brewing without the young folks lending a hand. John was very sorry when Young Bill explained that it was George Ackell's corn, and that the floods had brought him more disaster than a year's bad weather, so that he talked of giving up his bit of land and going into the mines over the Welsh border. That was the ultimate dread of the countryside, that they should leave their own land and go among the foreigners over the border with their queer clipped speech and ferrety eyes, to work in foul places under the earth.

Disease broke out among the cattle; it had not touched the Squire's prize breed, the farmers told each other in deep grumbling tones. More firewood for the Red House, that was all the storm had done to them. And there was an active cause of complaint, for the

Squire, who had been so prompt to help in other bad years, now did as little as he conveniently could.

A song that the old men could remember from the days when they used to call the larges at the Harvest Home, was now sung again by the children, with derisive hoots and gestures after the Squire had passed by.

"Hickley Hockley Harvest Home
Three plum puddings are better than none,
I want some ale and can't get none,
Hickley Hockley Harvest Home."

Their mothers would slap them severely if they caught them at it, and old Mrs. Keevil at the Long Leeze told Jenny it was ill meddling with the devil's own. Not that Jenny herself had called out; she scampered as fast as her legs would take her when she saw the Squire.

Miss Miningham's triumph was tempting Providence; some even hoped that Providence would not resist the temptation, for prosperity can irritate more than adversity. Miss Miningham, after a lifetime of languishing like an exiled heir apparent, had suddenly acceded to a throne.

"You'd think it was herself propped up that tree by sitting herself sore on the rope for the best part of a stormy night," was Woolly's comment across the counter. It was all very well to say how Heaven had taken her side and shown the Squire her window wasn't meant to be touched, but it was a fat lot Heaven would have done for it, if it hadn't been for Joe Mytton's rump. Best part of an hour he had been sitting there, he had. And wasn't it Woolly's own industrious tongue which warned everybody of the Squire's impious proposals about the window, first to Frankie Dear over the letters, and then to Mrs. Pike who had dropped in for a bit of lard, and then all the others who after that had hopped across for one thing or another as fast as fleas? The old lady was getting a bit above herself.

But with so many people afraid for her, Miss Miningham was sometimes afraid for herself, aware at dizzying delicious moments that she was living dangerously. She remembered with agitation how she had defied the Squire: she asked herself, 'Why should that tree alone have been struck?' and knew that all the village had asked the same question.

Fears that had been inspired in her childhood by the old woodcuts in

her father's *Pilgrim's Progress*, of Christian's battles with Apollyon and the powers of darkness, his journey through the Valley of the Shadow, now troubled her dreams. She hung a horseshoe over her door and had Woolly to sleep in the house for a night or two, but the one remedy destroyed the other, for Woolly, regarding the horseshoe with an eye as bright as a boot button, remarked, "Some folks reckon that's for good luck, but 'tisn't for no such thing. 'Tis to bring children, that's what 'tis for."

In any case, superstition was a weak and cowardly defence, unworthy of a soldier of Christ. She read the Psalms exhorting God to arise and scatter His enemies, and saw them in the person of the Squire advancing down the hill from the Red House, terrible as an army with banners. After so many grey years, the evening of her days was a lurid sunset, which coloured even that former monotony. Looking back, she thought that she may have been of more importance, perhaps even of more charm, than her modesty had allowed her to realize. She showed Very a cream serge dress trimmed with black velvet with a black velvet cape, made by the village dressmaker over forty years ago.

"I had some very pretty dresses as a girl. Miss Chavers made very well, it is a pity there is no one like that in the village now. I never could bear to part with that dress, but perhaps it is selfish; and Miss O'Farrell might do something with it, but clothes are so different now and I don't know if she is clever with her fingers," and the cream serge dress went back into its cardboard box, and another proud record was taken out of a drawer in a Japanese cabinet, a crumpled almost crumbling cutting from a local newspaper of the same date as the cream serge, which had mentioned Miss Miningham at the Gawcomb Mazzard flower show as "lighting up the tents with feminine grace and elegance."

She read this out with rather less than her usual self-deprecation, folded it again carefully and put it back in the tiny drawer. Very, who had hardly listened, watched her action with interest.

"Father's got a bit of newspaper like that too," she said. "I've seen him pull it out and read it and put it back again, but he keeps his in his pocket-book."

"Really," said Miss Miningham, "a bit of newspaper."

"Just a dirty old scrap like that," said Very uneasily. Each, in putting away the dirty old scrap, had had a secret, gloating look.

She did not recognize this, but she did not think he would have liked her to speak of it.

"Something that he's proud of then," said Miss Miningham.

"Yes. No. Oh, I don't know. He didn't look a bit proud at first, he looked sorry, he did really."

Miss Miningham actually stopped speaking of it, and in this new, opulent, almost swaggering mood, showed her some lovely old baby caps which she had always meant to give her dear Mother for the dear little new baby, only somehow. And now he had grown too big for them, and a whole-hoop ring of rather faded garnets with three of them out, which she would like Very to have when she was dead.

"But I'd rather have it now, Miss Miningham," said Very, who was trying to say something polite and gracious in the style of 'O Queen, live for ever,' and was confused when it came out like that.

Still it had all been very successful. "I'll come by myself again next time," she said in her most grown-up way, avoiding Miss Miningham's attempt to peck at her by the flourish with which she held out her hand, "we don't always want a boy with us, do we?"

And Miss Miningham, writing her Christmas letter to a feminine first cousin in Australia whom she had never seen, and much too early for Christmas, but you could never be sure at that distance, found that there was so much she could not write about that really it almost seemed as though she were living a double life.

It interested her what the dear child had said in her funny way about her father and the newspaper cutting he treasured so carefully. It could not be a record of some gallant action of his in the war, or successes at College, for he had looked sorry at first, it was odd how little Very had insisted on that. Woolly was a good creature but rather too coarse for her companionship—really, her expression as she looked at the horseshoe!—and the Rector as always would not quite do, but she did just mention it to that very nice young artist who kept coming in so often now, as much as twice in the last fortnight, so that it was not safe to wear anything but her best grey alpaca every afternoon in case.

He was always so very sympathetic and attentive, and she had noticed he was rather an inquisitive young man. She had to tell him exactly how Very had told it, and that the Squire didn't look proud of it at first, he looked sorry.

"He looked proud of it afterwards, then," said Mr. Wem, and fell into silence, nor did he pay half as much attention to her next item of news, which was of much more exciting importance.

Woolly had told her something so shocking she hardly liked to mention it. On Guy Fawkes' Day the boys had all made a great bonfire as usual in the evening up on Higher Fedders, and there they had burnt the effigy, not of Guy Fawkes, but of the Squire himself. They had taken a pole ten feet long and dressed it up in an old cap and coat of the Squire's that had been given to Gilly, one of the gardener's boys, and cut a face out of a long carrot and stuck in two burning red cinders for eyes; and, what was worse, they had thrust two rams' horns up through the cap, and fastened the cloven hoof of a bullock to the end of the pole, and a wire tail, with a fork at the end of it, to the coat-lapel, and then they had thrust this terrible giant into the middle of the bonfire and danced round it with shouts and jeers, throwing balls of mud at it, singing "Three plum puddings are better than none," and shouting "Here come all thy plum puddings," until the whole was burnt through, and it fell with a crash into the flames.

"And what do you think Miss Wolaston told me?" said Miss Miningham, dropping her voice, "she said, and she is a most truthful creature, only too straightforward, in fact just a little uncouth, so that of course one cannot make a real companion of her, but honest and sincere, oh yes, a heart of gold, and she actually said to me, 'It's not the first time they've made a mawkin of the Squire.' A mawkin, you know, is the name for an image or effigy round here, they use it too for scarecrows. Yes, she said old Mrs. Crickle and old Mrs. Keevil have both burned the Squire in their backyards this autumn, and been asked to do it too, and there were plenty to help them."

"But why should they? And why dress him as the devil? He's not hurt anyone in the village."

She bridled and said that that was as may be; but intentions did count for something after all; he had done nothing to help them in this bad time; simple people like animals and children always knew; and there was no smoke without a fire.

He was glad to be down in the village among a common and practical life with room for small dim fancies; he touched it through Miss Miningham's rambling talk, but no longer in the church. The villagers, who had so often dropped in on some pretext or other to

stare and whisper, now came there no longer. Nor did the children. He worked alone now except for the Squire.

He had to get up and go back to that other volume of life, where anything he thought, or tried to say to Bridget, had to work its way as if against a current, an increasing obsession of magnificence run riot.

He could not recognize his own work, it grew faster, stranger, more exorbitant; "aren't you rather overdoing it?" asked Peregrine, who did not wish him to lose sight of his earlier austerity, for it had been the best thing in Wem that you could be sure of his taste, but now you were not sure of anything in him, he himself was so manifestly unsure.

Moons like Stilton cheeses, thick and huge and solid, chestnut leaves like thunder clouds, men like trees in massive, motionless procession, as deeply subject to the earth as the procession of vegetable life; all seemed of the same substance, heavy and primitive. And like brilliant fungus on a rotting stump, this monstrous growth sprouted on the walls of a church that had outlasted any untroubled faith. No fresh beauties had grown there for centuries, there had been nothing to inspire them.

There were times when he turned from his own work with repulsion, as from something evil, though his speaking self would not have recognized the word. It recalled to him that Renaissance of wealth, art and learning, of the tyranny that comes from excess of power, and the cruelty that comes from excess of egoism, that burst into life on top of the stale, worn-out, mediæval world.

Nothing behind it all, he thought, nothing to express except actual material life. He did not know if he were criticizing the work of artists who were slaves to their imperial masters three centuries ago, or his own.

Behind it all was Peregrine Sark, whose dust would lie in an urn in this church that he had made famous.

The visitors gasped and exclaimed, they said "Marvellous," which it certainly was. They quoted Mr. Squeers, "There's richness for you." Later on they evidently found it difficult to say anything, even facetiously; they stood and stared, and some felt an approach of panic, a sense of the earth in its fury, creator and destroyer.

There came that comic yet terrible picture, irrelevant to the history of the life and death of John Barleycorn, of Christ blasting the fig tree that had refused to bear fruit for Him out of season.

Those bare branches of the stricken tree, fussy, futile, fumbling at the empty air as if in apology, expostulation, anything that was a mere vain waste of effort beside the all-important fact that it did not bear fruit when it was wanted, were like the pitiful gestures of an old woman, a silly old maid. And the ruthless gesture of the arbitrary God was like—yes, it was not unlike—never would they have imagined that a picture of Christ in anger should be so like their genial host.

"What does he *mean*?" they asked each other, laying themselves open to the snub that a modern and 'significant' picture is not intended to mean anything, that indeed it was very good of Mr. Wem to let them see at all that his men were men and his moons were moons, even though they were for that matter rather more like trees and cheese.

Yet it was he who said to Bridget, "I may be dangerously original, but I can't help thinking there ought to be a religious idea somewhere in the decoration of a place of worship."

"A religious *idea!* not subject," he added with his usual patient expectation of stupidity, and found compensation for it in her unexpected beauty.

She was less sudden and angular; there was a softness, a bloom about her as of a nectarine ripening on a sunny wall. Things grow fast in a hothouse, he told himself, watching her mature even as Ella withered. She had lost that occasional look of care; she was losing all traces of her former life; she might have been made out of the flowers and mellow fruitfulness of the last few weeks. 'Made?' Wem repeated to himself, 'made for what?' and found an irritating answer in the foolish stock phrases, 'Made for love.' 'Made to be happy.' He thought it was only his impotent jealousy that could fear—or hope—that this golden dream she moved in should lead to her doom.

He wanted her to talk of O'Farrell, but she could not bear to. Why should they talk of anything before the present? 'Present mirth hath present laughter,' the tune hummed in her head like the murmur of summer bees.

But David Wem snatched at every scrap she could tell him, examined it, put it aside as if for further use. It was as though he were working at a jig-saw puzzle and could never get all the pieces for it. He made her tell him things that Peregrine had said of her

father, and remember things that she had not even noticed at the time. He told her silly little things like Miss Miningham's tale of a newspaper cutting.

"What old gossips we are!" she cried, "you and me and Miss Miningham," and in this one chance to inflict a snub on him who had given so many, a glimpse of him at her first rush of laughter told her that he had been hurt more often than his victims. But it would never do to show she had seen that, so she went on laughing and said, "We're 'the three old maids of Lee. And one was lame and one was deaf and the other couldn't see.' Which is which, I wonder?"

"It's you who can't see," he said.

They were sitting over the great fireplace in the hall; the pine logs from the churchyard were burning merrily, the red-hot fir cones preserved their delicate and elaborate shape in the heart of the fire. A log fell off the wrought-iron dogs and rolled to their feet, it lay there hissing and sending up sparks; in the space it had left was a cavern of quivering flame. Bridget, looking into it till her eyes smarted, said, "I see a man with stiff red hair marching into a fiery furnace."

"You can't see what's round you. You might as well be dead here. You glow with life, but it isn't your own. All your own life is being sucked out of you to feed another. Ella knows it. She is watching you, she was glad at first, because it has happened to her and she is tired enough to be selfish, but now she is sorry."

'Why doesn't he say it?' thought Bridget, putting up her hand to her throat, there was such a throbbing lump there, 'he had better say it.' Aloud she said, "Do you mean I am in love with him?"

He kicked away the log with an impatient gesture. "I say you live for him. I don't know what love means with you. With him, it means that he absorbs people into himself, makes them his own. But he can do that too without loving. He exploits us all."

"It's Da's spirit in your pictures," she said, "not his," but as she spoke she knew the difference. If it were O'Farrell's spirit, it was transformed and enflamed by Peregrine. He had made that too his own. What was it in that clutching, fiery spirit that yet was barren, and knew it? Once he had said to her, " 'Give is a good girl, but Take is bad and she brings death.' That is not Christianity, it's from the Hesiod." And he had added mockingly, "You are a good girl, Bridget Bride."

But she gave nothing.

He had taken the thought of Frank clean out of her mind, which was now a cavern, bright and empty, waiting only for him.

There was no longer room in it for her mother, nor for all of them at home. "It isn't exactly that there isn't time," she had replied to her mother's protests at her much fewer and shorter letters, "but that there always seems to be such a lot going on." Yet she could tell nothing of it, nor did she answer about her mother's and sisters' lives, which had grown remote and shadowy, as though the Red House were now her only real world.

Perhaps she was not the right sort of governess for Very and John; she liked teaching them, she loved playing with them, "but a governess isn't only that, is she?" she said, looking perplexedly at David Wem, from whom she had wandered so far away in her thoughts.

"They are in it too," she said, "they are on your side, at least Very is. But why do we talk of taking sides? There isn't any fight."

She was being drawn into a conspiracy, against Peregrine, and against what else? For she knew as she spoke that there was a fight, though the forces were confused and struggling in the dark, she did not know what they were.

But on the side against Peregrine, among a host of dim figures which stretched from Mr. Wem to Joe Mytton, she suddenly perceived a tired wife, a cross child, a flustered old maid, an absent and faithless lover, a dead man.

She had not expected that last, she cried, "Da! Then Da wasn't——"

The front door was thrown open. Peregrine's voice said pleasantly, "What wasn't he?" He came towards them, holding out his hands to the blaze. Wem had pushed on the log again at his entry, and it flared up with a shower of sparks, he was in a hurry to be doing something, in a hurry to be gone. Bridget knew he was afraid and felt superior; she didn't care what she said to Peregrine, she looked up in his face, laughing, and said, "He wasn't really a friend of yours, was he?"

'But he was never a real friend of yours, dear,' Ella's voice had said, but how differently.

His eyes rested on Bridget thoughtlessly, covetously.

'God!' thought David Wem in a silent scream of agonized nerves, 'will he rape her in front of me?'

She had grown exquisitely responsive to Peregrine's glances, but this silent acquisition was like a heavy hand laid upon her. She flung back her head as if to shake it off. All that Wem had said to her came true in her mind. One of them must speak and lift this weight of silence.

She said, "When was it you had a chance to pay him back his loan? Only one chance, you said."

She should not have said that, and in front of Wem. But Peregrine did not mind. He did not seem to hear. He radiated cheerfulness and good humour. He said:

"Thirty years ago the Chancellor of this Diocese drank too much port at dinner and instead of calling in a right-minded manner for a match, he lit his cigar with a letter that he had happened to cram into his pocket instead of leaving to his secretary. The letter was to a lady in a remote part of his diocese, granting her application for a faculty to put up a window in her village church in memory to her father the late Rector. She had already obtained the consent of the Vestry and the Rector then in office, she therefore neglected to make any further application for the faculty, which had already been promised; and so put up her window without it. Thus it has come about, according to information extracted from the present Chancellor by the present Rector and imparted to me this afternoon, that at any time the Vestry can give its sanction to the removal of her window and the erection of another in its stead."

"But you've got to get the consent of the Vestry," said Bridget, "and Joe Mytton is part of it. He won't give it."

Wem glanced up at her from under his eyelids. So she too had put herself on the other side. She had not been there at the beginning of their talk. Had he helped then to put her there with the memories of her father which she had tried to avoid? They had broken her long mood of shimmering suspense. 'Pain stings us into life,' he thought, for he could admit her life if she were living, not for Peregrine, but against him.

Peregrine, his eyes still heavy on her, knew only now that she would be his; that in these last few weeks he had merely been deferring his moment, playing with it, and thus gaining the full flavour of each unconscious betrayal on her part, each shy hesitation or, as now, her futile defiance.

Then he noticed what she had said some time before, and smiled

at her and answered, "Supposing I had paid him back? Then you would not be here, nor Wem, nor the frescoes in the church, nor would Cybele sit enthroned on my chimney-piece, nor even perhaps would Ella now be going to see Miss Miningham, who has caught a bad chill in this bitter weather."

How recklessly he talked, all nonsense, but she was afraid with Wem sitting there, crouched, gathering up everything that dropped from him, fitting it all into she did not know what strange pattern.

Peregrine's eyes, resting on her, had the drugged and irresponsible look of a sleep-walker.

She sprang up, and said, "I didn't know Miss Miningham was ill. I'm sorry."

She ran up the stairs, hoping to catch Ella before she started, to go down with her if she might, to get out of the house. But Ella had gone.

She went up to the playroom. The children had not come back from their Latin lesson with the Rector. The new Viking ship stretched across a whole wall. Peregrine had had it sent from Vienna as a surprise for the children in place of Bucephalus, that headless leprous beast so ungratefully mourned by Very. John too, who had first learnt of the surprise, had been doubtful and distressed, but the blue and golden sails, the dragon prow on which you sat astride and rocked more deliriously than on any horse, had won him over to the glittering ship. But Very, more insensitive to beauty and more resentful of change, tied a black scarf on the mast in mourning for Bucephalus, and persistently refused to take her place in the stern, and sail the uncharted seas.

Bridget now tore down the scarf in impatience. Very was just keeping it up. She was too lucky. They ought all to have had that ship at home, *they* would have appreciated it. The Kitten with her hair over her eyes, and always a fresh hole in her sleeve or her stocking, how she would love it. She had not thought of the Kitten for weeks, not really, not as though she were there, living, beside her.

And suddenly she thought of Frank, and that he was in desperate need of her and she did not know what it was; she was here, and he could not get through to her, he was wanting her, calling to her. No one, not even Da, had ever needed her like this. But all herself was stunned and stupefied, she was not herself, she was no longer her own, nor Frank's, she was nobody.

She heard a loud double knocking at the front door and she said to herself, 'That is a telegram for me from Frank,' but she did not go down and see if her guess were right, she did not care, she was dull and empty. She put her head against the painted head of the dragon and cried.

'Oh, what is going to happen?' she sobbed, and all the time she thought of Peregrine, whose overmastering personality now filled her with oppression and fatigue.

## *Sixteen*

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IT was not a good Latin lesson that afternoon. The Rector was irritable; he chid John for "an error of taste rather than judgment," he shut his eyes at Very for lolling, in a way that made her wish she were dead or dazzlingly beautiful; he could not find their exercises among the welter of papers Mrs. Medlicot allowed him to keep on his writing-table, as long as it was only on the writing-table; and they wasted a great deal of time and temper looking for them until James in disgust left the room.

Then he was suddenly remorseful and made up for it all by throwing away the exercises, and for the rest of the lesson he translated to them with great speed and gusto the exciting bit in Virgil about the burning of Troy; and at parting he gave them a little book, full of funny old pictures, bound in faded red morocco, "straight-grained"; he murmured over it in loving tones as he ran his thumb-nail along the grooves in the leather. Out came the familiar stump of pencil from his pocket and in a small, straggling, almost illegible hand, he wrote their combined initials on the fly-leaf and a long Latin inscription which, in a remaining gleam of malice, he refused to translate to them, leaving it to "their leisure and their later learning."

"But we'll ask Father to read it to us," said Very.

"Then tell him," said the Rector, suddenly shutting his eyes again, "that in doing so you rely on him to remember the Humanities."

But of course Father remembered them, and could translate anything he liked. Very and John were too well brought up not to know that the Humanities meant Greek and Latin.

The Rector held the door open for James to return after the children had gone. But the atmosphere in the study had been disturbed, the writing-table was in a terrible litter, the chairs had all been moved into the wrong places, children had been here, and James detested boys; and earlier in the afternoon that violent visitor who came far too often and affected James like an electric shock, had appeared again, had laughed suddenly and long and had left the Rector in an unwonted state of perturbation.

He did not consent to return until Mrs. Medlicot, who knew as well as anyone else that the Latin lesson had not gone as well as it should, entered the study with a second cup of coffee to keep out the cold this raw afternoon, for "it's a nasty day and what's the use of hanging on to its leavings?" she said as she shut out the thin daylight with the solid crimson curtains, and put two lumps of sugar in the Rector's coffee and another log on the fire. The Rector, who was standing with a book in his hand, read aloud:

" 'Light that makes things seen makes some things invisible. Were it not for Darkness and the Shadow of the Earth, the noblest part of the Creation had remained unseen.' That is one way of saying you cannot see the stars in the daytime."

"It is a much finer way, sir, and sounds as though it means more."

"It may even mean as much as you did, Mrs. Medlicot, when you said you did not wish you had never met your husband, since he brought you your sorrows."

Well, she had not meant as much as a book, and a book in a dilapidated old cover too, which she understood was more precious than a smart new one. "I reckon there's many of us would rather have something than nothing," she said, and held out the cup, but he did not see her. She was afraid he would stand reading until he forgot all about his coffee, though he was all for having it hot, and she would often heat things up for him two or three times, a thing to drive you fair wild in anybody else; but you couldn't be angry with the Rector any more than with an innocent babe that didn't know better, and a great gentleman, too, for there he'd stand bowing and making such beautiful speeches about his carelessness and your kindness that it made you feel you were a great lady yourself to be waiting on him.

So she sought to divert him with a piece of news that she knew would startle him, though unhappily.

"Reckon we'll have Joe Mytton on the parish next. Been

turned off the Home Farm he has, too old for the work, they say. If he's too old for feeding the pigs and cleaning troughs, he's too old to be sexton, that's what they'll say next, sir, mark my words." And as the Rector lowered his book and looked at her over his spectacles, she added quickly, "There's your cup of coffee, sir, by you on the shelf. Do drink it up now, I've put in the sugar."

But her anti-dose had been too strong. He knew "they" to be the Squire, he agreed that "they" would find Joe Mytton too old to be sexton, and he knew why, since the Squire's strongest opposition in the Vestry would be removed with Mytton.

The news came in fierce reminder of the Diocesan Chancellor's letter in his waistcoat pocket. By some means or other the Squire would get his way about that window. And he himself had heard to-day that Miss Miningham was ill and he had not yet been to see her.

He dropped the seventeenth-century edition of *Cyrus' Garden* into the college chair, but that did not alarm Mrs. Medlicot, for the Rector treated even his best books disgracefully, reading them over the fire till the covers bent, lending them to anyone, marking the bits he wanted in pencil, laying them open, face downward, and actually making dogs' ears on the pages if he had no other marker handy. He looked on them, not as proud possessions, but complacent friends whom he could trust to tolerate such liberties.

But he did not then pick up the cup she had put on a book-shelf by him; he went straight out into the hall. Mrs. Medlicot pursued him with the cup in her hand and tears in her voice.

"You aren't never going out in this bitter weather and without your cup of coffee. There's not a mite of good in going to see Joe Mytton, and you'll catch your death of cold. Do, sir, just to please me——"

He stabbed his way through the torn lining of his coat sleeve (she must mend that lining the very first thing when he got in), but his severe expression broke into a smile for her as he drank the hot liquid at a gulp, saying at almost the same difficult moment, "Mrs. Medlicot, my cup of gratitude is already full, would you have it spill over?" and hurried down the steps and towards Miss Miningham's house.

There was neither sun nor cloud, the air struck like cold iron on his mouth; the passers-by had pinched, blue-nosed faces.

"Cold day, Mrs. Ackell."

"Ay, sir, reckon we shall have snow by nightfall."

Another shadow fell across his short-sighted vision, another sharp face peeked at him out of the cold.

"How's Mrs. Crickle's cough, Alice?"

"Terrible bad, sir. The weather's cruel hard on weaklings and old folks."

He hurried on, lest at that Alice should mention Miss Miningham, but as he drew near her house, his steps slackened, and every call he had ever paid on her dragged at his memory. For ten years he had treated her as a queen who, with a humorous depreciation of the value of power, had voluntarily abnegated her sceptre. For ten years she had treated him as an usurper.

His company was not wanted, he would be bored and irritated, distressed by her cluttered room and uneasy personality. A deeper fear beset him also, for she was ill and old and he would feel for her the unreasoning, tearing pity that sometimes assailed him since his mother's long and painful illness and slow death, an anguish that had turned him in terror from all experience that might again bring such suffering.

'Can a beneficent God allow these things?' he had asked himself; he did not recognize the question as his nearest approach to religion; he buried it deep under little acts of courtesy and kindliness, under many friendships, under books by gentle Epicurean philosophers who lived when Rome was great, or England rural but urbane.

His unwilling steps were arrested by the sight of Mrs. Sark stepping delicately out of Miss Miningham's little house and coming towards him, huddled in her soft furs, evidently anxious to speak to him. Here was one of the amenities of living, even in a cruel world, even in a parish, and that parish his.

A benign and gracious woman walked with him up the village street, asking questions about his housekeeper's rheumatism in this harsh weather, and about the lecture he was to give in Sherne next week on the English letter writers of the last century.

In the dark hedge above them, high against the grey sky, the pink and orange berries of a spindle bush burned like spots of fire. For at that moment the dull red ball of the sun had rolled out of the general grey and lit up the bush as though in all the surrounding scene it cared to look on that alone. The Rector loved berries, small bright bits of colour that he could gather and give away. He plunged

up into the hedge through thorns and nettles, still talking, though rather breathlessly, of the superiority of Cowper's letters to Byron's, grabbed at a large branch of spindle and returned in triumph, with a hole in his coat, to present it to Ella.

But for once she missed her cue, she stopped being gracious and benign; instead of thanking him, she said, "I am afraid Miss Miningham is very ill."

She seemed different as she said it, her silvery stillness was dispersed; perhaps she was different out of her home, to which she seemed in no hurry to return; perhaps she was glad to be wandering on through the village up past the Park gates, away from the Red House, surrounded by little lives that began and came to an end, that were filled with cares for food and drink, with unthinking daily employments, with illnesses, birth and death.

"She spoke of her window to her father," said Ella in that strangely troubled and therefore more lifelike voice, "she said—it was quite unexpected, and so unlike her—she sometimes thought she ought to have been a man, for she is of a proud and imperious nature and finds it hard to brook opposition. She said that perhaps she had all along thought too much of herself, of her rights and her pride, rather than of the church. She said—'If the other is indeed more beautiful——' But I did not let her continue. It distressed her to think of it."

Someone came running down the wooded slope in the Park, alongside the lane; a white face peered down at them over the hedge. 'Who is that squinnying at us?' he was just about to ask, when he saw it was Bridget O'Farrell, whom he had failed at the first glance to recognize. She stood there in her black cape, her hair the colour of dead leaves against the dark leafless trees, and in her hand a piece of dull red paper which the Rector gradually perceived to be a telegram.

How funny they looked down in the lane, thought Bridget, the old Rector in his rough shabby coat like a hedgehog, and Mrs. Sark in her furs like a slender grey squirrel, and between them the burning branch of spindle berries and behind them the red ball of the sun, like a Christmas card, except that there was no snow nor white frost, only a bare stage set for winter.

How funny human beings were; they had a way of turning into something quite different; if she could paint them as she saw them she would know what she meant. She stood looking at them, with

a telegram from Frank in her hand, as she had stood that evening long, long ago with the letter she had not posted to Frank, when Jenny Mytton had stared at her as though she were someone quite different, someone in a story of which Jenny knew a little, but she did not. Perhaps it was only because she remembered that, that they looked so strange to her, and as though they found her strange; they had peered up at her so startled she had nearly burst out laughing, or was it crying? For her breath was coming in a jerking sobbing way as she said, "Mrs. Sark, I've had a telegram. It's from someone who wants to know if he can come down and see me next week. Can he?"

"Yes, certainly. How long can he stay?"

"Oh, he would have to get back the same day. He's in the Navy. He could only have about two or three hours here. Thank you."

She turned abruptly and ran on. The girl was always running, reflected the Rector, who had called her Atalanta in a charming verse which commended her for turning aside in the race of life to gather up golden apples, and now regretted the compliment. For courtesy is a golden apple, and she had not turned aside for it, she had barely greeted him.

And then Ella said a thing that terrified him. "What can I do about Bridget?"

Mrs. Medlicot had tried to hint to him of gossip about the Squire and the pretty new governess. He had silenced her so that neither she nor anyone else in the village had dared another attempt. But with Ella asking him to think of it, he could no longer refuse to do so.

And the girl had not looked nearly as pleasing as usual; she was wan and grey and had a famished expression. Had she worn, like a veil, the exquisite sorrow of a Mater Dolorosa, it would have touched his heart. As it was, he thought, 'Women bring many troubles on themselves by their attitude of defiant independence.' He knew she was independent because her hair was untidy.

The Squire's good-humoured taunt, 'Not all your Christian charity could lead you to forgive a plain woman,' flashed into his mind. It gave a distressing picture of himself as a sybarite who had always preferred harmless scholarly flirtations, giving flowers to pretty married women, writing verses to little girls on their birthdays, to marriage and children for himself. He told himself he had always shirked the difficult and disagreeable things; and so morbid was his repentance

on this raw grey day that for an instant he wondered if he ought to have married Miss Miningham.

Miss Miningham had shown a great spirit; and he, who thought he valued magnanimity, had failed to recognize it.

He stood irresolutely in the lane and fumbled in his pockets.

"I must——" he began, and then, "I beg your pardon, I didn't ask you first, but I must, yes I certainly must have a pipe." He had been going to say, 'I must speak to the Squire,' but instead clutched at his pipe and matches as the last straw between him and the thing most repugnant to his fastidious nature. For he must interfere.

He had turned and led the way back to the Park gates without ever noticing that he had not answered Ella, nor spoken of his intention to see Peregrine.

But Peregrine was not in.

He declined Ella's invitation to come into the drawing-room; he wished to think, and so preferred to wait in the study.

It was the worst place to think in.

He stood by the window looking out on the jagged outline of rocks against the harsh grey sky, from which the sun had feebly rolled away. A few thin desolate flakes of snow came scurrying past. 'The weather's cruel hard on weaklings and old folks.' But however resolutely he looked out on the bleak landscape before him, the warmth of the room he was in lapped him round like the warmth of a day in June; the scent of flowers and spices, which proceeded doubtless from the aromatic woods burning on the hearth, stifled his senses into the belief that the wintry scene outside the window had no more reality than a picture. Less indeed; for, more uncannily vivid than the real view, there hung before him the small painting of an apple tree, weighted down by a magical burden of fruit, against the gleaming background of an orange-coloured cornfield. As he gazed at it he seemed to be looking through a minute window at an actual scene far away; almost he could believe he saw the sheep stirring on that distant hill and a thin haze of summer cloud drift across the cerulean blue.

The Squire's voice behind him made him start, for so absorbed was his contemplation that he had not heard him enter the room.

"I'm sorry you've been waiting for me. I was down in the hot-houses. Marvellous, aren't they?" He held out two amber-coloured

plums, bidding the Rector take one while he bit into the other and tenderly invoked its name, "Goutte d'Or Violette."

The Rector looked doubtfully at his plum. He had a reluctance to taste it; he had come to be unpleasant, and was it not taking salt in the house of his foe? Another tradition hovered absurdly in his mind, of mortals who ate fairy fruit and remained for ever prisoners in a strange land, held as vassals in the underworld once they had permitted a pomegranate seed to pass their lips.

The Squire took no notice of his visitor's reluctance, he ate his own plum at a gulp and threw the stone into the fire.

"That picture goes well here, doesn't it?" he said.

"So you got the curé to relinquish it at last. How did you do it?"

"By offering him more than he could bear to refuse."

'How shall I begin?' the Rector wondered, for never had he felt more sluggish and incapable. His senses were lulled, his spirit slept. He had always thought the Early Christians a rude, aggressive, ill-bred people, yet he had brought himself to their pitch of intolerance and must choose on which side he stood, 'for he that is not with me is against me.'

In the lane he had thought of the Squire as a rapacious and tyrannical man. But the Squire was his friend, and it was he who had been to blame, sheltering his conscience behind some ironic allusion, some delicate thrust that might or might not prick the Squire's sense of justice, but could in no way offend the decorum of urbane good fellowship.

"It's been very pleasant here," he said, "but I doubt if I should have taken a parish. I had the sense to refuse a house at Eton, but my limitations have outrun my knowledge of them."

"Your limitations, Rector? You have none as an ornament to this parish." The crisp laughing voice was like the crackling of thorns under a pot.

"The duties of a parish priest are not entirely ornamental, regrettably."

Peregrine's obvious pride and pleasure in him only increased his helplessness. He saw himself as a plum ripening and fattening on the Squire's red wall. Gawcomb Mazzard had been his place in the sun, year after year he had hung on in its shelter, browsing among his books, basking in the comforts and companionship of the Red House.

And now like a vandal he would have to break up this pleasant image of himself and the Squire as cronies with a variety of tastes in common.

"You have done far more for my parish than I," he said, "you have improved their cottages and the farm lands. I don't understand these things, but I have heard it said that you have given agriculture new life in these parts. But you know what straits they are in this autumn. Those cottages at Lower End have been flooded twice already, there has been great loss and damage. Since I've been here I don't remember a time with so many people sick and men out of work."

He had meant to begin by telling of Miss Miningham's admission concerning her window—'if the other is indeed more beautiful'—but he had unconsciously evoked a host of pale and pitiful faces that had lately troubled his kindness. Old women who had in these bitter winds to keep down their fires to a single lump of coal, children who looked pinched and hungry, men who, like Joe Mytton, had been told they were too old for work, and Joe Mytton himself unjustly told; yes, it was 'cruel hard' for them all.

Peregrine's voice fell on the warm air with an unexpected sound, for it was cruel soft. "I no longer wish to waste my money on what I do not care for."

"That is reasonable." The Rector was clinging to the last relic of his image. "But can the things you care for have changed so greatly? You have been as proud of your village as your house," and he thought, 'but "proud" won't do. That is no use if he is not fond of it.' He looked unhappily at his friend and said, "I have relied too much on your generosity and energy. I beg you not to remove them now when they are most needed."

So blank and bright was the look confronting him that he could only stumble on, "You are spending huge sums on the church, but the village would surely come first now."

He had not sat down when the Squire had motioned him to an armchair, and now the Squire went over to the fireplace and stood looking down into the burning logs. The Rector saw him raise his eyes to the figure of red earth that dominated the room, that held in her hands the torch of life and the pomegranate seeds of death. In his uneasy state of mind, he thought, 'He turns to that figure as to the *fons et origo* of all his success and splendour.' 'An idolator.' He was shocked at the obsolete religious phrase that had forced its

way into his mind, for what could such things mean to-day? Yet in that room, before the goddess who was old when that image was new, and whose image smiled at the passage of twenty-five centuries as it were yesterday, idolatory might have a meaning.

A dreadful meaning. The Pagan deity, compounded of human pleasures with inhuman powers, was a monster, at variance with the struggling world.

He scarcely noticed when it was that Peregrine began to speak with that same soft intentness, so unlike him that it was as though someone else in the room were speaking.

"I have been converted," he said, "I will not say from Christianity, for that has no longer a living meaning. Even you, Rector, the most natural and instinctive Christian I have met, can only preach to me a humane utilitarianism. But when I saw this goddess, it was with worship at first sight. It was bought with the price of a human life, of two, to speak exactly. And in reward it has brought me luck, or as I should say, life.

"You tell me I neglect the village for the sake of the church. That is true. You tell me of distress, of cold and hunger, you will tell me of an old maid ill and thwarted, of an old man unhappy that his work is ended, and himself in my way. What is that to me except as part of the necessary price? I tell you that the imperishable beauty that flowers in this obscure church is perfected if bought with poverty, with suffering, with foolish, incomplete, unnecessary human lives."

The Rector stood with his most cherished beliefs torn from him, his belief in the perfection of his friends, in the natural goodness of all men of sufficient education to understand the results of their actions. Against those beliefs there had always been the contradiction of Imperial Rome, of the Italian Renaissance, but never before had he been brought to face what the men might be who had brought these worlds into decay. He could find nothing to say to their descendant.

In his retentive memory there stood suddenly a passage from one of the Early Fathers: 'All the lusts of the flesh, and all the lusts of the eyes, and all the lusts of the will, and the pride of life, this man hath gratified and glutted to surfeiting, yet is he as restless as the sea and as insatiable as the grave.'

He said the last words aloud, and like the king rebuked by the saint, Peregrine answered, 'with a peal of orgulous laughter.'

Canon Goodchild could not recognize the face of his friend. The familiar world of the Red House was being estranged from him.

" 'The world has a right to be regarded,' " he exclaimed, for where he might not, surely Dr. Johnson would prevail.

It did not look as though he had prevailed.

"These people matter as much as you," he said.

"Can you honestly think it?" said the Squire.

"Yes, sir, for by what criterion can we judge? By the power of your money and influence you have achieved material beauty in the church. But who can judge of beauty? It is various and difficult."

Miss Miningham's tentative tribute to a beauty she did not understand now inflamed his mind to fury.

"What of the beauties of humility, of generosity in defeat? Do you deny these? Then, sir, you are a barbarian, and you may achieve a barbaric splendour in the works you inspire, but of the beauty that springs from a true sense of proportion you know nothing. The Greeks made a better thing of their gods than you have done. I thought that a Christian church had had good reason to thank you for what you made of your Cybele. But now the village has reason to curse you for it. You have turned the good to evil, the desire of beauty and power to a monstrous egotism."

"By God, Rector!" said the Squire, whose attentive eyes were bright with admiration. There was no other light in his face.

Canon Goodchild had failed. He pounded out of the room.

As the door slammed behind him, Peregrine smiled at his goddess; and saw her smile as the answer to his.

In the hall the Rector was bundling himself into his great-coat again and getting all mixed up with the sleeve which had got turned inside out. He was in such a hurry to be gone before the Squire could help him into it that he ran out of the front door and in a blind, lopsided fashion down into the village, still jabbing at the inside-out sleeve with his fist and never noticing why it was unable to penetrate, though he did at last perceive that his hand was still tightly clenched over his plum. In his pudgy palm it had become hot and squashy, of a sickening softness, an egregious sweetness, a lushness, an overripeness, a rottenness. He threw it from him with repulsion. Splash went the tender golden flesh all over a sharp stone.

That last hour had become a nightmare, he did not realize how

stifling, until he was outside in the sharp air, nor had he noticed how suffocatingly hot it had been in the study. He mopped his forehead, for he was still sweating, though not from the heat. Could the Squire have been drinking too much for even his hard head? He hoped that was the explanation. His face had had a flush and his eyes a glitter that had struck the Rector at the time as unnatural. Nor did men soberly use words like 'imperishable' and the verb 'to flower.'

He had turned without thinking of it towards Miss Miningham's house. 'She will die,' he thought, still running breathlessly, and there would then be no obstacle in the way of the Squire's generous gift of a window to the church. Where a thunderstorm had failed to do the job for him, where an ancient legal muddle, and a piece of arbitrary injustice, would prove superfluous, this black frost would succeed. 'Three plum puddings are better than none.'

In the tangle of rage and inexplicable fear that had ensnared his thoughts, he found relief in punching at his coat; he was glad it remained obdurate, he would have liked to think with Mrs. Medlicot that there was a chance of his catching his death of cold in thus rushing out to his duties with a portion of him insufficiently covered, even as old Miningham had met his death by a funeral on a wet day, which a neighbouring Vicar had offered to take for him. Canon Goodchild was in a mood to commend his obstinacy. What was the use of living unless you lived dangerously, shared burdens, fought unkindness? He would prove to himself that he was after all fit to be these people's champion. One man could not stand alone against the opinion of an entire little community.

But did the Squire stand alone? Not in his own belief. He must be mad if he thought he had bought the favour of a goddess along with her image. Mad with inhuman arrogance, he had already thought him. And materialists would hold all men with a sense of religion, Christian or Pagan, a little mad. What was it he had said, that the image of Cybele had been bought with a human life? It was impossible. But nothing in that room was impossible.

There was someone else at Miss Miningham's little gate, a slight slouching figure. It was that offensive young man who was so terribly at ease in Zion that he could pretend not to be.

"May I come in with you?" said David Wem to the Rector.

## *Seventeen*

*

WHEN Frank got into the train at Paddington on a dark early wintry morning, he left his world of the last few months behind, and rolled into a quiet pocket of existence. He had been so hurried and bothered that he had neglected to get any papers or magazines and had to spend a three hours' journey with nothing to look at and no one in his carriage. It did not matter, for there was so much to think of, all that had been happening to him lately, all the different faces, and one neat, slick little face, the pointed nose and chin he had found so fascinating, the slanted dark brows, the sleek head, that had suddenly slipped before his eyes into the narrow snarling face of a rat. All the things that she had said, and that he had said, and that he had heard said of her, and that he had thought, and that she must have thought, and that gradually at last he had had to admit she could never have thought at all; these he would have to bear him company on the journey.

At Gibraltar, he had been marooned on a point of land so crowded with people all jostling and talking about each other, so busy with duties and pleasures equally social, drilling, riding, dancing, flirting, hearing and making scandal, getting reprimanded or afraid of it, wondering what had been guessed and who had told, that this sun-baked rock in the middle of a sparkling sea had become his whole world.

But now with every minute he was leaving it all further behind. He found he was not thinking of it after all. He could only watch the momentary scene outside his window; grey streets, pink streets, grey fields, pink houses, more and more fields, less and less houses, men bending over the earth, women walking or driving down deep lanes. It was strange to know that they went on walking, working, living, after he had flashed by.

His own importance dwindled; his recent life became suspended and remote. He was rushed on deeper and deeper into the cold English country, where he had lived as a child, and would return when he was old. So he vowed on an impulse that caught him like a catch in the breath, as he saw a ploughed field sweep upwards to the

sky, and from its brown furrows, birds rising and wheeling against the silver clouds.

He did not matter here, he and his concerns. It had all been going on without him for ever and ever. This unexpected glimpse of it on top of the first emotional crisis he had known, was like dropping out of a glittering moment of time, into eternity.

'If Biddy doesn't care for me,' he thought, 'there is nothing in my life at all,' and he saw it going on through a grey infinity of days, all alike and all empty.

It was much colder at Sherne than in London; there had been a sharp frost here and some snow, and the cheerful little chauffeur who met him asked if he would like the car windows closed, but he wanted his full taste of the country. Bridget had not come to meet him, though he would have so short a time with her, and they would surely have given her the time off, she had told him often how decent they were to her. She must be angry with him, but not too angry to have let him come. That possibility had not occurred to him until this moment, when it gave him a chill sensation of fear.

It was market day in the old hill-town. The car emerged from the narrow crooked crowded streets, from a bustle of lowing cattle and sturdy staring farmers and busy women with heaped-up baskets, greeting each other and calling their children in broad strident voices, into a wide, white, silent space. The sky was leaden. A flock of birds sped across it, flashing their white under-feathers as they turned, scurrying from a storm cloud. The car was a moving speck in all that iron whiteness, hurrying on towards the hills, scarred and crowned with rocks.

Behind the rocks, the giant heads of snow clouds had risen, portentous, derisive. As he drove towards them, Frank felt trivial and unnecessary, as though he had strayed out of his own life into a scheme of things in which he had no part.

Then he thought it was no wonder that he was uneasy; he had not heard from Bridget for weeks; her last letter had been written in a rage, and so had his; much had happened to him since then, might not much have happened to her also? But she was safe in a respectable household in this remote country place; and as to her feelings for him, how could she lose in a few weeks what she had had for years? He had found he could not; surely she would find it too?

To still his questions, he began to ask the names of villages they

passed, and hear names that had been old before the Normans came, to notice church towers and oak-beamed cottages and crooked dormer windows winking at him out of the steep roofs.

"That's Gawcomb Mazzard," the chauffeur said at last.

Frank looked down the hill at a half-hidden clump of human dwellings huddled together, snug and secret under their canopy of snow. At that bend of the road the car seemed to be coming down just on top of their roofs. Spirals of wood-smoke, blue as turquoise in the ashen air, rose in some places as if from the little Picts' houses that used to be built in the bowels of the earth.

"Much sharper frost up here," he told Williams, who did not answer, but then he was having to drive carefully and slow. The village looked curiously deserted. Once or twice Frank was aware, just as they had passed a window, of a face peering out at them, and dodging quickly back behind the curtains.

They came to a church with a short, square tower where the bell was tolling. The stone faces of devils shouted silently from the roof, and Frank noticed a bas-relief of a centaur with bow and arrow. The field behind the church rose sharply against the sky; there were pigs running about in it, rooting at the hard earth. A tumbledown cottage squatted in a hollow with poultry pecking about the door.

The two men leaning over the lych-gate into the churchyard might have been in green hoods, talking Saxon, looking out on just the same scene eight hundred years ago. One of them was old and square and stockish, and had a bearded halo all round his face, and one was young, with a sharp-pointed triangular face. Both turned their slow gaze on the car, and then deliberately looked away.

All this Frank saw in detail because Williams with a perturbed look had brought the car to a standstill and stopped the engine; and he saw that the reason for this was a hearse drawn by two black horses, followed by a long black procession advancing over the white scene towards them.

He could now hear the silence of that place, for the footsteps of the procession, sunk in snow, made only a faint 'crunch-crunch,' and there was nothing else but the iron tolling of the bell. He wanted to ask whose funeral it was, but did not like to. His impatience at his delay was swallowed up in some deeper emotion all round him, so that he felt, though he could not guess, its still and dreadful hostility.

The black horses stopped just in front of him. A short stout man

in a surplice came out of the church and down to the lych-gate. The two men who were waiting there came forward, and helped lift down the coffin and carry it through into the churchyard. The coffin was covered with wreaths and crosses of yew, and a few Christmas roses, but behind it was carried such a conflagration of flowers that Frank could hardly believe his eyes.

Superb hothouse flowers he did not know, spikes of scarlet like spears dipped in blood, sprawling crimson stars and azure bells, fantastically curling blossoms like purple snakes, like swollen lips, like tongues of flame. They were made up into no shapes nor even bunches. Heaped prodigally together, they splashed that icy scene with an insolent and alien splendour.

The people in rusty black or dark clothes followed them. They held wisps of woollen scarves or shawls up to their mouths, and their frozen breath came in little clouds that hung about in the still air. Each face, blue with cold, as it turned at the lych-gate, looked blankly at the car, and then turned away. A little girl holding tight to her mother's hand, looking on the ground, glanced up and saw the car with suddenly frightened eyes. And as those shy and startled eyes met Frank's, they stared at him with admiration and awe, and still with fear, though not of him, and he wondered for an instant if she knew something to do with him that he did not know.

"Who is it?" he asked at last.

"Our old Miss Miningham," said Williams shortly, and Frank should have felt relieved, for certainly an old maid he had never heard of even in Bridget's letters could have nothing to do with her or him.

And now that the last of them had gone through the lych-gate, they could push on to the house whose red twisted chimneys Williams pointed out where they rose above the trees. They went through majestic iron gates up a short and thickly wooded drive and into a garden that lay in terraces between the house and the distant hills, for the intervening country could not be seen from it, so that it stood as in a land of its own. It seemed to have even its own climate, for when the car stopped, he thought it warmer here; it must be more sheltered, and perhaps the sun was coming out, for the scene looked lighter than in the iron frost of the village. White lawns and yew hedges, old red walls and a stone pond sunk deep at the foot of a flight of steps, were spread beneath a red house as spacious as a palace.

It was strange to come and look for Bridget in this silent, sparkling,

lovely place. An elderly man who was very like Williams came to the door and led him into a large warm hall. A door on his right was thrown open. A tall man came out quickly and shot him a glance so keen that it would have been discomforting had it not passed almost instantly into a smile of welcome.

"You are Chanbury?" said the man. "I'm Sark. Come in and get warm. Bring drinks here, Williams."

Frank came into a room where an enormous fire of logs roared and crackled beneath a high carved chimney-piece. A dull red figure sat on the chimney-piece and stared at the room, and he stared back. Her ineffable smile was an insult to his troubled thoughts. 'I hate antiques,' he thought, wondering when he would see Bridget. A copper bowl of flowers stood near him, the room smelt and felt like summer, and he was right, the sun had come out. But on looking fixedly out of the windows he saw that it had not, and that it was only the reflections from the curtains on the polished surfaces of floor and walls that had made him think it had.

"You didn't meet Bridget then as you came past the church?" said Mr. Sark.

"No. There was a funeral going on. She didn't go down for it, did she?"

"For the funeral, no. She went down to watch Wem at work, they should both have got back before the funeral."

"Wem?" asked Frank.

"David Wem the artist, you know," said Mr. Sark carelessly. "Will you have sherry or a whisky and soda?" for Williams was bringing in the drinks. "He's painting frescoes in the church and staying in the house here," he continued as he gave Frank his whisky and soda and began asking him about his ship, about life at Gibraltar, about an old friend of his, now an Admiral on that station, who had been torpedoed and kept his pipe alight in his mouth a full hour in the water, just to show the Navy never lets go. He talked fast, laughing at his own jokes and at those that Frank supposed he must have made, though he did not know it nor feel like it, for every moment he was getting more miserable and further away from Bridget, shut up with this jolly genial fellow, while she hung about somewhere with an artist, no, *the* artist, damn him.

And she knew he had no time to speak of down here; she was avoiding him; she was engaged to the artist; but surely she would

have let him know before he came down. Perhaps it had happened since; yes, that was it, his coming had precipitated it. He had known all along there was someone else; he suddenly remembered a sentence in her last letter which he had burnt as soon as he had got it. "I'm glad you've got someone else too." He had thought she had been flirting with a curate or something and wrote it just to make him angry; and all the time there was a famous artist staying in the house and she had never let him know.

'At least I told her about me,' he thought in dismay at the duplicity of women, and stretched a grin on his face in answer to a remark that he knew must be witty, and looking up suddenly, encountered again that piercing glance that issued cold and sharp as steel from his cheerful ruddy-faced, red-haired host.

He asked Frank if he would like a hot bath after his journey; there was just time before lunch. So he would not see Bridget until they met at lunch with a lot of strangers, and the artist.

He was taken up wide stairs and down a long corridor. Everywhere there was the smell of flowers and of burning aromatic woods, and his feet made no sound on the soft carpets, and the windows he passed showed winter scenes as strange to that warm and scented air as if they framed pictures of another country. And somewhere in this place was Bridget, who did not want to come and see him.

At the end of the corridor a door was flung open, and a child who seemed about four years old came scampering towards them, his hair dancing round his head in a crown of flaming curls. He shouted at seeing Mr. Sark, who caught and swung him up on to his shoulder, and Frank looking up at him was startled by the child's arrogant beauty. He made no attempt to hold on; though he was perched so high, he looked as if he were driving a triumphal chariot.

"Downstairs! Downstairs!" he commanded, thumping his father's head. A scared-looking little nurse came running in pursuit, but stopped at sight of Mr. Sark, who said, "All right, Nanny, I'll take him down to the study for a minute. You show Mr. Chanbury the bathroom."

"I don't know what to do with Baby, I'm sure," she complained to Frank while performing this function, "he's not two years old yet, and he will go running down to the study now every minute of the day, and so fast I know he'll break his head falling downstairs, and if he doesn't, he'll kill himself playing with the fire down there,

for he's always at it and the Master only laughs and encourages him. That's the shower bath, sir, and I'm sure I hope you'll excuse me, but it fairly gets beyond me."

Her anxious face reminded him of those he had seen at the funeral. It had none of their hostility, but theirs had had something of her fear. For an instant he too felt it, but what could it have to do with him that Sark's young son liked playing with the fire down in the study? He found himself whistling the chanty, "Fire Down Below", as he sank into the largest and hottest bath he had ever had.

When he came down they were all in the dining-room. Bridget was there, only a little away from him; taller than he had remembered, looking extraordinarily well, and somehow strange to him. He had to shake hands with her after his hostess and say something like "Hullo, how are you?"

They all sat down without any further hand-shaking or introducing and he sorted out a rather plain but nice little girl and a very nice little boy, though neither of them looked anywhere up to that infant giant upstairs. The boy asked him about the Navy and told him he had a book of pictures of every ship there had ever been, and the girl said, "Not every ship, it wouldn't be possible," but he did not mind, and when he was not talking he listened so hard he had to be reminded to go on eating. They also appeared to be having a curate to lunch, only without his collar, for there was a pale young man in spectacles who stooped very badly, sitting across the table and saying nothing, and the famous artist hadn't come in after all, perhaps he had stayed on in the church to finish something in the way famous artists do.

And Bridget sat beside him, silent, superb. A hot wave of shame rushed up over him as he remembered a face that he had so lately thought lovely, and now like a rat.

But this sparkling hush that enclosed Bridget made him uneasy. Why did no one mention the artist? There was Mr. Sark looking at him again, laughing at him, this time he was sure of it; he had guessed what was worrying him and he was not a good fellow after all; he was a cold-blooded brute. Frank would not stay to be tortured for his host's amusement; he did not care if he made a fool of himself, as long as he found out what he wanted; so he plunged with some question about the frescoes in the church. His host referred it to the pale man opposite. Bridget addressed him as "Mr. Wem,"

and in a rush of relief that nearly burst into laughter, Frank understood that that filleted fish was the artist whom he had been fearing all this time as his rival.

For a moment he could feel all the gaiety of his luncheon party, the charm of his host, the excellence of the food and wine, the new beauty in the girl he had come for, who was the governess in this house like a palace, and seemed its princess.

All this suited her, he thought, and suddenly his spirits dropped again, for if her flowering was not for Wem, for whom then was it? Not for him, he knew. She sat beside him a thousand miles away. And suddenly he caught a glimpse of a face like a hawk, swift and relentless, before it changed into that of a pleasant middle-aged man telling a good story; and knew that though Mr. Sark was so much older, and married, and her employer, yet he alone in this place would have the power to transform Bridget with this summer radiance. He could not finish what he was eating, he felt rather sick, he sat appalled, and he had to go on talking about Gibraltar.

Lunch ended at last, but then of course there was coffee, and he did not want to drink old brandy and he would smoke no more than a cigarette. It was not merely inhuman to prolong his agony like this, it was all part of a plan, he saw that now; and Mr. Sark had arranged that Bridget should be out of the way from the beginning. And she had not withstood it; she did not care.

They got away at last, he did not quite know who had arranged it or how, but they stood in the hall and she said, "Shall I show you my sitting-room?"

"No," he said. He could not talk in this house. "It's stifling here," he said, "let's get out."

She put on a scarlet woollen coat and swung round her that old French cape he remembered of her father's, with the hood over her head. She said she would show him the gardens; there were still some flowers down by the south wall and it would be funny to see them in the snow. But he wanted to get right away, and he did not want to come back to the house. He said good-bye to his hosts, and it was arranged that the car should meet them later at the bend in the road.

They walked out of summer into an icebound land. She led him through a blue door in a garden wall and across a lane, and presently he found they were in a field that sloped downhill to a copse of bare

trees and a little stream. They walked down towards it, and all the minutes he had left were slipping past him fast as water through his fingers; but he could not touch her, he could not come to her; she walked beside him imprisoned in a bright enchantment.

It wasn't even as though she troubled to pretend, as the other one would have done, staving off the awkward moment with neat little questions.

They stood silent on the frosted grass, and a withered leaf fluttered down, falling straight almost as a stone in the still air. She was beside him, red and gold and adorable beneath her cloak, and on her face that strange smile that seemed eternal, as though it belonged not merely to her but to someone as old or as young as the world.

And suddenly the stillness was broken with a voice which he did not know at first came from him, and he said: "Oh, Bridget, it's all my fault. I've been a fool, and I've lost you."

She said: "I knew it some days ago, just before your telegram came. I minded then, I can't mind now. I'm sorry I can't."

He said: "But you will mind. You are kind and true, it's not natural to you to hurt. You are not like the other one. It isn't only me. You will hurt others." For though he was not thinking of her, her mother's face had just come before him, and a shadowy woman who had sat on his other side at lunch, kind but tired, and knowing it all.

"Bridget!" he cried, and then the old name he used to call her, "Biddy!"

But a more subtle voice echoed 'Bride!' in her heart.

"I came to this wood one evening," she said, and then stopped, and scrunched her hand as though it held a letter, the letter she had meant to post, and had instead burnt in Peregrine's study. "It's no good," she said, "a few weeks ago it would have been everything to have you here, and now it's all gone."

"Where has it all gone to?"

"I don't know."

"You do know. It's gone to him."

"That's something quite different."

"It's all the same," said Frank, and again was startled to hear his voice, for a man should not groan as with physical pain when he is in the Navy and has learnt all that can be known about life, even when he still finds he has a heart to break.

"I couldn't love you like this before," he said, "I didn't know how. And now it's too late. Biddy, you might have waited for me, you promised you'd wait. No, it isn't your fault. I've been an ass and a swine and I've got to pay for it."

The whisper of the freezing stream, the smell of decaying leaves crept up from beneath their feet. Love had died, hope was dying, time slipped away. He made an effort to break the frozen spell.

"You *can't* love him best," he cried. "He's twice as old as you, you've only known him a few weeks, he can't marry you. Bridget, you do love me still. Love can't die. Tell me you love me."

He caught at her cloak, pulling back the hood so that it brought down her hair. It fell soft and warm all round his hands. He clutched at her with frantic, clumsy haste, pulling her to him, and she did not resist him; she was not a heartless princess, she was his Bridget, only a thousand times lovelier than ever before, and he would kiss her as never before, he would show her how he loved her as he had never known before.

But as he kissed her he knew it was now too late to show her. She went rigid in his grasp; she said, "It's no use now." He let go of her suddenly.

At the sight of his white, stiff face she began to tremble, and tears ran down sharp and cold on her cheeks, and she said: "I wish I loved you. There isn't anything there. I might be dead inside. Perhaps I am."

She felt so miserable at seeing him suffer, that ought to show she loved him. Couldn't she know for certain as people did in books? But she could not see Frank, not even now he looked so different, with this tight-drawn face. Peregrine, glancing, darting, swooping, dragonfly and hawk, had dazzled her so that she could not see. There was nothing left over for Frank, nothing else left in her.

They heard the hoot of a motor horn in the road below, and after a minute it was repeated. There was a sentence she had been reading to the children that morning, "And so he heard a horn blow, as it had been the death of a beast. 'That blast,' said Balin, 'is blown for me; for I am the prize and yet am I not dead.' "

"We must go," she said.

"You can't stay here," he answered. "Come up to town with me. You can stay with one of your college friends. We can talk in the train. I've had no talk with you. He's kept you away from

me all the time. Bridget, you're mad if you think you love that man. He's cruel. He doesn't care for you, he only wants you for himself. You're only one of a string of things to him, God knows what the others are."

"Oh, come away," she said. "You will miss your train."

But he could not come. He said he would not leave her unless she promised—promised—he did not say what he wanted her to promise, he leaned his head against the trunk of a tree and said he could not bear it. Down below, the horn sounded a third time.

He came after that, and followed her through the thin trees to the road below, where they found Williams waiting in the car, and nervous about the time. Frank did not ask Bridget again to come with him, nor even to come in the car. He became correct and cold and told her to have a good time at Christmas, and then he said he would write soon, and told her not to do anything till then; but in quite a casual voice.

And now it was she who felt him a thousand miles away, who knew she was losing something she had had for years, and never known what it was, and now saw a distant glimpse of it.

A wave of pain shivered across her face, not like those frosted tears that had fallen from her calm eyes; but something human and tender that made her look almost plain. She wavered, she wanted to come in the car with him, to hold his hand under the rug and whisper, 'It must be all right really,' and he saw it, he smiled at her; without knowing it they drew together, leaned towards each other, and there, with Williams starting the engine and an old woman coming down the road and staring, they somehow came nearer to each other than they had done at any time that day. They saw each other as they used to be, and might become, and neither love nor hope was dead, only asleep like the spring buds under frost.

He did not know what changed her; he could have sworn it was fear that chased the sweet familiar look from her face; while still near him she seemed to vanish from his sight; so strange did she grow to him, and inaccessible.

He got into the car to drive back to his train, back to London, back to his ship, to the bare, sun-baked rock, and all the faces he knew so well and dreaded to see again.

He drove past the churchyard, now empty, where an old maid's

funeral had gathered all the village, and saw the red twisted chimneys rise over the trees behind him. He had left Bridget behind in that wonderful house, that richness and gaiety. He was leaving the silent village, the frost, the watching, hostile faces.

Soon it would all be behind him, right out of his busy life, like something that had happened 'a great while since, a long, long time ago.' He would not forget it, but he would not believe it. He would cover it up with explanations, translate the silent faces, the enchanted princess, the summer palace in a frozen land, into something that accorded better with his daily experience.

## *Eighteen*

*

IN the place that Frank had left behind, experience took the reverse course, one that it had followed there for thousands of years. In the track of his departing car over the snowy road, the seeds were sown that would blossom into legend when the Red House was a charred heap of ruins. Frank himself would make a part of it, the sailor boy who came down for so short a time to see the young lady up at the Red House, and went away almost at once he did, looking as if his heart would break. All the way from London he came, and some said even further, from another country, from an island beyond the sea.

It was better for him that he went, they said.

It was better not to cross the Squire's path these days.

Miss Miningham had been in the Squire's way; Miss Miningham fell ill and died.

Joe Mytton had been turned off his work and was in a bad way; even his friends watched him with that hopeful curiosity which expects and therefore wishes to see superstition fulfilled. For Joe, alone of all the village, excepting Parson, had dared stand up to the Squire and oppose his will. Parson never went up to the Red House now.

The village people did not care to go up to the Red House now, specially after sundown; nor into the church at all, except for God's

holy word, and even that was flouted by the outlandish pictures blazoning themselves along the walls.

The year crept on. Jenny Mytton came out of school every afternoon to find the village street a little darker. She ran and skipped and whooped with the others in their woollen caps and mufflers, they pulled at each other's hair or satchels or walked with arms round each other's necks, telling secrets, or stopped to play marbles or hopscotch on the roadside, blowing on their blue fingers and stamping their chilblained feet; but so happy to be out of school, all together, free on the road, that none of them hurried home to the fireside and hot strong tea and hunch of bread and jam or, on lucky days, dripping, or perhaps even a lump of dough cake, that awaited them along with their scolding mothers.

Jenny, playing with the others, would look above the darkening roofs of the village, to the bare woods and the chimneys that rose from the Red House like the towers of a city, and the glow that surrounded them from the great fires burning there and the many lighted windows.

Old Mrs. Keevil had said it wasn't called the Red House for nothing, that a ruddy light had been seen on its walls on grey days when the sun lay hidden, and that the glow Jenny now saw was shed by no natural light, but blazed with the very same heat that fed the fires of hell.

Old Mrs. Keevil was too twisted with rheumatism to go picking up sticks any longer, and when Jenny brought her in a bit of firing, the old woman, huddled over her scrap of fire, rewarded her with delicious and unholy terrors, muttering that such things as the luck of the Red House had been known before, and would be known again, but that a price had always to be paid.

One day Jenny would be as old as Mrs. Keevil and frighten her grandchildren with tales of what had happened in this very village as long ago as when she was a little girl, tales of the Red House as it was then, 'though no stick nor stone is left of it now,' and of the Red Squire, as he came to be called. For when the Red House was gone, the village would go on, and grow stories on that haunted ground.

Roses had been seen blooming there in mid-winter, and plums hanging on the trees, and birds singing their mating songs, as Harry Smout had seen and heard with his own two eyes and ears when he had taken a step out of his way one Saturday night on his return from Sherne

market; though some did say he was in no fit state to distinguish roses from clumps of snow or the nightingale from the winter owl.

And stranger and more shocking things came to be said, that if anyone had dared creep up the terraced garden at midnight and look through the long windows of the Squire's study, they'd have seen the young lady there, sitting naked on a golden throne, with a crown of flowers on her hair.

But nobody dared, so nobody had seen this, but there—down in the village 'they knew the way the wind was blowing before the weather-cock.' And Jenny for one would never believe it, for a sweeter young lady never stepped on the grass, and as happy, she was, as the birds in the air.

But Jenny came to believe what she thought she herself had seen, and tasted. Though as she came over queer just after, of a fever and a hacking cough, and her mother had said she was a wicked girl to go playing such tricks, and that stern man, her grandfather, had said, "There, there, my pretty, you dreamed it surely," she did not believe it herself, until a long time later, when she grew old and her children grew up and life grew dull, and more and more it seemed to her, as to her grandchildren, the most wonderful thing that had ever happened, so wonderful that it must have happened.

And this is what Jenny said had happened, when she was as old as Mrs. Keevil.

She came out of morning school one day with an empty basket, for she had been picking up sticks on the way there and left them at Mrs. Keevil's; and instead of running with the others, she stood looking at the towers above the trees until the shouts of her schoolfellows grew faint in the distance, and Jenny found that she was alone with the empty basket in her hand. She thought that she too would see what she could with her own two eyes, and perhaps Master John would fill her basket with the magic fruit and flowers that grew there, for she was tired and her head felt hot and she did not want to eat her dinner of suet dumplings and gravy, and Master John was good and kind and there could be no danger in going up there, at least, not in the middle of the day, though Jenny would never have dared to go had she been coming out of afternoon school in the dusk.

So presently she stood at the tall park gates and looked through them, with a disappointment that was half relief, into a garden so sparkling white, so breathlessly still, that it might indeed have seemed

to lie under enchantment, had she not known that the snow was no miracle. And as she stood there in the thin serge cloak that had been made out of her mother's old skirt, and a narrow woollen scarf, and her eldest sister's faded scarlet hood that went up in a peak, she saw Master John coming down towards her, handsome and splendid in his great-coat, not running about as usual, nor did he smile at her.

He opened the gates and led her in and she thought afterwards that he said, "I will show you something," but later still she thought he did not speak at all.

He led her through trees like branching icicles, to a long bed of smooth snow, which he began to push away with his hands, "and there," said old Jenny, long, long afterwards, "there lay red strawberries under the snow." He picked one and gave it her he did, as sure as she was here now, and as she smelt and tasted it, for one instant she saw the frozen fountain playing in the sunshine, and green bushes, and flowers red and gold, and she heard a blackbird sing. But as she moved her head, the garden was all white again, and there was nothing but the snow and the grey sky and the red strawberry in her hand.

Her mother told the neighbours how she came home that day all hot and flushed and her eyes shining like stars, and danced up and down, saying she had brought her granddad a basket and how he was to poke in his finger and see what he found there, so he poked and he poked, but there was nothing there. Then Mrs. Mytton scolded Jenny for playing a trick on her granddad, and she cried and said it wasn't a trick, she had brought him lots and lots of strawberries, until Mrs. Mytton snatched the basket from her, and emptied out all the melting, dripping snow, and there at the bottom of the basket was nothing but a few withered leaves.

## *Nineteen*

*

ELLA went to see Jenny when she was recovering from her pneumonia, and brought her fruit from the hot-houses; but the child turned her head away and would not even look at them, and

her mother, who was very much embarrassed, said Jenny had got a silly notion they made one ill. Her grave little face lay on the pillow, her dark hair pulled back from it in two pigtails, and her eyes looked huge, glancing away from the lady from the Red House. She said not one word, and not till the lady had gone would she look at the picture book that Master John had sent her for Christmas.

It was not a new book, as Ella had explained with apologies, and a brand-new doll that she had brought on her own account to make up for the fact. John had said he was too old for the book and had found some fault with the accuracy of the information therein; but it was in secret, sneaking truth his favourite book, for it had first taught him his love of primæval forests. As Jenny gazed at the terrible beauties of those giant trees, she knew for the first time that that was where she had been with Master John last summer when they had played in the copse down by the stream, and he had told her it was a pathless forest old as the world, and they two the first to enter it.

Ella looked into the church on the way back, for no reason that she knew of. She saw a small hunched figure in the pew under the new old window that had just been put up in place of Miss Miningham's. It was her daughter. She was shy of speaking to her, she understood children so little, and Very might not like to know she had been seen crying.

She stood there nearly five minutes, quite still, but hesitating in her mind, then something seemed to tear inside it, she said to herself, 'It is best to go away,' and began to tread softly out of the dim church. But as she pulled back the great door, it creaked, and she heard Very's voice call her. She turned back, and went into the pew and sat down beside her, putting her arm round her. Very began to cry again.

In the window above them, Saint Bernard's tree spread in sunlight while the rain fell all round.

"She wouldn't mind now," said Ella.

"Mother," said Very, "do you think I could learn to play the guitar?"

"Yes, my darling, you have an ear for music, but I didn't know you cared about it."

"I'd like to sing," said Very with a deep sigh. She snuggled into her mother's side, and whispered, "like Aunt Adelaide."

Ella knew with a thrill of triumph that she had after all shared the romance of her childhood with her daughter.

Very saw herself perched on the arm of a chair, her skirts sweeping round her like the petals of a flower, singing Italian love songs to a guitar. Surely her father would then call her Verona. Her indignant pity for herself and Miss Miningham was soothed into a gentle and hopeful melancholy; she stroked her mother's furry sleeve, she was glad she had come into the church, she wondered why she had begun to go out without speaking to her. "Didn't you see me, Mother?"

"Yes, Very, but I didn't know that you would want me to."

"*Mother!*"

She had been brooding over her grudge against Ella's refined taste, which had inspired her unhappy decoration of Miss Miningham's window. 'Oh, but what a pity,' she had said of the picture in her scrap-book, 'you want delicate colours——'

And Bridget had said of her window, 'It just all looks rather dirty.'

And then John, 'Father said so too.'

Little sneak. Beast. How had she ever forgiven him? And it had all been her mother's fault.

In a rush of remorse she now wanted to tell how horrid she had felt; but no, she wouldn't; she wanted to protect Ella from any knowledge that would hurt her. She stood up, she was a big girl and would be taller than Ella.

"Let's come along," she said, and her voice sounded to Ella very like her mother's, Lady Winteringham's. There was the same sturdy loyalty in it, and it gave Ella a sudden sense of safety, such as she had not had for a long time. She looked up at Very and smiled. Neither knew how rare it was for her to do that these days, but they knew the moment to be rare and precious.

Something disturbed it, a memory, a fear. Ella was looking at a brown leather pocket-book in Very's hand.

"That's Father's, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Very, elaborately careless. "I'd just picked it up over there. He must have left it behind when he was talking with the Camel. He's always making notes in it when he's here. I don't know where the Camel is. He's never come back this afternoon."

She went on talking in fast jerky sentences and her face was rather

red, for she had been looking through the pocket-book to find a certain newspaper cutting. And she had found it, all frayed and crumbling at the edges and rather blurred, but it was in French, with a lot of words she didn't know, and she could not make it out and it did not seem to be about anything she had heard of. So she put it back exactly where she had found it, and tried to forget that she had looked into the pocket-book at all, since it had been no use.

"Let's come along," she said again, impatiently this time, and Ella came, with the docile dependence on her daughter's will that would mark their relations all the rest of their lives.

The snow and frost had all gone some days ago. The afternoon was grey. Up on the dark hills a long, rippling line of fire leaped and quivered against the sky, for they had begun to burn the heather late this year, as the early snow had prevented it before.

Very tugged at Ella's hand. "Oh, *let's* go up there. Do let's, and see the fires close."

And Ella never said that they would be late for tea, or couldn't get as far as that without the car. She too wanted to walk on over the hills. By silent consent they avoided the park and went up across the hill field, and there they met David Wem coming down towards them. He said he hadn't been able to settle to work this afternoon. Very told him they were going up on to the hills, and Ella asked him to come too.

They were forming a secret company in running away from home. Nobody said it, but that was what it was. Her mother and Mr. Wem were walking fast, for them, and Mr. Wem talked most. His little quiet monotonous voice went on and on, the words dropping with a flat cold thud like the toads that dropped from the Ugly Sister's mouth. Very would not have believed one person could know so many or such odd people. He was making most of it up, of course; it had long been her belief that grown-ups talked mainly to show off, and did not much mind if they spoke the truth or not. All that about the lady who sat by the fire and said nothing and was beautiful but rather dusty, and someone had once killed himself because she went on saying nothing to him; well, it ought to be plain even to grown-ups that nobody could be as silly as that. But she felt very grown-up to be listening to it all, though it did occur to her that they might not be noticing if she listened or not.

They avoided roads and even lanes. Long grass and then heather

swished against their legs; clouds raced above their heads. They stopped to look back, and not a trace of Gawcomb Mazzard nor the Red House could be seen. No one said anything, but Very drew a deep breath, and felt that the others did too. She caught Mr. Wem's shy sheepish glance stealing round under his big spectacles to her father's pocket-book, which she was still carrying in her hand.

He was talking now with a strange new violence, of a man called O'Farrell. It took Very some little time to realize that this was Bridget's father who was dead. He said, "O'Farrell could not deal with life, but he transfigured it. He was of the prophets, he had walked with God. His pictures were an act of worship."

"Surely yours too in the church——" Ella's voice was vague, inattentive, and polite; she was thinking of Very and little Jenny and Canon Goodchild and poor Miss Miningham, not linking them in any way, except to feel that all were friendly to her, and now even this queer and rather friendless young man. "Surely your pictures——" she began, wishing to be friendly.

"A wilderness of monkeys," said Mr. Wem, quite rudely "A treacherous outpouring of gluttonous life."

What could he mean? Very wondered. A bramble had caught on to her stocking and she stopped to pull it off while they went on up the hill, not noticing where they were going, aimless yet resolute. It somehow surprised Very to see them walking together, her mother drifting along in her lonely way beside Mr. Wem.

But Ella did not feel lonely; she did not even feel tired; she walked without effort as though some purpose more than her own helped her on. 'So many people round one,' she thought, and wondered that she had ever felt dull or lonely.

When Very caught them up, Mr. Wem was saying, "Those pictures have grown up in an empty church, from an empty heart. Leave your house empty, swept and garnished, and seven devils will enter in."

Very heard her mother answer in her quiet way, but meaning it this time, "There are seven devils in it already."

Mr. Wem said, "I know."

They were not talking now to show off. They meant it. But grown-up people should not think these things. They were there to keep one feeling safe. If they got frightened too, where would one be?

The darkness was creeping up out of the hollows in the fields, out of the woods and the valleys; soon it would spread over the whole earth and up over the pale sky.

She was amazed that she had gone into the church this afternoon, all by herself, to look at the new window. She would never go into the church again, not even with lots of people there, not even for service. She could get out of it, by having quite firm and decisive doubts about religion. But then her father would tease her; she had already said, unfortunately, that clever people often lost their faith in God, and he had told her of a clever young man at Oxford whose tutor had ordered him to find a God by nine o'clock to-morrow morning. And she could never tell him about the devils in the church; you either knew about them or you didn't, and anyway you could never tell *him*.

She tucked her arm into Ella's, who looked down and asked her what she had been thinking of all this time, and Very said, "I was wondering where John was."

They were walking up through a tangle of gorse and bramble over the edge of a hill, when there just in front of them, running along the ground, was a snake of fire. It raised a long forked head and hissed at them, it leaped into the air, it lapped itself round a bush, it became a banner whirling upwards to the sky. Other fires were leaping up out of the dark earth. Very ran from one to the other. The heat came so sharp on her face that it stung at first like ice. Volumes of smoke blinded her for the moment, then blew away. The burning gorse crackled and snapped, its twigs were all outlined with a rim of sparks, the live wood squealed like a small wild creature.

A man moved about with a branch, he thrust it into a blazing bush and then carried his torch to set light to another. He shambled away from them, dark and hunched, on up the hill, carrying fire. They were on the old green road; it was nothing but a wide grass track, it went on for ever, always on the top of the hills. Her father had told Very that long before the Romans came, or even the Britons, people that nobody knew about had gone along that road high up over the swamps that covered the whole of England. She thought they had looked like that little squat clumsy man with his branch of fire.

"Look, Very!" called her mother.

The black clouds on the furthest hills had broken into a red fury. The sun had rolled out of them, flattened itself on the top of the hill

like a huge soap bubble, balancing just on the top, before it again disappeared in a volume of flame and thunderous vapour. Very swung round from a bush that had become a roaring whirlwind; she saw the furthest hills, and cried, "Oh! The whole world's on fire."

The sunset faded; the flames round her died down. A gorse bush near by held a nest of fire in its topmost branch; pale yellow flowers still bloomed through it, shining in the light before they shrivelled. In the burnt patches there was nothing left but ashes, white worms of ash that squirmed, then died and lay still.

The little squat figure stood on the skyline, and round him fire was again breaking out of the earth.

Very ran back to the others. She wanted to go home to tea in a lighted room; but not in the drawing-room, it was too still and shining; and not in the playroom because of the new dragon ship; and, above all, not in the study.

On the high road below them, lumbering along round the curve of the hill, came the scarlet motor-'bus to Sherne.

"*Mummy!*" called Very on an ecstatic squeak, reverting all unknowing to the discarded name, "let's go into Sherne and have tea at Boots', oh let's, shall we?"

They dashed down the hillside, they yelled to the 'bus, they threw themselves over a stile, down a field, through a gap in the hedge; and there was that patient monster waiting for them. Faces were staring out all along its sides, round childish country faces, with hats at the back of the children's heads, and perched like birds' nests on top of the women's hair.

"Tea at Boots'?" inquired Mr. Wem.

"Tea at Boots'," Very blissfully assented.

Tea at Boots' café was the treat for remote villages for miles round. On market days especially, the large hall was crammed with farmers' wives and children who sat in awe among the pink pillars, staring at the waitresses with pink bows in their hair, eating pink sugar cakes and ices, and listening to a band played by one young lady and two young gentlemen.

It would take an hour to go in by the 'bus, but they could get the car to call for them, "and we might get some more things for the Christmas tree and see what is on at the cinema," said Ella. Very had clambered up over the baskets and parcels, squealing with relief and excitement, "Isn't it an adventure, going in like this!" The Red

House car and even the bright, chirruping Williams would have spoilt it, but to snatch the 'bus in mid-flight and go in on the spur of the moment, not knowing whom you would be sitting near, this was life. There would be nobody from Gawcomb Mazzard, for this 'bus did not go through their village; that too helped the feeling of adventure and running away.

But Mr. Wem would not come in with them. He said he must go back, and he would let them know at the Red House where they were, and Ella told him to send the car to meet them at Boots'. He stood looking up at them from the road, very pale and solemn, and suddenly Very saw that what he was looking at so intently was the pocket-book in her hand.

"Hadn't you better give me that to take back to your father?" he said. "You might drop it, you know."

Very stared at him for a second in silence, then looked at Ella. "Shall I——?"

"Yes, dear, I think you had better give it to him."

She handed it down just as the 'bus had begun to rumble on, then followed Ella to an empty seat and settled down beside her. Everybody in the 'bus had been watching her hand down her father's pocket-book. 'It's done now,' she said to herself, just as though it were something that really mattered.

"Are you cold, my darling?" asked Ella.

"No. It was only someone walking on my grave."

Her father's face had come into her mind, but she had never seen him look like that; he had never been angry with her, so why should she imagine it? It was quite right to have given the pocket-book to Mr. Wem to take back; besides, her mother had told her to. But she knew that this was talking 'on the top' as she called it. The pocket-book *was* important, and Mr. Wem knew it; she did not know if her mother knew it too, but in any case she had helped.

Well, it was done now. Mr. Wem was walking home with it across the fields; every minute he and it were getting smaller and smaller and less important, while she trundled along into Sherne among all the farmers' wives and children. She wished she were one of them and went into Sherne once a week in the motor-'bus to have tea at Boots' and see the pictures.

The 'bus stopped at some cross-roads where a cottage stood all alone, and in front of it a girl was waiting with a little boy in her

arms and a multitude of parcels. She sat down on the next seat and began dropping her parcels all over the place. Ella took the little boy on her knee and asked him his name and age, and showed him things out of her bag; she always had things to show children. Then Ella discovered someone she knew just behind her; they began to talk about Christmas, it would be on them now before they knew where they were.

The pleasant burr of country voices hummed and cracked all round Very. The lights in the 'bus were turned on. The windows shut out the passing country, and showed only reflections of the people in the 'bus, the big hats and baskets, all bobbing past over the dark hedges. She pressed her face to the glass, and now the 'bus and the lights and people were blotted out by the scene outside, all grey and lonely; and up on the hills she saw again that leaping line of fire.

There was fire down under the earth. If you dug down far enough you came to it, but nobody could ever dig as far. It looked as though these fires had risen out of the earth, pushed up and up until at last they had to break through.

David Wem looked through all the papers in the pocket-book until he came to a cutting from a French newspaper of May that year, which told how a vagabond of the name of Picard had been executed for a murder with robbery for its motive. This then was the scrap of newspaper that Peregrine Sark had treasured and taken out to read at times. The actual words were nothing as they stood; Wem was no nearer to his mystery, but remained convinced that they formed the clue to it, could he but discover the key.

He walked back across the darkening fields. 'I will ask him,' he resolved, 'who Picard was, and see if that startles him.' Suddenly he knew the answer. Picard was O'Farrell. He stumbled blindly over a tuft of coarse grass and sat for some time where he fell.

O'Farrell had starved until he had robbed and murdered, he had been executed as a criminal.

Peregrine Sark had known of it, had kept the account of it; he had 'looked sorry at first, but afterwards he had been proud.'

Bridget had said he owed her father a debt, but never had a chance to pay it back—'only one chance.'

Very had told him 'he sold a man to buy a goddess.'

The goddess in his study, on whose face he had looked too long.

It had been bought with a human life. He did not know how he knew that. The Rector had thought? Miss Miningham had said?

David Wem, who had worshipped O'Farrell, who feared and hated Peregrine, saw all these gossamer threads weaving together into a rope to hang his enemy, a rope not of evidence but conviction, aided by Peregrine's own arrogance, his belief that he had no need of concealment, that he was strong enough on his own standing, and even by his own showing, to disregard all these feeble foes that he had never even troubled to consider as such,—chattering children, gossiping old maids, male and female, these mice banding together against a lion.

He cried aloud, 'I knew it,' for always he had known that some fantastic and horrible connection existed in Peregrine's mind between the Cybele and O'Farrell's death.

His cry startled the quiet fields. A bird rose from the ground, crying in answer, beating its wings against the air. A rabbit, only its white tail showing against the dark grass, scudded past the huddled figure that had sat as lifeless as a log upon the earth, until it uttered that cry.

He scrambled to his feet and went on down the field in a blind, rushing fashion. He stumbled again pretty often in the growing darkness; he was short-sighted and unaccustomed to going fast over rough ground. He did not know why he was hurrying, nor what he would do when he got to the Red House.

He thought of O'Farrell, who was rotting in a criminal's graveyard, while Peregrine prospered.

'If Bridget could only know and see him as he is,' he thought, and remained unconscious of the irony of his position. For a long time he had been afraid; now he was shocked. His scorn for human conventions, for personal consideration and pity, had collapsed without his noticing it.

He entered the Red House gardens by the door in the wall and went across the upper terrace, slowly now, for he had begun to wonder what he should do next; he peered uneasily in at the study windows as he passed.

The curtains were still undrawn; the room was full of leaping light and shadow from the fire. David Wem, seeing the two figures who stood there, was in no further doubt what to do, but he went on into the hall and there waited some minutes, before he did it.

## *Twenty*

*

BACK there in the Red House that Ella and Very were leaving behind, Peregrine stood in his study, his arm upraised on the window pane, leaning his head against it, looking out on those same hill fires that Very was watching. He saw a head go past on the lower terrace, slow and bent, and the enormous trunk of a log uplifted above it. Young Bill came up the steps carrying on his shoulder the Yule log they were to burn on Christmas Eve, and John walked behind him, helping to support the weight from the back. They were going round the corner to the kitchens when Peregrine called to John and asked him where Bridget was. "Find her for me, will you, and tell her I want to show her something."

John called back that he would, but continued to give his inadequate support to Young Bill's burden instead of running on ahead with his errand. Peregrine felt a touch of annoyance, with John rather than the delay. He could afford to wait; he had waited so long for the ripe and perfect moment that was now bending towards him, heavy with the accumulation of many weeks. Since that evening when he had kissed Bridget in the study, in silence, there had been no touch nor word to express his desire; yet inevitably he had drawn her to him, he had woven an enchantment so closely round her that it would not be safe even for himself to break through it and disclose to her any aspect of the outer world. It would be safest to say as little as possible; to enflame her senses, as he had hitherto done her imagination.

He heard John's voice calling her, and her answer, "Jo-ohn," on a long low note that recalled to him the memory of olive trees, the smell of thyme, and on the opposite hill, from a tiny white and red Italian city, that seemed to have dropped from the sunset, the single note of a bell. All these beauties she brought him, even in speaking to his children.

Now she would be coming downstairs towards him, slowly it seemed; did she know for what she was coming? And once again the silent scene, the pale sky and darkening earth, the giant heads of the distant hills, crowned with fire, looked like a vast stage-curtain,

a background, heroic and divine, to the one human figure that stood awaiting the governess.

She was coming across the hall, slowly. He could see her thoughts coming towards him, her wide expectant eyes, her hesitancy. Now her hand was on the copper knob of the door; how slowly it turned. She stood in the doorway; her eyes met his, and he saw for the first time in the firelight that they were golden. As he looked at her, saying nothing, the blood came flushing into her cheeks and throat. She turned her eyes from his to the little box he was holding out to her, but still without moving. She came to him and put out her hand to the box and her lips formed the words, 'What is it?' but neither of them noticed that the words remained voiceless; she took it in her hand and looked up again at him, and then she lost all power of movement; his arms came round her, she was caught up into them.

The scene darkened outside the windows; a bright hush lay upon the room; the two figures standing there made no sound nor movement; round them the leaping colours of cornelian, amber and ruby seemed more alive than they.

Not even this moment could last for ever. Something disturbed it, a movement outside the window; that outer scene came pressing back on them, shadows from the past and future fell across the dazzling present; she looked into the face she now knew to be her world, and thought that in all the years ahead of her, nothing like this moment could ever happen again.

"Bride, will you open the box?" said Peregrine.

What was the good of that? Nothing in the box could bring that moment back. But she opened it because she was too much dazed to do anything but what she was told.

A speck of colour lay winking and burning in the box. It was a large ruby set singly in an old ring. He placed it on her finger; the firelight leaped up on their bent heads. With the girl's ringed hand in his, Peregrine raised his head and looked up at the goddess.

For one swimming instant he felt himself standing beside his Bride in the presence of a power that meted out the seeds of death and the fire of life. With love he could defy death.

He said in a cool practical voice, "Have you written definitely that you are not going home for Christmas?"

"Yes." The shadows deepened; she remembered there was a

world outside the study. She said, "But then I can't stay here now. I can't wear this ring."

"No. You can't stay here now, but you can wear the ring, you can come away with me, and in a very short time we can come back again. Ella will take Very and John to their grandmother's, and divorce me and then we can marry. It is all quite simple. I will arrange it with her as soon as she comes in. I don't know where she is, but anyway I had to ask you first. Only I haven't asked you. Need I ask you? It has been in your hands all this time, and you have not thrown it away. Will you come with me, Bride, now, this evening? You need see no one. Go upstairs and pack a few things and I will take you away myself in the car, and when we come back we will have the Red House all to ourselves."

"But John?" she said, staring, "and Very?"

"They will stay with their mother. They are more hers now than mine. I shall keep Baby Dick."

She felt afraid, not of the situation, which she could scarcely take in as yet, but of him. His ruthlessness wore so brisk and cheerful an air that she failed to recognize it, but she felt that she was being caught up by a will as swift and irresistible as a force of nature.

And as she stood amazed, she was again actually caught up, into oblivion. The moment that could never come again had gone for ever; but here was another more blinding and overpowering. In panic she broke from it, swayed with outstretched, groping arms, then sank to her knees on the hearthrug, her face hidden, her hair tumbled over her shoulders.

He did not touch her, he looked down on her and wondered what he had spoiled. It was early to begin, he thought grimly. But in answer to his silence, she gasped out—"I'm sorry—it's so much—one wants to die——" and quiet succeeded to her ecstasy; she sat back, her hands on the rug, looking into the fire with a still, dreaming face. The man standing by her envied her; for he could possess her, but not lose himself.

He could not share her feeling; he could only make use of it.

"Will you come?" he said.

There was a knock on the door. Bridget repressed an impulse to spring up, since Peregrine did not stir even to put on the light. In answer to his "Come in," the door opened, someone stood motionless beside it, they saw the firelight glaring on Wem's spectacles.

"Turn on the light, will you?" said Peregrine.

Wem did so and remained standing with his eyes on the ground. His face was grey; in his hand, which shook a little, was Peregrine's pocket-book. He thrust it out towards Bridget with a sudden jerking movement as though he were poking it at her; his mouth opened and shut like a gasping fish before the words came out: "I think you had better read this," when he snatched back the pocket-book and substituted a frayed scrap of newspaper.

Peregrine did not intercept it. He drew his pipe from his pocket and rammed some tobacco into it. "Will you kindly hand me back my pocket-book," he said, "now you've taken from it what you require?"

Wem poked the pocket-book at him, as Bridget held out the cutting.

"Take it," she said, "he is accusing you of something, I don't care what it is, I don't want to know. It is nothing to do with me."

"Is your father nothing to do with you?" said Wem.

She had guessed it was to do with her father, with his death probably. She feared that if she read it, nothing would ever be the same again. Was she never to get away from death and sadness? She hated David Wem for dragging her back into them, in the very doorway of her happiness. He had come into that room only to spoil and destroy.

"He is dead," she cried, "oh what is the use of going back?"

She scrunched the paper in her hands. She said to Peregrine, "Let me burn it."

"Read it first," he commanded. He looked at Wem and smiled. "Your trump card doesn't seem much use." He said to Bridget, "Picard was your father. That figure of the Cybele was the price of his life. I might have saved him had I not stopped to buy it. That is what Wem wishes to tell you," and as he said it, Wem knew that all along Peregrine had wished to tell her this, that he himself had only furthered his wishes. "He has been guessing it for some time," said Peregrine, "and thinks he has found a proof. A proof of what, Wem?"

"Are you going to deny your faith?" answered the other. He was not shaking now. His voice came with its accustomed bitter monotony. "You sacrificed O'Farrell to your goddess, you came to boast of it, to base your life on it, to sacrifice others. Will you go

back on that now? Will you pretend that you would now act differently if you had the chance? O'Farrell died as a murderer, but it is you who take life, as you take everything, it is all you can do. It was O'Farrell that mattered," cried David Wem in a sudden harsh voice, "and you left him to die, while you bought things for yourself and turned them into gods."

He looked at Bridget to see if she would take part in his indictment. But Bridget was learning for the first time that the father she had so often sheltered had starved until he robbed and killed, that he had died as a murderer. She looked years older and almost ugly. Wem realized that though he would have loved her had he been a little different, yet she was not first in his life, nor even in his mind at this moment. It was O'Farrell that mattered.

Would she turn against Peregrine even now? He doubted it. Women were practical. The minstrel who sang, 'I saw a dead man win a fight,' was a man. O'Farrell would never win anything, not even when he was dead.

He went clumsily out of the room and wondered how he had ever entered it.

He looked round the hall, at the thick red fleshy bells of a greenhouse plant in the corner, and wanted to cut them into strips to see if their substance were like earth or leather. He looked up the wide staircase expecting to see Baby Dick come charging and shouting down it with his nurse in pursuit, and if he did, he knew he would want to murder Baby Dick.

But no one came. Through the whole spacious lovely house there was a deep stillness as of suspense.

'I must get out of it,' thought David. He went out, shutting the hall door very softly.

Then he remembered that he must give Ella's message about the car; but he did not go in again, he went round to the garage where he found Young Bill, and asked him to drive the car into Sherne in half an hour's time and call for Mrs. Sark and Miss Very at Boots' Café. He also asked Bill to stop at the church on the way and call for himself.

He went down through the garden door to the church. It was quite dark now on the ground, only in the sky there was still a long streak of watery light. High against it he could see the black outline of the Red House and its many chimneys, its glowing windows;

it looked like a cluster of horned beasts with fiery eyes crouching together over the hill. He would never go into it again.

He went into the church and put on a light and collected his painting things together. He avoided glancing at his work on the walls; it had never filled him with greater repulsion than now, but though his gaze was averted, he felt that the writhing sunflowers and cornshocks were aware of him through the gloom, watching him, mocking him. He found that his hands were trembling, that he, who a few months since had thought he had reached the last stages of scepticism, believed that if he had stayed to finish that work he would have lost his soul.

Before he left the church he stood for a moment before the part of the wall which remained blank. If he knew anything of Peregrine, it was this part that would always engage his attention. His impatience had always led him first to the bare wall; now its nakedness would stand there for ever, startling the spectator in the midst of that monstrous harvest. The treacherous outpouring had stopped as treacherously, with the effect of a discord or a murder.

A fruit tree that exaggerated even O'Farrell's sketch of "The Miracle" was left stretching its preposterous branches over the white abyss; there was something curiously shocking in this abrupt conjunction of the fury of fertility, and nothing. David Wem, who had come to hate his own work, hated also the violence done to it; and for that moment he felt a sympathy with the man he hated.

He went out of the church and down to the lych-gate, where he waited till the Red House car drove up and stopped, and then put in his painting things at the back and got in beside young Bill.

"Will you drop me at the station?" Wem asked. "My luggage will be sent on later. I have to go away in a hurry."

"I don't blame you, sir," said Young Bill suddenly, "me and Nanny would be going too if I could get her to leave Baby Dick, though he treats her like dirt, he does." Towards the end of the drive, when they had again talked a little, he said, "I think she's fair bewitched by that devil's brat, and she's not the only one, though not by him. I'd leave to-morrow, but I'm scared to leave her here, and that's a fact."

Wem had ceased to be scared of leaving Bridget there. His frenzied anticipation had worn itself out. He thought of her as he had seen her through the study window with Peregrine's arms about

her. 'Let her pay then for her father,' he said to himself, 'since *he* will never pay.'

But his anger with her could not stretch as far as that.

He began to see that he might have laid too great a burden on her in this knowledge of her father's death, that the result of such knowledge was incalculable.

'What will she do?' he asked himself. 'What have I done?' All he had wanted to do was to destroy her love for Peregrine, a thing that could surely only bring her harm. But destruction was a dangerous and far-reaching thing. Once you began it, you could not see where it would stop. He wondered what he had destroyed, and whether after all any good could come of it. It was of no use to kill, unless something were born in its place. But what could be born from horror and despair?

Then he thought of O'Farrell, who had painted that miracle of hope and fruition when he knew he was going to die. It was in the condemned cell that O'Farrell had painted his triumph of life.

This discovery stirred him with such pride and exaltation that he felt he would now see all things as if for the first time. He would paint with that new power of sight; he would begin to-morrow.

## *Twenty-one*

*

BRIDGET did not move nor speak, and Peregrine heard his words fall dead, against her inattention.

He was glad when at last she began to cry, but he became alarmed. The long, shaking sobs came as though they would tear her; however hard she tried she could not stop them; she was like a drowning animal that was trying to climb up the side of a pond and always slipping back; and what oppressed him was that she, whom he had always seen so radiant, was evidently acquainted with this element of wet misery, and even expectant of it. "It's always there," he caught from among the fragments of speech that escaped her sobs, "There's always trouble there waiting for you. You can't get away."

He had just made her drink some brandy; and this, and her efforts

to do anything that would stop her crying, made her begin to talk. She said, "And I was relieved when I heard he was dead, I thought he was safe—*safe*, when that was how he died!"

"Well, and isn't he safe? He is none the less dead because they killed him." He was trying to distract her thoughts, however roughly.

He told her that no creature was ever more made for happiness than herself; and he would give it her. His confidence shook her fears a little, yet suggested others; he was so strong and secure that union between him and one of her disastrous breed now seemed to her as unnatural as to wed a Martian. It was a far more serious barrier than his marriage; that he was born to be happy and successful, and she was not.

And now that she had thought of his marriage, though only as an inferior consideration, she thought of Ella, and of what Ella might feel, when told that she was to go to her mother and sue her husband for a divorce. Ella, who had seemed for ever fixed in her position. So Ella too, and John and Very, were not safe from trouble. No one was safe, except those who were strong enough to impose their will on others.

She made an attempt to withstand him; she said she would not go away with him and certainly she would never marry him; she said she must in any case go back now to her mother.

"Can you keep from her what you have just learnt of your father?"

No. Her mother would be sure to see that something was wrong. She must never know what it was. There seemed to be no place for herself anywhere. She felt utterly tired.

"Bride," said Peregrine, low to her, "Bride."

Her face quivered, but she did not turn to him.

He said, "You know why Wem showed you that paper. It was to turn you against me. Has it done so? Before he came in, you were willing to come with me. Do you want him to succeed? Do you want your father to come between us?"

It was safe to count on O'Farrell's generosity. His daughter's share of it rushed her towards him. "Da would have hated that—you know it. You were trying to find him. You couldn't help it, you didn't know. He would have hated to spoil happiness, to bring ill luck—you said, unlucky himself, he brought luck to others." A

rush of tears interrupted this, for it was so true, "and so unfair. But he wouldn't think so."

He flung his arms round her, crushing her, yet she felt in him no answer to her thought. His was triumph, that her love for him had been put to its supreme test, and had not failed. It gave him a hard delight that shut him off from her. His caresses could not comfort, but they excited her; she grew reckless, wild to escape from the misery that had threatened to engulf her. She would not think, nor remember, nor look forward; and while he held her, she could not. She was now in haste to go with him; her face was white, her teeth chattered, she said, "Let's go quickly, before something else happens."

He went to order the car. He said he would be back in a minute, but it seemed a long and dreadful time that she sat alone, staring at the fire, at the goddess that reigned above it. *She* did not care what lives were sacrificed to her; she held life in her hands. Bridget wished that she herself were hard as stone, that she might smile for ever.

Peregrine flung open the door and stood there, laughing. She sprang up. He said, "The something else has already happened. Wem gave a message from Ella to Young Bill to call for her and Very in Sherne. He's taken the car in and fetched Wem at the church."

"But what can it mean?"

"That the frescoes are left unfinished. I knew it really when he left the study, but I didn't think he'd go so quickly. At least I didn't think it out—I was too busy wondering what you would do."

That was triumph for her, but she longed to give it back to him.

"How could he leave his own work! The mean little destructive rat——"

"Oh well, it's rather comic of him to bag the car and get in to Sherne first, so as to catch the very train we were going by. Cheery chap, little Wem, I always said so, got a perverted sense of fun somewhere."

"But he doesn't know we were——"

"No, oh Lord, no. Nor do Ella and Very, of course. Yet they've got the car away so that it won't be back in time to catch the last train. Can you believe it? They went into Sherne by the 'bus, the maids say, and Young Bill is calling for them at Boots'. Have they suddenly gone mad, do you think, or is it only us?"

To Bridget it was all part of some far-reaching conspiracy. She had had too many shocks that evening to take it sanely; she could not believe Peregrine when he said that it altered nothing, that it would all be just the same and they could go to-morrow.

"It won't," she said. "Nothing is ever the same, nothing. There may be no to-morrow."

She was hysterical, he thought, amazed at this new terror, still more at this impatience in one whose serenity had been her loveliest feature. What did she see of to-morrow that caused her to look into nothing, with burning eyes?

"Oh Sybil, prophesying woe," he called her, teasing her, loving her. "What was the matter with the entrails?"

The reference to a sacrifice was not happy. He cursed himself as he heard what he said, but she had not noticed.

She laughed, she gave him her hands, they were ice cold. She leaned her head against his breast and sobbed, "I shall lose you. There are so many against us."

"You shall not lose me. You cannot, for I shall not lose you. Nothing can come between us till death do us part."

"Death?" Her father's death stared her in the face, but no, it had not parted them. Nothing then could part them now. "Nothing," she said, and then, "To-morrow."

"Oh," she sighed, "if I could only go with you to-night!"

"You will come to me to-night. Come down to me here in the study, after midnight. I shall make up a big fire and stay down here. Everyone will be dead asleep. We shall be one then. You will know it is all right, that you need not fear anything."

"I can't. Not here. Not in this house."

He had spoken in his normal voice, but she whispered; she kept looking round her, the room seemed full of eyes staring at her.

"Nor could I, if we stayed here," he said. "But we go to-morrow, in the morning. Bride, you must come."

But he was not looking at her. Once again he was looking at the figure on the chimney-piece.

Their marriage then was to be in Her temple. He was rapt, lost to all other feeling, even to hers, for she shuddered in his arms at his invocation of the goddess that had cost her father his life. It was not the same now she knew that; it could never be the same again.

'She is more to him than I,' she thought, and remembered Frank's

'You are only one of a string of things to him.' To Frank she would have been everything. But she had gone beyond; she could not turn back. She clung to Peregrine, and in the longing to lose all choice, all volition, all herself in him, she again, but this time with a despairing passion, wished that she could die, and for him, so that he should at least know her love, even if he could never fully share it.

Something he shared, for he knelt by her, put his arms round her, he found his eyes were scalding. "I wish I'd knocked him out of the room before he'd ever told you. But I wanted to tell you. I never saw that you'd cry like that. I'm crying too. I didn't know what it was. I didn't know anything could hurt like this. Oh, my Bride, my beauty, let's be happy, let's leave this house, go away for a year, years if you like, for ever if you like. Let him leave the frescoes, let him daub them out! What does it matter now I've got you? I've been mad all these months, I've been clutching one thing after another when all I wanted all the time was you. All the rest—it's all nothing but a lot of hot air, like my talk."

"Oh, but why, with all that splendour——"

"Yes, all for so shrivelled a kernel. All for my cremation urn when I die. Cremation! What a cold word for burning.

> 'If I had been a heathen I'd have piled my pyre on high,
> And in a great red whirlwind gone roaring to the sky.
> But Higgins is a heathen and a richer man than I,
> And they'll put us in an oven just as if we were a pie.'

That's all it's for. A 'gay tomb,' for a handful of treasured dust."

At last he could admit it, he could even glory in it. "Frescoes, windows, all dead dust," he cried, "when here is my living Bride!"

And in his furious desire to love life most, he kissed her as though he would kill her.

"We will go round the world," he said, "everything will be new. You will forget everybody who ever troubled you; you will forget that you were ever anybody else."

She longed to believe him; a small voice far away within her whispered, 'I shall remember,' but she would not heed it. She saw herself this transfigured Bride, gay, rich, free of every care and responsibility, Peregrine adoring her; wandering, wherever she wished, in a shadowless, tireless world. She held out her hands to that bright

stranger, that other Bride. She said, "Oh, make me like that. I want to live all over again."

For a moment his success awed him into silence. Everything he desired had fallen into his hands, for in that moment he had actually forgotten the bare space on the church wall.

"I am too lucky to have got you," he said at last. "What can I do to make up for it? Shall I throw the Cybele into the fire as Polycrates threw his ring into the sea?"

"You never would!" She was laughing, but there was a new sound in her voice, of real hope. She looked up at the goddess, and her laughter broke against that supreme smile.

She heard him say, "No, I suppose I wouldn't. It would be silly, wouldn't it? Not what O'Farrell would want either, you said."

"I suppose not. Yes, it's silly."

But the hope had died out of her voice. She sat trembling, listening for the sound of the car, though it was far too soon for it to return. She said she could not come down to the study to-night, nor to dinner. How could she come down and sit between Mr. and Mrs. Sark and not even Mr. Wem opposite?

He made a desperate effort to remember that while he felt like a car with the engine running, throbbing with the impulse to spring forward in fresh plans of action, she had been crushed by the horror of her father's death. He did not feel more than a momentary impatience at the feminine capacity to suffer for other people. He too had suffered in that way just now himself. He changed his plan, and told her to go up to bed and she should have her dinner sent up to her and then take a cachet which he would put on the tray. It would make her sleep all night, and in the morning she would have her breakfast in her room, and stay there and pack, until he sent for her.

She asked him not to speak to Ella to-night; she could not sleep if she knew he was speaking to her about it. He promised he would not; there would be plenty of time in the morning. She would have nothing to bother about, everything would be settled, she would see no one, all she would have to do was to go straight down to the car and drive with him to Sherne to catch the 12.5 train to town.

With a deep amazing sense of rest, she thought how she would never have to make plans for herself or anybody else again.

## *Twenty-two*

✲

SHE went blindly into her room, she sat on the chair at her dressing-table, and as she took out the three big pins in her hair, her head nodded forward on to the table and she found she was falling off the chair, falling asleep. She pulled herself up, but she could only just keep awake enough to get to bed, and the moment she was there she fell into the heavy sleep of exhaustion. The maid who brought up her dinner decided it would be a shame to wake her.

She woke in the middle of the night with equal suddenness. She had been dreaming of her father, and happily; so she realized just before she remembered what she had learnt of his death. Yet she had woken refreshed and happy, with no presentiment of evil waiting to be faced. 'That must have been Da's doing.' She tried to recollect her dream of him, but it had vanished. Perhaps he had not been so miserable at his death. He must have been miserable at having killed a man in his anger, but then he would have been glad to pay. She had never seen him lose courage; he had not lost it then; and suddenly she remembered that his last act had been to paint "The Miracle."

She sat up in bed and stared at the blackness, at the grey square of her window, and a star that twinkled frostily within it. She heard the wind in the trees, it had a fine sound. She thought of her father who had not acknowledged defeat, who, when condemned to die, 'rejoiced in his giving and was glad in his heart.'

Before she came to bed she had been terrified, longing to die, to change into somebody else; she had begged Peregrine to take her away that minute because in her panic she dared not wait and see another day. He would not stand a coward, he would be bored by one, she had known that even as she had clung to him.

If she were fickle and selfish in forsaking Frank to run away with Peregrine, playing only for her own happiness, then she must live up to all that, she must see to it that she was happy and Peregrine too. It was no use running away to be frightened, to feel and cause regrets. He was giving up everything for her, the Red House, John, Very, Ella. She said this to herself for the first time, he had men-

tioned it so lightly, there had been so many other things, she had scarcely noticed. Now she was appalled.

'Well, but he wants to,' she answered herself.

'Only because I've come along. He didn't want to before.'

She saw herself as an interloper, a destroyer. She saw John with a divorced father. But it would be Very who would suffer most, would grow bitter and priggish about it. A nice sort of governess she had been to them.

'Alas, alas, if their mother knew it——'

She will know soon enough, thought Bridget.

And hers too.

'Oh Heaven, what am I to do?'

I *can't* go, thought Bridget.

The darkness pressed on her eyeballs. There was nothing all round her. There was nothing for her in all the world if she could not go with Peregrine.

She had thought last night she would never have to make plans again. But one's whole life was making plans.

Where should she go? She could not go back to her mother, unless she were strong enough to keep her knowledge from her. Last night she had known she could not do that. You are stronger now, she told herself. Yes, she felt strong, she felt awake. She said to herself, 'Oh God how wretched it all is,' because she was tossing about and hitting the pillow in her efforts at decision; but she was not really wretched; every faculty in her was being strained to its utmost, her brain was furiously alert, she was alive.

She was not just one of a string of things to Peregrine; he had told her he cared for her more than all the frescoes and windows, more than all the lovely things in the Red House. He had come alive, she discovered in astonishment, and it was she who had made him do that. And she; how inhuman she had been with Frank, unable to feel his pain; she had stood and watched it, a frozen block. When she thought how unkind she had been to Frank, who had said it was all his fault, she could not believe it; it could not have been herself.

Her life stretched ahead of her, years and years of empty darkness. She told herself, oh well, it's better to go on loving than doing nothing.

Peregrine would not go on loving alone. He did nothing alone. If she went away he would remember her as a bright patch in his life, but not one that would alter it. He would not 'go back' to Ella, for

he had never left her, so Bridget suddenly perceived. It was a burning humiliation, this discovery that Ella and Peregrine were really fond of each other. She had been a fool not to see it all along, and now so furious was she at her stupidity, that she laughed to stop herself from groaning. 'Where have I been all this time? I've been blind, dead asleep.' That was over.

She found it easier not to look too far ahead. There were things to decide quickly. She must go away without seeing Peregrine, for she could not trust herself to do that. There was that early train at 6.30 a.m., she must go and tell Nanny to get up Young Bill in time to take her into Sherne for it. They would think it extraordinary, but scarcely more so than David Wem's going last night, without luggage. She could make up something, but here again a horrible discovery flashed upon her, that what she had learned last night of herself and Peregrine, was already known to everyone else.

She turned on the light and looked at her watch. She thought she had only lately heard the church clock strike four, but the last hour must have passed in a flash, for she found it was just on five. She would have to start in an hour. She splashed in cold water and flung on her warmest clothes; she found it was all much better now she was doing things, it was even rather fun in a ghastly way to be running away in the middle of the night.

She would wake Nanny before she packed anything. Young Bill would not want more than half an hour.

She opened the door, she switched on the light, and saw Peregrine standing in the passage.

He held his pipe in one hand, the other was thrust into the pocket of his dressing-gown; she saw him looking at her clothes, she thought 'He knows it all.' She could not speak, she did not believe she was breathing, everything seemed to have stopped. A faint acrid smell hung on the air, she thought it was the smoke of his pipe, but if so it was different. He must be going to speak soon; he would say, 'So you are running away.'

He did not. He said, "Caligula was a misunderstood man. He suffered from sleeplessness as a result of his wife's love potions; all night he wandered about his palace until he went mad. Have you given me a love potion, Bridget Bride? I have been walking about all night."

She said, "I am sorry, Peregrine." It was the first time she had

said his name, and now it would be the last. She said, "I must go away. I can't go with you. It's not because I'm frightened. I'm not now, I'm not really."

It was no use stammering that out, as he came upon her, frightening the heart out of her with that delicious terror she had told herself she would never know again. She surrendered to his arms, then struggled, told him again and again what was clear enough without the telling, that it was not because she did not love him, she loved him, indeed she loved him, but that there was everything else. She saw he did not hear a word she said; his eyes were hot on her, his kisses stunned her, she slid somehow from his grasp into a heap at his knees, she held on to them as though she were falling through the ground, she said, "Do stop. Do listen. I'm forgetting it all, but it's there all the time."

She heard him say, "Nothing is there but you." He would have pulled her up, but she resisted, and that made him frantic; she said in a cry, "Very well then, I'll go with you, but you mustn't tell them you'll leave them. You must go back to them when it's over."

He said, "You damn' fool darling, it will never be over."

He dragged her up to him, he lifted her and carried her towards her room.

There was a noise below, someone was shouting. She cried, "What's that?" and he said, "Nothing. I don't care." A louder shout reached their ears, and both perceived that the acrid smell, which he had not noticed while he had been smoking, was the smell of burning.

Bridget's room was on the second floor, up a small side staircase. He now rushed along the passage to the main staircase, where he saw smoke rising from the hall two flights below. He fled back, seized Bridget's hand and dragged her down the side staircase until he could see it was clear of smoke down to the bottom. "Go straight out by that side door," he told her, and ran back towards the main staircase.

Bridget went out at the side of the house. The wind was roaring in the trees. The night was pitch black with no stars showing now. She felt and stumbled her way round to the front of the house. People were running out on to the terrace. There were flames at the windows on the ground floor, they lit up the staring, frightened faces, the figures huddled in blankets. One or two were already dressed.

Nobody knew how it had started, in the study they said, and it was at its worst there now.

She came on the children, who were all three with their mother. John called "Hurrah!" at seeing her and rushed towards her, tripping over his dressing-gown. He said, "*I* found out the fire. I heard someone singing, I know I did. I went down to the hall, it was full of smoke."

Baby Dick shouted "Fire! Fire!" and Very smacked his head. She had had to hold him back from the flames and was very cross because she was frightened. She kept saying, "The whole world's on fire."

Ella said, "I wish we could take them in to Miss Miningham."

Bridget said to herself, 'No, of course I can't go with him. Not now.' He belonged to them.

A hurried uneven clanging broke on the air above all the other noises. It was the church bell sounding the alarm to the village. Someone said that Joe Mytton in his cottage by the church had been warned and gone off to the belfry in nothing but his nightshirt and a blanket to ring the bell.

She did not see Peregrine. She had not been afraid until this moment, now she shook all over; she ran across the terrace to the study windows. One window was ablaze, she saw the curtains like a forest of flames. She looked into the fiery room. At its heart was his goddess, serene, triumphant.

Relief made her sob. She had thought Peregrine was there to rescue the Cybele. But soon he would come for that, and the fire would be worse then, he would not be able to rescue it, he might be killed in trying to do so. The further window was not in flames. She picked up a stone and smashed a pane, put in her hand and tugged the glass door open. She looked round to call to someone but there was no one near, they were all round the hall door, in another minute it might be too late. She pulled her coat over her head and rushed into the room.

Peregrine came out on the lawn; he asked for Bridget; they told him she had come out some time ago, they had thought she was there, she had been with them just now. They could not see her, but it must be all right; no one had gone back into the hall. He called to her, he ran round the house, he came to the study window.

He saw her in there through the smoke and glare, reaching up her hands to his goddess. A roar like a cataract filled his ears, he knew that the thing for which she was risking her life was a senseless lump of clay, that she herself was what he loved. He leaped across the room and pulled her out. A beam from the ceiling fell on his head just as he had reached the window; he fell, with her beneath him. When they dragged them both out, they found that he was dead, but Bridget was alive.

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This is the story that Jenny Mytton will tell when she is a very old woman, of the Red House that had long ago become a charred heap of ruins. She will tell you of that fire that was seen for miles round, and nothing like it ever before, or after, except in the next war when the whole mountain side was set ablaze, right up to the Devil's Chair.

Mrs. Sark and the children and Rector too, they all went away, nobody rightly knew where, for none of them ever came back. Master John went further than any of them, for he went exploring as he had always said he would go, in forests where nobody had ever been, and then so far away that they said he went over the Roof of the World.

The outlandish pictures in the church were left as they were, till a stray bomb fell on it in the next war and destroyed it.

And they said that the young lady up at the Red House found her sailor lover again and went with him across the seas, and that both of them outlived that war; as did Gawcomb Mazzard; until both wars, and the story of the Red Squire, were all as much as forty year ago or more.